

What **Building mental health resilience in children from school: lessons learnt from COVID-19 and innovative approaches**

When and Where 14 September 2022, 14-15:30, Online

Main relevant speakers **Ms Alviina Alametsä**, MEP, Co-chair of the Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing in the European Parliament
Ms Stine Hellum Braathen, SINTEