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Gendering Covid-19: Impacts of the Pandemic on Female Students Through School Counselors Perspective in Sweden

A qualitative case study

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Abstract

Attention to Covid-19 and its effects on societies worldwide have been intense for the past year. This thesis increased knowledge by exploring how Covid-19 has affected female students' symbolic interactionism in upper secondary schools' access to Elevhälsa seen from school counselors' perspective. Symbolic interactionism in this thesis refers to interactions one is acquainted with daily and are prone to change depending on the contemporary social context affecting one's actions in the future (Aksan et al. 2009; Dong 2008). It is a qualitative case study with empirical data collection conducted through surveys answered by school counselors around the country. The seven participants demonstrated the ongoing situation in upper secondary schools by illustrating how school counselors' work has changed, how female students have been affected by these changes, and how they have managed this crisis. Thereafter, the empirical information was analyzed by a qualitative analysis method of coding where categories and themes were identified. The results from the analysis were discussed in three different sections and these are changes within the organization and school counselors' work, school counselors' perception of female students, and crisis management. Results illustrated a complex situation where differentiating between female and male students is difficult for school counselors since the general need for access to support has increased in all genders. Despite this challenge, a change in students' symbolic interactionism can be seen due to Covid-19 as a crisis and that the access for Elevhälsa and school counselors have been crucial during the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19, Elevhälsa, crisis management, female students, school counselors, symbolic interactionism

Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	3
1.1 Aim.....	3
1.2 Research question.....	4
2. Background.....	5
2.1 <i>The covid-19 situation in Sweden</i>	5
2.2 <i>Remote teaching in upper secondary school during the pandemic</i>	5
2.3 <i>The blueprint of Elevhälsa and legislations</i>	6
2.4 <i>The need for elevhälsan for youth</i>	8
2.5 <i>The role of the school counselor in Elevhälsa and for students</i>	8
3. Theoretical Framework.....	10
3.1 <i>Symbolic interactionism</i>	10
3.2 <i>Social integration</i>	11
3.3 <i>Coping theory</i>	12
4. Literature review.....	13
4.1 <i>Crises and their effects on youth</i>	13
4.2 <i>Crisis management and support from schools</i>	14
4.3 <i>Female students' access to support</i>	16
4.4 <i>NGOs perspective on crises</i>	17
5. Methodology.....	19
5.1 <i>Survey design</i>	19
5.2 <i>Ethics</i>	21
5.3 <i>Reflexivity</i>	22
5.4 <i>Limitations</i>	23
6. Empirical results and analysis.....	24
6.1 <i>Changes within the organization and school counselors' work</i>	24
6.2 <i>School counselors' perception of female students</i>	28
6.3 <i>Crisis management</i>	33
7. Conclusion.....	36
Bibliography.....	38
Appendix 1; Invitation letter.....	44
Appendix 2: Questions from the survey.....	45
Appendix 3: Coding scheme.....	47
Appendix 4: background information about participants.....	49

1. Introduction

This thesis addresses a relatively new and ongoing issue around the globe. The Covid-19 outbreak and its global spread have had many consequences and impacts on societies. Overall, this pandemic has affected education for approximately 1.6 billion students in about 190 countries (UN 2020). Education disruption does not only affect knowledge loss, but has social impacts for example mental health issues which are common among students in Sweden. Thus, the progress and development many countries have made within the education system are at risk of rewinding and increasing inequality. Belonging to marginalized groups heightened the risk of students not completing their education causing long-term effects both for students and societies (ibid). Education and health are essential pillars for a prospering society emphasizing the significance of prioritizing these institutions to prevent societal crisis and reversing development.

1.1 Aim

This thesis aims to explore school counselors' perspective on how Covid-19 has affected female students' symbolic interactionism in upper secondary schools (also referred to as gymnasium) in Sweden and to analyze school counselors' perception of how their work with Elevhälsa has been used during the pandemic. Symbolic interactionism is actions created through social situations and what people experience will affect their actions in future social contexts (Aksan et al. 2009; Dong 2008). Upper secondary schools most often include students within the age range 15-19. The requirements for enrollment include completing the national requirements or primary education and that students are enrolled at the latest the spring term the year they turn twenty (Skolverket A 2021). It is usually three-year-long schooling encouraging students to choose a program specializing in subjects of interest before heading out to working life or university. Upper secondary schools have been largely on distance since Covid-19 first arrived about a year ago, forcing thousands of students to study remotely. Previous surveys and articles have already shown that remote teaching has affected them in one way or another (Kapetanovic et al. 2021; BRIS 2021) but there is a lack of research focusing primarily on females. Thus, the purpose of focusing on female students through symbolic interactionism is to understand how the ongoing pandemic is affecting their mental health and access to Elevhälsa. Because these changes are related to the school counselors' work and Elevhälsa, exploring their influence on female students and their health is necessary. Since females are already a marginalized group

struggling with mental health issues causing alterations in their symbolic interactionism, one argument is that this will continue increasing during a crisis. Thus, the importance of researching this topic by closing the knowledge gap regarding marginalized female students and their health resulting in an unjust, insecure, and unequal society.

1.2 Research Question

To explore this topic, the research question is stated as follows:

How has Covid-19, as a crisis, affected female students' symbolic interactionism in upper secondary schools' access to Elevhälsa as a policy?

To be able to explore the main question, other sub-questions are of interest which is:

- How have female students been affected by a change in social interactions such as contacting, talking, and receiving advice from their school counselor during remote education?
- What are school counselors' perceptions of how female students have been affected by the remote accessibility of Elevhälsa?
- What education policy implications does a crisis like Covid-19 have on school counselors and female students?

2. Background

This section will provide essential background regarding the Covid-19 upsurge in Sweden, the Swedish education system and its policy Elevhälsa, and the role of school counselors for the education system and students. Comprehending how the education system is organized with employees, students, and policy in regards to the Covid-19 situation in Sweden is necessary for understanding the need and purpose of this thesis.

2.1 The Covid-19 situation in Sweden

The year 2020 started with minor reports about the new virus Covid-19 began its global spread from China. However, it took until March, before the world turned upside down with several countries implementing lockdowns and closed borders to minimize the spread. Sweden was not an exception and confirmed their first Covid-19 case on the 31st of January (Folkhälsomyndigheten A 2020) and since then it continued to increase until it became a fact that there was a societal spread of the virus in March. From March the Swedish society started closing down by encouraging people to work from home, avoiding public areas, and minimizing their social contacts. Yet, the intent has always been to find alternative ways to keep society running to minimize the spread and its societal effects, and therefore no strict strategies have been implemented (Claeson & Hanson 2021). Aiming that the Swedish population would follow these recommendations would lead to few economic losses and a chance to go back to normal life faster. Sweden's strategy has been a worldwide discussion since only minor restrictions and no lockdowns have been implemented (ibid). Restrictions have changed depending on the virus spread and harsher recommendations have been implemented throughout the year, but many people have not followed them resulting in Sweden has one of the world's largest spread and when this is written there have been 1,058,341 confirmed cases and 14,366 deaths (John Hopkins University of Medicine 2021) with a population around 10 million.

2.2 Remote teaching in upper secondary school during the pandemic

Since the upsurge of Covid-19 began, the Swedish strategy has aimed to keep schools open because it plays a key role for society by (1) ensuring the safety of students who are at risk of living in unsafe home environments, (2) allowing parents to work (especially in socially

important jobs for example hospitals), and (3) minimizing the drastic changes for students and larger impacts on the education system. This has resulted in various strategies for different ages, where primary schools remained open while upper secondary schools started remote teaching in March 2020 proceeding for the entire semester (Folkhälsomyndigheten B 2020). One aspiration was that the spread of the virus would decrease during the summer and allow upper secondary schools to reopen. The autumn semester began on-site, but since the spread increased rapidly they had to implement remote teaching again in December (Folkhälsomyndigheten C 2020). The aim of spring 2021 was to open upper secondary schools and keep them open. Schools have had the choice to close if they have an internal spread and they also have had the power to decide alternative ways to run the schools for minimizing the number of people on-site (ibid). Therefore, many schools during spring semester 2021 have used a strategy with both remote and physical teaching.

Implementing remote education in upper secondary schools occurred quickly forcing schools and teachers to rethink and adjust to the new education environment occurring online. Schools have to a large extent been able to decide themselves how to proceed with remote teaching, but the Swedish Agency For Education (also referred to as Skolverket) has underlined some points that have to be followed by implementing temporary regulations due to the circumstances. The aim is that even though education is remote, it has the students' best interest by ensuring a safe school environment online and the possibility for them to complete their education (Skolverket B 2021). To meet this aim, students need appropriate technology and since education is free of charge, schools have to ensure that students lacking technology or internet are provided the right tools or a safe study environment on-site. This is supported by legislation (Skolverket C 2021). Another important aspect is to ensure that students' online environment is safe and that any proof of discrimination, bullying, or other factors questioning the safety of the students is reported by schools and their employees (Skolverket D 2021).

2.3 The blueprint of Elevhälsa and legislations

Elevhälsa was implemented to support children and youth enrolled in the Swedish education system aiming to ensure and encourage students' learning, development, and health in a safe and open school environment. This requires that the school is allowing students to use school counselors, nurses, psychologists among other resources included in the Elevhälsa support team

(Skolinspektionen 2015). Health and education are interrelated and therefore important aspects in the policy with the aspiration to provide children the best opportunity in life. Student's health impacts their school performance, wellbeing, and ability to function within their school environment (Socialstyrelsen & Skolverket 2016). Vice versa, school performance such as the stress of receiving good grades and the amount of school work impacts a student's mental health and well-being. Thus, the importance of combining health and education in the education system.

To ensure that Elevhälsa is implemented in all schools and objectives are being met the policy is supported by legislation in The Education Act (also referred to as Skollagen) (Skollagen 2010:800, 2010). Chapter 2 25§ in Skollagen focuses on Elevhälsa by (1) ensuring that all students within the education system are given the right to Elevhälsa; (2) Elevhälsa include medical, psychological, psychosocial, and pedagogy of special needs efforts; (3) Elevhälsa aims to prevent poor health; (4) students' development to reach educational goals should be supported; (5) for medical, psychological, and psychosocial efforts, resources such as school doctors, school nurses, psychiatrists, and counselors should be available; (6) employees should have the competence to provide special education for students in need (ibid). Chapter 2 27§ in Skollagen clarifies how often students should meet with members of the Elevhälsa support team. In upper secondary school, this should occur at least once during the three years to observe general health conditions (ibid). If more meetings are needed, these should take place. Furthermore, there are other legislations in Skollagen not focusing primarily on Elevhälsa, but are essential parts included in the policy for example the discrimination legislation 2014:960 (ibid).

The Swedish education system has implemented the UN Child Convention by including it in the Education Act in 2010 (Socialstyrelsen & Skolverket 2016), but since January 2020 it also became legislated by itself emphasizing how important this convention is for all children and their childhood (UNICEF A 2021). The UN child convention was first launched 30 years ago and has since then been modified depending on the changing situation of the world's children. The overall aim is to ensure that all children have a safe upbringing by meeting rights such as health care, education among others (UNICEF B 2021). This convention should be inductive in the work of Elevhälsa by assuring that all activities within the education system are upholding children's rights. The convention has several articles relevant for Elevhälsa, the focal ones are the four core principles in articles 2, 3, 6, and 12 that are implemented in Skollagen chapter 1 10§ (Skollagen 2010:800 2010). Article 2 states that all children have the same rights, no child

should be discriminated against; article 3 states that in all actions, the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration and what is considered as the best interest of a child differs in every case; article 6 states all children have the inherent right to life, survival, and development; article 12 states all children have their right to form and express their views with consideration to their age and maturity (UNICEF B 2021). Thus schools have an essential role in meeting these articles and informing the students of their rights.

2.4 The need for Elevhälsa for youth

Implementing Elevhälsa should result in all students being provided the chance to accomplish their education no matter what problems or difficulties they encounter in everyday life. Therefore, their education should be organized depending on their needs and circumstances (Skolinspektionen 2015). Since a few years back, students are feeling more stress, anxiety among other feelings in both school-related situations and their everyday life. These feelings are more common for females compared to males and have increased during the year with Covid-19 (Kapetanovic et al. 2021; Tjejjouren Väst 2020).

When it comes to implementing Elevhälsa during the pandemic, The Swedish Agency for Education - Skolverket (Skolverket D 2021) emphasizes the importance of the policy and assuring its accessibility for all students, especially important during the pandemic. Elevhälsa emphasizes that students have the right to school counselors, school nurses, or doctors during their education (ibid). Even during a pandemic, this right remains and therefore all schools are responsible to find solutions safe for both students and in this case school counselors. Skolverket does not specify what upper secondary schools should do, but they have to find a system that ensures students can have a dialogue with their school counselor even if these are not physical meetings (ibid).

2.5 The role of the school counselor in Elevhälsa and for students

One aspect of Elevhälsa is to make sure that students can contact, have a dialogue and relation with the Elevhälsa support team where school counselors play an important role for both policy and students. The school counselor is included within the psychosocial efforts by contributing with psychosocial competence as a tool in the pedagogical work and the planning of Elevhälsa (Skolinspektionen 2015). School counselors shall also provide consultation for the rest of the

school employees as well as contribute with knowledge about risk and safety factors for students' health, education, social situation, and development. They should help to develop support teams for students, but also specific strategies for the school and teachers to use (ibid).

Even if the school counselor has an essential role in Elevhälsa, they also play a key role for students. Within the psychosocial efforts, the school counselor's job includes being either an investigator or adviser for the student and their family by having a dialogue that either supports, motivates them, or discusses a particular problem (Socialstyrelsen & Skolverket 2016). This relation can either be made on the initiative of the school counselor, other teachers, the student themselves, or their families. Knowledge about society's safety nets and different institutions that students can contact if needed is another important role of the school counselor both for students and school employees (ibid). This ensures that students are provided tools on how to proceed forward or receive help if their life situation requires it. School counselors' job is also to investigate and assess social and psychosocial situations for individual students which can be used as a foundation to apply for special support through other institutions and in some cases modify their education (ibid). The aim is to reassure students' well-being and that tools needed for completing their education are available.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this section, the academic discourse framing this study will be described, and being a thesis in Development Studies focusing on sociology, the study will be framed within the sociological discourse. The theories included are symbolic interactionism, social integration, and coping theory. Symbolic interactionism is the focal theory, and where the other two theories will be useful complementation. These three theories will complement each other by including different perspectives reflected in this topic. Symbolic interactionism is relevant because it explains how interactions influence people and their actions in different social contexts. Within education, these interactions occur daily within classrooms and corridors, between students and school personnel influencing how they will interact in the future and potential mental health implications (Aksan et al. 2009; Dong 2008; Lalander & Johanson 2019). Exploring this social issue benefits from referring to coping theories. Coping theories help to question how well students are being taught how to cope with feelings that may arise during a crisis and how to handle emotions in different social situations (Brougham et al. 2009; Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Thus, coping theories will complement symbolic interactionism by emphasizing the positive perspectives of learning coping strategies for unpredictable crises and situations. Social integration complements symbolic interactionism by focusing on the role of the participant in the social context. The individual role is important to include since people experience their role in situations differently reflecting the way they decide to interact (Glanz et al. 2015). Reasons for why these theories are a useful contribution to the thesis is that they illustrate and explain different perspectives of this topic through a sociological discourse. In essence, all theories can be justified by themselves, but focusing on symbolic interactionism and complementing it with coping theories and social integration will provide a strong backbone when exploring this thesis from a sociological perspective relevant for Development Studies.

3.1 Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a commonly used theory within sociology and stems from the idea that our social world is constructed through social interactions resulting in social meanings that are adapted and interpreted through social practices people encounter daily (Aksan et al. 2009; Dong 2008). The theory aims to explain and examine the meanings of people's interactions in

everyday life and within the social environment. One explanation is that symbolic interactionism forms meanings in two different ways. Firstly, is meaning associated with events and objects while the second meaning implies a physical attachment by humans to events or objects (Aksan et al. 2009). These examples of meaning illustrate how every interaction people experience builds up the facts and ideas they have about their social environment and how they interact in social situations. Another factor is that symbolic interactionism explains how different interactions develop our identities throughout life. Since our identity is constantly evolving, it is constantly vulnerable to drastic changes that one may have difficulties avoiding or foreseeing (Lalander & Johansson 2019, p.260). This may cause behavioral and identity changes influencing how the person interacts with people in the future. Youth and identity are important to reflect upon since young people are in a vulnerable period where they are prone to change reflected in their identity and personality.

One reason why this theory is essential is that the current situation, where education is mostly held online, minimizes social interactions. Female students in upper high schools are therefore at risk of minimizing their contacts interfering with the way they interpret society and their personal development. Social interactions form humans (Blumer 1969, p.8) does the students are being interrupted in their personal development. Additionally, these students are at risk of losing social practices, for example how to ask for help from their school counselor or other adults, which may be necessary for the way they socially interact in the future. It is essential to remember that communicating online is a way of interacting, but the way people present themselves may differ from reality resulting in different outcomes (Stier 2012, p.44-45). Online communication may be risky since it is difficult to determine what is real and what is fake causing people to interpret situations incorrectly because they cannot see the whole social context. This will affect one's way of interacting in the physical world which may become even more difficult after only interacting at distance.

3.2 Social integration

Social integration is a theory with a long history in sociology and has been discussed since the early 20th century with Emile Durkheim as one of the influential sociological pioneers. The main idea with this concept is that it discusses and describes an individual's participation in different social relationships including active engagement activities and relations resulting in a sense of

community and one's understanding of their social role in society (Glanz et al. 2015, p.184). Concepts associated with this theory are social interaction and social support which might be used in the thesis too. This theory is related to symbolic interactionism since it emphasizes the need for social interactions between people to be able to comprehend social situations. Social integration will contribute to including a person's role within different social contexts instead of solely focusing on social interactions between people.

3.3 Coping theory

The concept of coping is broad and often a response to stress through various actions aiming for a positive result (Brougham et al. 2009). The coping theory also referred to as coping strategies is relevant since it discusses how humans cope with feelings such as stress, anxiety among other feelings that may occur during a crisis or similar situation. Two of the pioneers of the coping theory are Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman who discuss that stress occurs at all parts of society, institutions, and individuals. Some of the fields include economics, health care, businesses, and education where stress acts differently depending on the situation (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Since there are different types of stress people have to learn how to avoid these feelings taking over one's life and decision-making. By learning this lays the foundation of the coping theory which includes different strategies for different situations and feelings. Strategies that are valuable in this thesis are coping strategies related to education, crises, and feelings such as anxiety, depression, and stress. Including coping theories in this thesis is beneficial since it can explain and understand how the students are feeling and reacting during Covid-19 and is related to symbolic interactionism because lack of social interactions will affect one's understanding and skills of how to cope in social contexts. Thus, this theory will contribute to the discourse by illustrating if coping strategies have been implemented in the education system and the need of educating people on how to use coping strategies for improving one's well-being in everyday life and crisis.

4. Literature Review

There are many studies, reports, and documents regarding this topic that have been reviewed in order to understand it in-depth as well as to use the literature as background and for comparison. To understand what literature was relevant, different themes this topic touches upon needed to be identified. Some focal points of this research are crisis and their effects on youth, crisis management and support from schools, female students' access to support, and NGOs' perspectives on crises.

4.1 Crises and their effects on youth

Unquestionably crises affect youth psychologically, physically, and socially. This has been seen in other crises before the pandemic and what they all have in common is that they often come without prediction and with unknown outcomes. Covid-19 is a worldwide crisis and when it rapidly began spreading, there was little time to prevent it and prepare societies for what to come. Thus understanding outcomes and effects on youth in other crises are necessary.

One of the largest disasters in Sweden was the discotheque fire in 1998 where approximately 400 adolescents had gathered. The fire spread rapidly and with few alternative ways to escape resulting in 63 deaths and 213 people with physical injuries. These were direct effects of the fire, but a study conducted by Anders G Broberg, Atle Dyregrov, and Lars Lilled (2005) found that self-reported posttraumatic stress reactions several months after the catastrophe was high among the survivors. They concluded that female students had slightly higher results of posttraumatic stress than male students illustrating that effects may not be seen directly, but can evolve during time and occur or/and exist months after a catastrophe. Another result from the study showed that the victims' school work was heavily affected in different ways. About 23% of the participants reported that they dropped out or had to redo a year (Broberg et al. 2005). Other students experienced a lack of support from the school causing difficulties to complete their education and a feeling that schools demanded them to go back to normality faster than what they were capable and ready of doing. Broberg et al. (2005) research illustrates the variety of direct and indirect outcomes catastrophes have on youth and an understanding of why monitoring long-term effects is necessary.

A research; *Reported Changes in Adolescent Psychosocial Functioning during the COVID-19 Outbreak* (Kapetanovic et al. 2021) aim was to study students' social relations and psychosocial

changes during the pandemic's start by conducting a survey in June 2020 targeting youth between the ages 15-19. Results concluded an increase in mental health issues where female students had to a larger extent than males higher rates of poor sleep=41.1% vs. 30.6%, anxiety=63.3% vs. 38.2%, sadness/depression=59.7% vs. 41.1%, increased loneliness=66.7% vs. 52.0%, and stress=70.1% vs. 63.0% juxtaposed to before the outbreak. Kapentanovic et al. (2021) explain one reason for these results is that youth around these ages, heading towards adulthood are vulnerable and could therefore be more exposed to consequences when everyday life suddenly changes such as Covid-19. Yet this study lacks to explain reasons behind why there is a difference between genders emphasizing the need for researching this further.

Furthermore, students are not only feeling stress and anxiety because of the pandemic, but they are also losing their ability to meet and interact with other students which is essential to form and develop social skills. One study by Loeb and Windsor (2020) researched how these social interactions have changed due to the pandemic and that students' social interactions with people who do not belong to their families are few compared to pre-corona society. Even if this survey cannot give clear examples of how students' social interactions have evolved, it concludes that they have become less, which will lead to behavioral changes and negative health effects. This is one reason applying the theory of symbolic interactionism within this context is necessary. Loeb and Windsor (2020) express this concern since interacting with teachers and students creates a motivation that is lost when remote teaching takes place emphasizing again the importance of social interactions for personal development and completing education. Ensuring that students are doing their part remotely requires constant communication with teachers and other school employees even if this interaction differs from physical interaction.

Other scholars researching crisis and their effects on youths are Amana Kaskazi (2021) studying youth and intersectionality during Covid-19 in the US; Annika Lems, Kathrin Oester, and Sabine Strasser (2020) researching the refugee crisis effects on youth through an ethnographic lens; and Kristen Pisani-Jacques (2020) studying how the pandemic as a crisis affects the child welfare system.

4.2 Crisis management and support from schools

One key aspect to avoid a crisis with severe consequences is a well-prepared crisis management plan. Before a crisis, people and societies must be prepared with basic skills to

minimize consequences and enable quick recovery. For example, teaching coping strategies and making the public aware of different crisis scenarios in their society, workplace, nature, and so forth is essential. Yet, being able to provide help and support afterward is vital for the health and well-being of victims. Crisis management is important before, during, and after a disaster.

When it comes to coping theory, previous literature has shown using appropriate coping strategies and knowing how to cope in different situations has a positive influence on students' satisfaction of life (Brougham et al. 2009) Therefore it can be argued how important it is to teach students coping strategies for when these situations arise. Covid-19 is just one example of when it is beneficial to use coping strategies to be able to handle the crisis and its sudden life and socialization changes that no one predicted. In a survey conducted in May 2020 by Eva Hoff and her colleagues, students in upper secondary schools from three cities were asked to participate by answering questions regarding the home environment and remote teaching (Lindgärde 2020). Many answers confirmed that students are feeling stress, anxiety, and social isolation over the situation, where female students are slightly more worried than male students. Even if this study is not finished analyzed, one possible explanation discussed by Eva Hoff is the aspect of students not being taught skills to handle these emotions, coping strategies are one way of learning how to cope with these feelings and situations and why integrating coping strategies and similar methods in the school curriculum is necessary for preparing and improving students' mental health (ibid).

For crisis management to be successful in schools, crisis management plans are necessary. All possible crises, from natural disasters to unsafe home environments, should be covered within a crisis management plan to ensure the safety of the school population. This is discussed in the article *School Crisis Management Planning* (Elbedour et al. 2021). One of the top concerns is crises regarding emotional trauma emphasizing the need that school employees are prepared to handle emotional trauma preferably by including school counselors or school psychologists in the health support team. With their knowledge and experience, they should be able to mitigate the outcomes by focusing on prevention, preparation, response, and recovery. Elbedour and colleagues (2021) mention four principles of an effective crisis management plan. They are planning, communication, protocols for immediate action, and protocols for different specific crises (Elbedour et al. 2020, p.209). Analyzing different crisis strategies, the scholars concluded that "school counselors need to be intimately involved in the development, implementation, and

interventions" in the school's crisis management plan (Elbedour et al. 2021, p.214). Thus, they have to be included before, during, and after a crisis to ensure it has been managed correctly.

A case of interest by Stuart Roe (2014) researched the role and access of school counselors for LGBT students between ages 16-19 in Pennsylvania. It was researching to what extent and how students could identify and determine if their school counselor was supportive and with the aim to improve school counselors, policymakers, and supervisors' work to assist youth in the LGBT community to access support from their school counselors. After interviewing the participants' conclusions could be drawn that they believed that school counselors were supportive just by their title. They believed that if someone has chosen that job, they should automatically be supportive (Roe 2014). The ones that did not trust that their school counselor would be supportive used different methods to determine such as asking about political views, relying on their history with the school counselor, or observing for supportive symbols in their office. These unsure students had fear as a common theme, fear of what the reaction would be, and instead tried seeking help from other people such as friends. Another issue discussed by Roe (2014) is confidentiality. Students know that confidentiality should be implemented, but they are still nervous that school counselors might call home anyways. School counselors are well-positioned to provide support for students, they just have to ensure that students trust them.

Additional research articles about crisis management and support from schools are written by Daniela Werner (2015), *are school social workers prepared for a major school crisis?*; *School crisis management: A model of dynamic responsiveness to crisis life cycle* (Liou 2015); and, *Looking for 'social work' in school social work* (Isaksson & Sjöström 2017).

4.3 Female students access to support

One research article, *You can do it! An experimental evaluation of an encouragement intervention for female students* (Wong et al. 2020) discusses how important support and encouragement are for one's well-being and development. The study researched how supervisors' phrasing, encouragement, and support influenced academic female students at universities. This topic is within the positive psychology field and argues that "[e]ncouragement might be particularly useful means of social support in academia and school settings, especially for students and researchers who are struggling academically" (Wong et al. 2020, p.427). Female students in many fields in academia experience discrimination and/or sexist microaggressions

which can have severe consequences on individuals and their academic careers. The test studied if a letter of encouragement from the supervisor to their female students enhanced their interest in research careers. Wong and colleagues (2020) concluded that a letter of encouragement did increase the interest of female students to conduct research in the future and increase the interest of potentially becoming a professor during their career. During this positive process, students felt cared for by their supervisor increasing their motivation to continue engaging with them. These social interactions occurring through encouragement benefited both supervisors and students. Looking at this study, one can draw links to what positive implications people can have on someone's motivation if they just show encouragement and support.

Many countries have implemented full lockdown causing strict quarantine for many people resulting in social consequences. This is discussed in *Social consequences of mass quarantine during epidemics: a systematic review with implications for the COVID-19 response* (Chu et al. 2020) and the conclusions drawn are not only based on the Covid-19 outbreak, but also Ebola and Sars. Altogether, seven social consequences were identified and they are psychological distress, communication inequalities, food insecurity, economic challenges, disruptive education, diminished access to health care, and gender inequity and violence. Some of these social consequences can be touched upon in this thesis, for example, education disruption, psychological distress, and gender inequity where other studies confirm this (Kapetanovic et al. 2020; Tjejjouren Väst 2021). Whilst the other social consequences illustrate the larger extent of pandemics and emphasize the developmental aspect of quarantine and pandemics. How these social consequences increase the need for access to support will be explored further.

Other studies about female students' access to support have been written by Shantel Crosby et al (2017) examining social support and school attachment regarding female students with traumatic histories; Ali Taghinezhad and colleagues (2017) studied how social support changed depending on what strategy female students used in their education.

4.4 NGOs' perspective on crises

There are several NGOs in Sweden working to improve the health, childhood, education of children and adolescents. These NGOs are one part of society that can see the aftermath of crises and their effect on youth since there often is a change of pattern and increased need for support

and advice from adults. Thus, reports of NGOs' reflections of changes they have noticed during the pandemic are of interest in the literature review.

Barnens Rätt I Samhället (BRIS) is a well-established NGO for several years focusing on children's rights in society by acting as a support tool for children to contact them when feeling stress, anxiety, living under poor conditions, experiencing physical or emotional violence among other reasons. Every year, BRIS publishes a yearly report to show how the pattern has shifted during the year and what problems children are currently facing, and with no doubt, the first year of the pandemic has rapidly increased issues and children's need for support. This report also emphasizes that the social crisis of mental health problems existed already before the pandemic, but has increased rapidly since the Covid-19 outbreak. During the first Covid-19 year phone calls regarding anxiety increased by 61%, while calls referring to depression increased by 55% (BRIS 2021, p.12). Exactly, the reasons behind this are unknown, but one factor is social isolation. The report can see that children often bring up difficulties caused by restrictions regarding activities and other social relations. The positive aspects activities have given them are suddenly removed resulting in decreasing social engagement with other people. When social relationships are removed it impacts its role as a safety net for children jeopardizing their mental health and well-being (BRIS 2021, p.14). Maintaining these social relations becomes more important the older the child is since losing the safety net is losing the support resulting in increasing mental health problems and depression. This can be related to social integration and as Glanz et al. (2015) describe, an individual's participation in social relationships including engagement in activities, provides youth a sense of community and a deeper understanding of their social role in society. BRIS confirms that female students are more prone to mental health issues due to remote learning in upper secondary schools, increased social isolation, and loss of social relations (BRIS 2021 p.16). It also concludes that students' social isolation overall has increased the need for contacting the Elevhälsa support team and due to all restrictions many children experience canceled meetings and calls with the Elevhälsa support team and changing from physical meetings to alternative solutions have been difficult (BRIS 2021 p.16 & 19). This report confirms a lot of the facts that already exist, but still leaves the question of why?

Other relevant reports on the crisis from NGOs' perspectives have been published by Majblommans Riksförbund (2021) looking at Covid-19's impact on child poverty in Sweden; Tjejjouren Väst (2020) published a report regarding females' mental health during Covid-19.

5. Methodology

This thesis implements a qualitative case study using two methods: (1) desk review in order to review and analyze documents and literature and (2) conducting surveys (Desai & Potter 2006) answered by school counselors in upper secondary schools. Analyzing documents and previous literature will be used as a secondary source that can contribute with comparison and explanations useful when analyzing and drawing conclusions from the primary source. To find previous literature relevant to this thesis, I used Google Scholar and Lunds university's database LUBsearch. When researching information and reports about different institutions, legislations, NGOs and so forth I used their web pages. Some of the words used while researching were: school counselor, Covid-19, mental illness, Elevhälsa, remote teaching, upper secondary school, crisis management, female students among other words. When I struggled to find relevant information, I used the same words, but in Swedish, and therefore many references are in Swedish. To increase the chance of finding more sources the words were also researched while combined.

The primary source is the semi-structured surveys that will portray school counselors' perspective of how female students have been affected by the pandemic, their view of how Elevhälsa as a policy has been working during the pandemic, and how their role as school counselors have changed during these unusual circumstances. Access to participants in more detail can be seen in Appendix 4. The blueprint for creating questions in the survey has been based on the sub-questions with the objective that exploring them will contribute to answering the main research question: **How has Covid-19, as a crisis, affected female students' symbolic interactionism in upper secondary schools' access to Elevhälsa as a policy?** All questions asked in the survey can be read in Appendix 2. The objective is that these questions and this research will contribute to more knowledge and understanding of what impacts educational disruption has had on female students and their access to support during the pandemic. Since this thesis is exploring the case of Sweden, all information sent out to participants was originally written in Swedish, but has thereafter been translated into English, by the researcher, who is both a native Swedish and English speaker.

5.1 Survey Design

There are two units of interest for this project: female students and school counselors. These two units will provide information, explanation, and personal experiences that will help to answer and explore the research question. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, school counselors will be the primary source. The data collection through school counselors will provide answers through surveys explaining their perception of the pandemic's effect on female students, but also insight on how they have worked during these circumstances and what changes they have done to ensure the wellbeing of the students. Answering questions in the survey, will in turn lead to answering the sub-questions.

Since school counselors are solely asked about their female students, this leads to the second unit of analysis; female students. No female students will be directly involved in this research, instead, their voices will be told through the school counselor's perspective. Secondary sources such as previous documents will also portray female students in order to broaden the perspective and for comparison. Thus, this survey design aims to illustrate and emphasize why female students are a vulnerable group in this pandemic and how this is reflected in upper secondary schools and the education system as a whole.

Sampling

To conduct the data, surveys (see Appendix 2) will be submitted to school counselors. The choice of school counselors participating has been through a voluntary sample design where potential respondents could volunteer if they wanted to participate (Murairwa 2015). Approximately 100 invitation letters were submitted to school counselors around the country and only a handful decided to participate. During this thesis period, the survey will only be sent out once and consists of both closed and open-ended questions (Desai & Potter 2006, p.166). Questions have been reviewed beforehand since adding or asking follow-up questions will not be possible. The survey consists of four different sections (1) before and during the pandemic-similarities and differences, (2) school as an organization, (3) female students experience through a school counselor's perspective, and (4) the future. Requirements for participating include working as a school counselor for an upper secondary school and has been working before and during the pandemic. No specific school or region is of interest instead, the thesis will provide a national overview of what these school counselors have experienced. It is important to remember that schools have decided themselves how to ensure that Elevhälsa is still implemented remotely

and thus different strategies may have been chosen resulting in different experiences. This research will provide an overview and thereafter similar studies may be conducted. The aim is to include as many participants as possible, to receive a broad variety of answers and different perspectives of the situation, but since the time limit is short, the number of participants is limited. Answers from a total of seven participants will be analyzed where every participant will be referred to as school counselor 1, school counselor 2, and so forth to keep them anonymous. Surveys will be thoroughly analyzed before drawing conclusions. Since this research is conducted in Sweden, questions will be asked in Swedish to ensure that school counselors fully comprehend them.

Coding

Closed questions will provide background information of the participants which will not be coded. However, for analyzing the open-ended questions in the survey, the method of coding was implemented. Since this thesis only has seven participants, hand-coding has been used (Creswell & D. Creswell 2017). Coding was done in Swedish to find suitable codes, categories, and themes and thereafter translated into English. To begin with, survey answers have been well organized to receive the best outcome for the analysis and the answers from participants have been reread at least twice (ibid) to receive a general understanding of the school counselor's perspective of the pandemic and its impacts on Elevhälsa and female students. Thereafter, the coding process began by searching for suitable words and phrases that can be identified in the answers. Codes such as: increased workload, remote support, confidentiality, etc have resulted in categories such as: the changing work tasks and the physical accessibility resulting in the theme *Changes within the organization and school counselors work*. Codes such as: lack of social contacts, emotions, female students in need of support, etc resulted in categories: ability to reach out and catch students and access to Elevhälsa resulting in the theme *School counselors perception of female students*. Codes as: different support, close collaborations with other institutions, etc resulted in categories as: access to support, and prevention and preparation leading to the theme *Crisis management*. This coding process resulted in three themes where empirical data has been analyzed in the empirical results and analysis section. The coding scheme can be read in Appendix 3.

5.2 Ethics

Methods used in this research require involvement with other people and therefore correctly and ethically conducted data is essential for the study to be valid. Participants have to be aware of the purpose of the research, how it is conducted, how the data is used, and any potential risks participants may face if participating (Fleming & Zegwaard 2018). One aspect when it comes to ethical considerations is to clarify the role of participants in surveys. This is necessary to ensure that they know what they are participating in and that researchers are protecting and respecting participant's opinions, experiences, and lives (Vetenskapsrådet 2017). Thus, for clarification and avoiding misunderstanding, the invitation letter underlines the importance of participating in the survey, that it is anonymous and that participants are allowed to end the survey whenever they want to. Another significant aspect is to ensure confidentiality so only authorized people have access to the information (de Vaus 2001, p.146). This accentuates the importance of storing documents, data, and information correctly without disrupting participants' privacy. The data used in this thesis will be anonymous for the protection of the participants and the only authorized person for the answers is the researcher. To ensure the ethics and validation of this research, Vetenskapsrådets (2017) general rules and requirements have been implemented. A copy of the invitation letter is attached in Appendix 1.

5.3 Reflexivity

Being as transparent and objective as possible as a researcher is essential. Yet it is important to remember that the researcher does have personal experiences and beliefs that may be difficult to avoid in qualitative research. Thus, who I am might influence this research, risking me becoming subjective to the thesis (Trigg 2001, p.36). The idea of studying female students in Sweden reflects who I am, which is a born and raised Swedish female, who has been a part of the education system and Elevhälsa for several years. My school experience has influenced my attitude and beliefs of this institution and its policies which is rather constructive because of my positive experience without any obstacles jeopardizing my education, mental health, or access to support if needed. Since I was enrolled in upper secondary school 10 years ago, many things have changed with youths' attitudes, identity, and perspective of society. Today's teenagers have also experienced a crisis in the form of a pandemic which I never could have imagined when I was at the same age. Thus, their perspective of society differs from mine emphasizing the

importance of being aware that my experience may influence how I interpret the results. However, one strength is that I am writing this thesis during the pandemic. My education has been remote since 2020 which has impacted my studies and social life. Therefore, my similar experience provides me an opportunity to understand the youths' situation. Another way of trying to avoid subjectivity is that surveys will portray school counselors' perspectives, which makes it easier to stay objective since their perspectives on how female students have been affected will be an approach that I cannot relate to. Yet, I still have to be aware that my attitudes, beliefs, and values may affect the study as a whole, and being as objective as possible while interpreting and analyzing the results is significant.

5.4 Limitations

One limitation to consider regarding this thesis is that it is conducted and analyzed during an ongoing crisis causing people's perspectives and feelings to be difficult to examine. Often people require distance to a crisis to see, understand and reflect upon what they have experienced. If living under this crisis for about a year is enough time or not is difficult to say, but hopefully, some participants will be able to answer the surveys with their reflections that they have thus far. This limitation is connected with another important one which is using surveys for conducting empirical information. On a positive note, this can increase the number of answers considered in the short amount of time this thesis has been written. One drawback is that no follow-up questions will be asked and the answers told in the surveys are the only empirical data available. It could be argued that interviewing female students as a primary source is essential, but because of this sensitive topic and the limited amount of time, I chose to use surveys and school counselors. The aim of using surveys is that it will be a good start for receiving an overview of this subject and what needs to be researched further in the future.

6. Empirical results and analysis

While analyzing the results, links have been drawn to the theoretical framework and previous literature. In this section participants' answers will be presented in direct quotes translated from Swedish to English. Results will be presented under three themes created during the coding process. These are changes within the organization and school counselors' work, school counselors' perception of female students, and crisis management. Again, a presentation of the participants can be read in Appendix 4. The school counselors participating were asked background questions regarding age, gender, career, and so forth. Altogether there were seven female participants, in the age range 34-68 working currently as school counselors with 1 to 22 years of experience. One interesting result is that all participants identified themselves as females. They had the choices of male, female or other, but still, only female school counselors decided to participate. If this is just a coincidence cannot be concluded, but the aspiration was to receive perspectives from all genders which unfortunately was not the outcome.

6.1 Changes within the organization and school counselors work

Some questions in the survey aimed to receive a picture of how the school counselors work and how their school as an organization has changed due to the pandemic. What challenges have they met, how have they worked around these changes, and what have been the positive and negative aspects of these changes? To a large extent, answers often included expressions as difficult, stressful, time-consuming, and technological issues. Many school counselors had similar experiences, but with some variations depending on their school. This is an expected result since all schools have been recommended to find solutions that suit them the best in regards to the recommendations of implementing remote education. There are no direct guidelines for schools and school counselors, more than schools have to remain open, ensure a safe study environment, and that school policies are still implemented (Skolverket B 2021). Organizational changes and changing work tasks intensifies the risk of creating new social patterns leading to changes in symbolic interactionism. This includes both school employees and students. Thus, understanding these aspects of the education system in today's society is necessary to answer the research question.

The changing work tasks

Society has changed due to the pandemic and as mentioned earlier, upper secondary schools have been forced to rethink and adjust their curriculum and teaching depending on the pandemic's societal spread. Although some recommended restrictions have been enforced these have to a large extent still allowed school counselors to work on-site, even though their chance of talking to students physically has been minimized initiating a change in symbolic interactionism. School counselors answered that their work tasks include talking and being available for students, talking with colleagues, meetings with people in the Elevhälsa support team, and administrative work. They also mentioned that all tasks still exist, but are done remotely and often through Teams. Work tasks today are similar to before, the differences are the use of technology which changes the social environment affecting symbolic interactionism regarding these individuals. Since symbolic interactionism is in constant motion, new changes and ways of interacting do influence both students and school counselors. These technological alternatives implemented in today's society are important for the educational development paradigm, but they cannot replace the social aspects schools provide because actions in the physical sphere differ from the cyber community (Stier 2012). Technological advances such as Teams and other online platforms are common tools used by school counselors. This advancement has made their job function during these circumstances, even if new challenges have occurred. A common experience was a more difficult working situation since they had to try to communicate with students in new, less successful, and interactive ways.

...my meetings have to a large extent been held on Teams, where we have been talking through the computer. Students that have not been able to talk through the computer, have been able to meet me at school, but during safe rules of conduct (School counselor 7)

When asking more directly how their work has changed they all brought up working online and that many of them could not meet students under the same conditions they usually do.

I don't meet the students at school which I miss. Usually, I experience a feeling during a meeting that disappears through Teams. I like meeting in real life since I can read the students differently, from their body language, movements, to how they meet my eyes, etc. (School counselor 7)

This illustrates the importance of meeting physically. Body language, how a student talks and interacts with the school counselor can provide signs of help by identifying emotions and needs which are not seen as clearly through a computer screen. Social interactions do occur online, but interacting face to face provides additional details and signs (ibid). Thus, symbolic interactionism is not only significant for one's development and understanding of how to interact within a social context, but it can be a helpful key for understanding one's hidden feelings and issues. These results can be compared to Loeb and Windsor (2020) that argue that social interactions with teachers and other school personnel creates motivation for students which is hindered when all interactions occur online. Results in this thesis confirm this concern because reading students' body language and expressions become more difficult and therefore less successful in finding students in need of help. These insights also lead to a more political discussion of how beneficial it is to implement technological advancements within the educational field. To what extent can technological advancements be implemented so it hampers educational and personal development rather than hinders it?

The physical accessibility

When creating relations digitally compared to physically there are differences, and several school counselors described a challenging situation of trying to establish new relations with students. Again they drew links to the theory of symbolic interactionism and the importance of being in the same room to receive a feeling of the situation and read students' body language.

... I can feel the situation in the room while we are talking, a difference resulting in me being able to catch a problem that is not said out loud. Online meetings do not provide the same feeling. (School counselor 7)

When students don't turn on their camera and you can't read their body language in the same way. Some students also feel more exposed when they are on a screen compared to meeting them physically. (School counselor 4)

The feeling of being exposed and vulnerable is a reaction that can be linked to this generation. They are known as generation z which has grown up with technology influencing and to one extent forcing them to live under these conditions (Stier 2012). However, avoiding showing and sharing one's emotions and thoughts makes the school counselor's job challenging. Even if they

are doing their best and some school counselors are experiencing an increased workload since they are afraid they will miss something important regarding their work. They feel an obligation to help these students and know the importance of their job in interacting and supporting students. Their work and effort through conversational support make a difference.

I work more hours during the pandemic since I worry about missing something important regarding the students. I still noticed problems and have made three notifications of concern to social services... (School counselor 5)

This quote illustrates a change of work for the school counselor leading to these notifications of concern where the reasons for them are not stated. The uncertainty of how badly students can be affected emphasizes how important the work of school counselors is for identifying these students and the difficulties avoiding these cases even if more time is used as prevention. Students' desire for help during the pandemic has also been seen in BRIS (2021); Kapetanovic et al (2021); Tjejjouren Väst (2020) reports and have provided statistics of what adolescents feel and what concerns them the most. Whilst this survey has confirmed this since school counselors often are responsible for reporting these cases to other institutions. However, contacting these other institutions has enlightened another consequence of the pandemic highlighted by school counselors.

The work is limited and then the help is too. The possibility of meeting and solving problems is more difficult. Sure, it can be done through Teams or over the phone, but it does not work as well as physical meetings. The social work we do in school, for example, with social services has high confidentiality and technology makes it difficult since all technology is not allowed... (School counselor 4)

Technology aiming to enable school counselors' work has both strengths and weaknesses. It has allowed the system to remain open even if students are studying remotely, but it has not been working well all the time due to confidentiality reasons. Thus, ways to carry out these meetings without jeopardizing confidentiality have to improve. Research by Stuart Roe (2014) concluded that confidentiality is important for students trusting school counselors. The student has to be reassured that sensitive information is stored safely, but the school counselor also has to be ensured that they can easily collaborate with other instances without worrying about breaking

confidentiality and the student's safety. If a student requires help and support from more than just the educational institution this has to be done correctly without endangering or harming the student and its integrity. The responsibility for making technology safe to use does not lie on school counselors, but the school as an organization and other institutions have to make adjustments in their cybersecurity. This issue is exemplified in the quote below.

Less good technology, we have often received limitations from attorneys of not being allowed to use a certain technology. What is working well, is that the technology we are allowed to use has become better. A lot will probably continue existing after the pandemic. (School counselor 4)

To conclude this section, organizations and the work done by the school counselors are vital for students' symbolic interactionism and personal development. Analyzing these empirical results touches upon all three sub-questions, but the answers have reflected general changes within the organization and school counselors' work and therefore the overall picture of changes has been included with no emphasis on gender. The sub-question regarding education policy implications is answered by what problems have been seen when working with Elevhälsa including continuing conversational support to the students and maintaining confidentiality even when working remotely. This is one challenge that has to be studied further by looking into the topic of cybersecurity to ensure the safety of students, school counselors, and institutions.

6.2. School counselors perception of female students

Another theme identified when coding is school counselors' perception of female students. This relation is a focal point of the research in order to see if studies conducted before are aligned with the school counselor's perspective or if these results differ a lot. This section has been divided into two categories: access to Elevhälsa and the ability to reach out and catch the students where both the first and second sub-questions are answered.

Access to Elevhälsa

Students of all genders are always in need of support and this has not changed during the pandemic. All school counselors agreed that the need for support has increased in general and therefore some could not say if they could see a distinct difference between genders. The

question about female students' need for support now compared to before the pandemic provided a variety of answers. Some school counselors thought it was difficult to say exactly if it has changed since there also have been an overall increase of students seeking help and therefore not reflected fully upon this. While some answered that usually there are more females than males seeking help and therefore it was difficult to determine if the difference had increased even more. Students seeking help from school counselors automatically access Elevhälsa since school counselors and Elevhälsa are interlinked. School counselor 6 says “increased press and remote teaching have influenced students negatively” while school counselor 4's perspective is “from my experience, it is quite equal between female and male students”. These examples illustrate the issue for school counselors to compare the need for help between genders,

Previous studies and reports such as Tjejjouren Väst (2020), Lindgärde (2020), and Kapetanovic et al (2021) have confirmed that females are often in need of more support and are experiencing more mental health issues than males students during the pandemic. These previous studies have sent out surveys directly to students which might be one reason for them to see this gender difference in the results. Results from this thesis contradict the literature in the sense that no strong conclusions can be drawn that females require more help and support. Looking through the perspective of school counselors this has been more difficult to determine, but there is an overall increase of need for Elevhälsa and conversational support compared to before Covid-19.

A phrase several school counselors referred to when answering how they perceive female students have been affected was *less/lack of social contacts*. This can be linked to the minimized social interactions with people in different social contexts. During the upsurge of the pandemic, the recommendation of social isolation became integrated into society and people.

I think that females' needs are clear, they lack social contacts. It becomes too lonely.
(School counselor 1)

More female students are suffering from psychological issues now compared to before the pandemic and more are seeking support. Reasons for this are lack of social contact, lack of routines, more time for negative thoughts, stress over school/schoolwork and the future. (School counselor 2)

These examples can be connected to the theoretical framework. To begin with, social integration due to lack of social contacts affects students' perception of their role in society and

within-group dynamics. It is related to symbolic interactionism in the sense that the loss of social contact will have long-term effects on their interactions in the future (Blumer 1969; Lalander & Johansson 2019) symbolic interactionism is seen in Elevhälsa since it requires interactions with the school counselors, either physically or remotely. Thus female students are not only lacking social interaction in daily life, but also have to be prepared for changes on how to interact and contact their school counselor during a crisis.

Elevhälsa is an important part of the education system and participants believed that female students have a positive view of the availability of Elevhälsa and support system considering Covid-19. Because of new adjustments to find students in need of help, new ways of reaching out have been implemented where casual talking through texting is positive. Wong et al (2020) saw similar results in their research where increased encouragement improved female students' view and perceptions of the future and their relation to their supervisor. Comparing this to these empirical results illustrates providing extra time for students, by casual talking, encouragement, and stronger relations will have positive effects.

I hope they think it is good, and I am currently working with a more searching approach during the pandemic, for example sending texts through Teams just to ask how they are doing. This is appreciated and students have expressed that it feels good and nice that I get in touch, that someone cares even if it is not an urgent reason (School counselor 7)

We have also had the opportunity to have students in the school, but their lessons have been remote. This has helped them to receive extra support in both their education and social work. (School counselor 4)

When asking about the school counselor's perspective of how they think female students believe Elevhälsa and support systems have worked during the pandemic, the answers were overall positive. In cases where remote support has not worked, they have readjusted to other alternatives resulting in satisfaction for students and school counselors.

...in some cases, the conversations haven't been able to occur since students don't or can't talk through Teams depending on how they live, who's home, and so forth. It has been difficult, but in those specific cases I have had the opportunity to meet the student in school...(School counselor 7)

Schools are not the only institutions' students turn to, other institutions and NGOs are struggling to continue their work during the pandemic. These, however, have not been able to adjust in the same way as schools. Resulting in school counselors feeling lonely in their work. School counselor 4 describes it as “Sometimes I believe that we are the only support that exists since many other instances are struggling even more to keep in touch with students”. Therefore one strength of the education system and Elevhälsa is that it has successfully worked in keeping in touch with students even if they feel a higher burden than before. Keeping schools open has been positive for the student's well-being, but it also emphasizes that school counselors need support and encouragement to continue their work during these unusual circumstances.

Ability to reach out and catch the students

To receive more insight, school counselors were asked to give examples of advantages and disadvantages of female students accessing Elevhälsa and the technological platforms online. Female students that have benefitted from Elevhälsa and support online are because of the variety of ways to contact their school counselors. They can receive help and support remotely by texting, or calling through various platforms emphasizing the advantage of technology when used correctly. Students struggling with anxiety, social phobia, or unwillingness to receive help have been able to receive conversational support through ways that suit them better. Finding alternative solutions adapted to the individuals has been a positive outcome, opening up for more alternatives for support even after Covid-19.

...by building up trust and cooperation with a student that absolutely did not want support from the start, but really needed it. Because of distance, we started texting and thereafter advanced to calls through Teams and the next step is to meet in real life. In that aspect, distance has been helpful. (School counselor 7)

One student has had difficulties attending school due to anxiety over the bus commute. We solved that problem by implementing remote education and additional communication through text with me. She is doing well, has a good job, and reached her goals. (School counselor 3)

On a more negative note, one major problem with receiving support on distance is the lack of social contacts and social contexts. Social belonging is essential for many people and when they

are suddenly removed it has consequences on people's everyday life. It gives a lot to one's well-being, but is also important for some students to be able to train and maintain their social skills in the physical sphere.

Many female students have expressed joy over returning to school. They have missed the social aspect, laughing together, hugging, and so forth (School counselor 5)

Students suffering from social anxiety and need to train social situations disadvantages of distance (School counselor 4)

One student of foreign descent can't talk through Teams during distance because this student doesn't want to talk at home because of fear of relatives overhearing the conversation. (School counselor 7)

This last quote touches upon a subject that has not been discussed to a great extent in this thesis. Unsafe home environments are one issue that becomes enlarged during a crisis. Students' experiencing unsafe home environments are important to identify and keep in touch with to ensure their safety. Although, it may be difficult to identify these students when drastic changes occur making them more vulnerable. During a crisis, many social consequences can occur, one of the seven consequences common during pandemics is violence (Chu et al. 2020). Thus, keeping this in mind as a potential outcome for students is vital. Exactly what the situation is referring to in the quote above is unsure, but it opens up to a new topic that needs to be explored further. Tjejjouren Väst (2020) does bring up the aspect of the home environment during the pandemic where results show that around 19% of female students do not feel safe. This emphasizes the sensitivity of researching this subject and why students and school counselors have to be protected, but also the importance of continuing researching this topic.

To conclude, looking at female students' situations from a school counselor's perspective has not been easy. It is difficult for school counselors to measure differences between genders and instead it is easier to confirm that both genders have increased the use of Elevhälsa and the need for conversational support. Female students are also heavily affected by the lack of social contacts which impacts their mental health and wellbeing and can have devastating consequences in the future. Feeling a part of a social context is important even if these are occurring online it should be encouraged to find a social context in alternative ways.

6.3 Crisis management

The pandemic has been a crisis like no other in recent times. It required drastic changes, adaption, recommendation, and restriction for individual people, institutions, and societies worldwide. Schools as an institution have therefore been challenged uniquely with few preparations and quick solutions. This section will touch upon the sub-question of educational policy implications by analyzing crisis management. Even if schools have crisis management plans for many possible situations, it is not obvious that they had a plan if a pandemic would occur.

Access to support

One aspect of crisis management is the availability of support and some school counselors have seen clear differences from now and before the pandemic.

The support is different since I have limited employment and have not been able to meet students in their daily life such as in classrooms or cafes where youth usually gather. At the moment, we are only here a certain amount, the school nurse at 40% and me at 10%. We contact other institutions outside school if needed. (School counselor 1)

I don't think the school was prepared, however, I believe our school has adapted quite well in regards to the circumstances. Difficult to say what could have been prepared better, but more employees within the Elevhälsa support team would have improved the prerequisites for the increased workload. (School counselor 2)

These insights show that there was no specific plan implemented for a crisis as a pandemic, but they were able to quickly adjust and have given many school counselors a positive perception of how the school handled the situation. As Elbedour et al (2021) discussed, having a support health team ready when a crisis comes can minimize the consequences. In this case, the Elevhälsa support team includes school counselors that know how to handle the emotional trauma that may increase in a crisis, and in that perspective, they were prepared, but all adjustments needed to reach out were more difficult to prepare. The article (Elbedour et al 2021) also concluded that having school counselors involved in prevention, development, and implementation is beneficial. Elevhälsa has done this by including school counselors and their

knowledge of how to interact with these students well and instead the issue is mostly related to technology. The increased need for support by students, in general, could have been easier for some school counselors if there were more employees in the Elevhälsa support team. This is confirmed in the quote above from school counselor 2 who alone is responsible for 700 students (see Appendix 3). Thus one can understand that if the need for conversational support increases, it will increase the school counselors' workload, and a solution would be to hire more school counselors.

Prevention and preparation

When asking how the school as an institution was prepared for this type of crisis, if they were well prepared, or if the school could have been more prepared, an overall agreement could be concluded. School counselors felt that the management of the situation has been better than expected since they were not prepared for a crisis as a pandemic. They all agree that schools adjusted and adapted to the situation quickly. Yet, there still have been struggles and issues to learn from.

We readjust quite quickly last spring, but we have also been forced to learn a lot. Many have been forced to learn systems and alternative ways to communicate that did exist before, but were never used to the same extent as today. Decisions have been taken suddenly, so it has been a rollercoaster of which we have adapted as well as possible. (School counselor 4)

When it comes to preparation many school counselors felt that they could not be more prepared than they were. It was a crisis very different from what is prepared for in the crisis management plans. This crisis was out of their control.

I don't think anyone has been able to prepare themselves for this crisis when it comes to health. However, we have conducted surveys during the pandemic and talked to the students to try to find solutions for making their education go as smoothly as possible. (School counselor 4)

There were no preparations for this type of crisis other than we were well prepared when it came to education, contacts, and so forth. At the school, we have crisis management plans for other situations, but this one, no one could ever have predicted. (School counselor 7)

...it is difficult to prepare students for something so unpredictable. However, we could work to strengthen their mental health as well as give them tools/skills as prevention to handle difficult situations, stress, and anxiety. (School counselor 2)

Only School counselor 2 mentioned teaching tools as prevention which can be linked to coping strategies. Using and teaching coping strategies as a tool would benefit many people in different situations. These strategies can differ, but the aim is to learn how to handle stress, anxiety, unpredictable situations, and so forth (Lindegård 2020). This is exactly what the pandemic was, an unpredictable crisis where all people were tested for lack of social interactions, increased anxiety, and stress. However, adults have better skills to handle these feelings compared to youth. Seeing that no one else of school counselors mentioning teaching skills can be an indication of them not reflecting or using coping strategies within their work. This has been seen in an ongoing thesis one can conclude that students are not taught coping skills at school. Since there were no questions directed towards if the school is teaching students coping skills or not, it is difficult to draw any further conclusions. Nevertheless, it is an interesting outcome of this thesis emphasizing the need to study the use of coping strategies in schools further.

In essence, this section covers the theme of crisis that can be seen throughout the thesis. Crisis management plans are one part of policy implications and it can be seen that adjustments are needed in these plans to be more prepared for these unpredictable crises. Better preparation would have been beneficial for students and school counselors. This discussion also connects to the research question by looking at it from a crisis perspective and what can be redone to avoid this type of crisis in the future. I argue that prevention and preparation are necessary for reducing the impacts on students' symbolic interactionism, and even if some crises cannot be predicted, crisis management plans for unpredictable crises are needed. The pandemic is a crisis affecting society, education, and youth, and being prepared is the first step in helping marginalized youth.

7. Conclusion

The pandemic and its impact on societies are still close in time. Therefore studying how females' mental health has been affected through a school counselor perspective has been challenging, but necessary. Throughout this first year with Covid-19, a lot has happened, and changes and adjustments to find the best strategies are in constant motion. These empirical results are a contribution to understanding and gaining more knowledge which will influence schools to improve their strategies on how to proceed forward during and after this crisis when it comes to Elevhälsa and student health.

Firstly, symbolic interactionism is an evolving process where all interactions, situations, and crises do influence people's actions. The purpose of symbolic interactionism is that people learn from acting and reacting to different social contexts. Thus, remote teaching has minimized these physical interactions and instead increased interactions through technological devices and platforms. If this hinders more than hampers personal development may be discussed, but this ongoing phenomenon of remote socialization will affect people and their actions in society which can already be seen today. Direct effects can be seen on their mental health status while the long-term effects are still unknown.

Secondly, focusing largely on female students through the eyes of school counselors has been difficult because the perception of school counselors has contradicted the literature. School counselors do not have direct statistics that females are more vulnerable than male students more than what they have observed themselves. Since female students are overall in need of help and more prone to seek help this has just intensified during the pandemic, while male students also have increased their needs. What is agreed, is that there is an increasing need and access for support.

Thirdly, in answering the research question one can see that female students have been able to use Elevhälsa even if it is during different circumstances. Students have adapted to remote teaching which has changed the way of interacting with school counselors, but adjustments have been made in certain cases by aiming for the child's best interest. Thus, these changes have affected female students' symbolic interactionism, but exactly what effects it will have on their actions in the future is still unknown. Future studies to see these changes are a good contribution to this research.

This thesis has been successful in providing insight and contributing with more knowledge into this complex social situation that still is ongoing. Yet, more knowledge through additional research can be useful. Conducting similar studies that include a larger set of participants, preferably both female students and school counselors through surveys or interviews would be a beneficial contribution to this thesis. Additionally, while analyzing the results other topics for future research were identified. One of them refers to cybersecurity and its impacts on remote education, since this was identified as one of the problems of teaching and helping students remotely. The other suggested research topic is focusing on unsafe home environments and remote education which for some students are an indication of poor well-being and since that topic is very sensitive a clear strategy on how to reach these students and ensure their safety is vital. In essence, the objective of the thesis was met and has contributed with knowledge about this contemporary problem, even if this thesis is just the beginning of several more.

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Appendix 1; Invitation Letter

Translated from Swedish to English.

Dear xx,

My name is Stacey Carlsten and I am studying Development Studies with a major in sociology at Lunds University. At the moment, I am writing my bachelor thesis where I am going to research how school counselors in upper secondary schools perceive how female students have been affected by Covid-19 and its impact on remote teaching and their changes on Elevhälsa and students mental health. To be able to answer the purpose of this thesis, I need to get in touch with school counselors in upper secondary schools during the pandemic. Therefore, I want to ask You, if You are willing to participate in a survey regarding this topic.

The survey will include questions about Your experience of being a school counselor and how Your work has changed during the pandemic, but also how You as a school counselor have experienced changes for the female students. Since female students are a marginalized group in society this thesis has decided to solely focus on female students to receive a better picture and deeper understanding of their situation. The survey takes about 30 minutes to complete. The questions will include topics such as how school counselors have been affected, how school counselors think female students have been affected, and how Elevhälsa and support have been working during the pandemic.

The information conducted will only be used for this thesis. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. You are therefore allowed to quit the survey or choose to not answer questions. The last day to participate is the 12th of May 2021.

Please, let me know if you want to participate, even if you decide not to. I would appreciate it if you inform me of this too.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me.

Thanks for your time!

Best regards,
Stacey Carlsten
Student
Lunds University

Appendix 2; Questions from the survey

Translated from Swedish to English.

Background information

- What is your age?
- Gender? (male, female, other)
- What city do you work in?
- How long have you been working as a school counselor?
- Why have you chosen to become a school counselor?
- How many students are you responsible for?

Before and during the pandemic: similarities and differences

- Describe a normal day at work before the pandemic.
- Describe a normal day during the pandemic.
 - What are the biggest differences in your work?
 - How has it reflected upon you and your work?
 - What has been working well and what has been working poorly?
- Do you experience any differences in creating relations with students physically or remotely?
 - Are there any challenges?
- What is your perception of female students' need for support during the pandemic compared to before?
 - Have there been any changes and why do you think they depend on them?
- What is your perception of how the access to support has been during the pandemic compared to before?

Institution

- Do you believe that the school as an institution was prepared for a crisis like Covid-19 and the readjustment to remote education that the crisis caused?
 - If yes, in what ways?
 - If not, how do you wish that the school would be prepared?

Students Experiences

- Do you experience that female students overall have poorer health than male students and if they require more support from their school counselor?
 - In what ways have you experienced this?

- From your perspective, how do you think the female students are experiencing access to support during the pandemic?
- From your perspective, how do you think female students experience that the support has been working during the pandemic?
- Do you have an example of a female student who has positive experiences of support online?
 - In what ways have you seen that this has benefited the student?
- Do you have an example of a female student who has negative experiences of support online?
 - In what ways have you seen that the student has not benefited?
- From your perspective, how has school and Elevhälsa prepared the students for a crisis like Covid-19?
 - If yes in what ways?
 - If not, how do you think students could have been prepared?

Future

- What have you learned from working the way you have had to do during the pandemic?
- If the female students could decide, how do you think they would like to proceed with their contact with school counselors?

Appendix 3: Coding Scheme

Translated from Swedish to English

Quotes	Codes	Categories	Titles
<p>School counselor 5: <i>I work more hours during the pandemic since I worry about missing something important regarding the students. I still noticed problems and have made three notifications of concern to social services...</i></p>	<p>Increased workload</p> <p>Notifications of concern</p> <p>Social services</p>	<p>The changing work tasks</p>	<p>Changes within the organization and school counselors work</p>
<p>School counselor 7: <i>I don't meet the students at school which I miss. Usually, I experience a feeling during a meeting that disappears through Teams. I like meeting in real life since I can read the students differently, from their body language, movements, to how they meet my eyes, etc.</i></p>	<p>Remote support</p> <p>Body language</p>	<p>The physical accessibility</p>	<p>Changes within the organization and school counselors work</p>
<p>School counselor 4: <i>The work is limited and then the help is too. The possibility of meeting and solving problems is more difficult. Sure, it can be done through Teams or over the phone, but it does not work as well as physical meetings. The social work we do in school, for example, with social services has high confidentiality and technology makes it difficult since all technology is not allowed...</i></p>	<p>Difficulties</p> <p>Technology</p> <p>Confidentiality</p>	<p>The changing work tasks</p>	<p>Changes within the Organization and school counselors work</p>
<p>School counselor 3: <i>One student has had</i></p>	<p>Female students in need of support</p>	<p>Ability to Reach out and catch students</p>	<p>School counselors perception of female</p>

<p><i>difficulties attending school due to anxiety over the bus commute. We solved that problem by implementing remote education and additional communication through text with me. She is doing well, has a good job, and reached her goals.</i></p>	<p>Emotions</p> <p>Problem-solving</p> <p>students best interests</p>		<p>students</p>
<p>School counselor 2: <i>More female students are suffering from psychological issues now compared to before the pandemic and more are seeking support. Reasons for this are lack of social contact, lack of routines, more time for negative thoughts, stress over school/schoolwork and the future.</i></p>	<p>Lack of social contacts</p> <p>Psychological issues</p> <p>Stress</p>	<p>Access to Elevhälsa</p>	<p>School counselors perception of female students</p>
<p>School counselor 7: <i>There were no preparations for this type of crisis other than we were well prepared when it came to education, contacts, and so forth. At the school, we have crisis management plans for other situations, but this one, no one could ever have predicted.</i></p>	<p>Unpredictable</p> <p>Crisis management plans</p>	<p>Preparation and prevention</p>	<p>Crisis management</p>
<p>School counselor 1: <i>The support is different since I have limited employment and have not been able to meet students in their daily life such as in classrooms or cafes where youth usually gather. At the moment, we are only here a certain amount, the school nurse at 40% and me at 10%. We contact other institutions outside school if needed.</i></p>	<p>Different support</p> <p>Close cooperation with other institutions</p>	<p>Access to support</p>	<p>Crisis management</p>

Appendix 4: Background information about participants

School counselor 1 is 61 years old, has one year of working experience and is currently employed in an upper secondary school in Karlskrona, and is responsible for around 240 students. The motivation for the chosen career is that the person has worked with adolescents and young adults with psychological issues at a medical center.

School counselor 2 is 34 years old, has six years of working experience, and is currently employed in an upper secondary school in Stockholm and responsible for around 700 students. The motivation for the chosen career was to work with supporting children and youth with different challenges as well as working with prevention and furtherance for children and youth by giving them the best foundation for a good upbringing and prerequisite as possible. The school is a great arena to reach many children and youth.

School counselor 3 is 48 years old, has 3 years of experience and is working in an upper secondary school in Uppsala, and is responsible for about 70 students. Motivation for the chosen career likes to talk to adolescents and believes that they also are good at coordinating youth and identifying and meeting their need for support.

School counselor 4 is 48 years, has six years of experience, and currently works in an upper secondary school in Uppsala responsible for about 100 students. The motivation for the chosen career is to encourage students to grow as persons and the group of students the person is currently working with gives them that opportunity. The students are curious and not too deeply rooted in certain patterns therefore it is still possible to make changes if students are willing. Seeing students grow and believe in themselves is inspiring.

School counselor 5 is 68 years old, has 20 years of experience, and is currently working in an upper secondary school in Stockholm and responsible for around 250 students. The motivation for the chosen career that the person works as both a school counselor and school nurse and these roles interlink well together.

School counselor 6 is 58 years old, has 22 years of experience and is currently working in an upper secondary school in Uppsala, and is responsible for about 600 students. Motivation for the chosen career is that the person likes to work within the educational field since all people are included.

School counselor 7 is 61 years old, has five years of experience and is currently working in an upper secondary school in Gävle, and is responsible for about 450 students. The motivation for the chosen career is that working with youths is an incredible privilege. To have the opportunity to help, support, and guide them when needed feels like a large and important assignment.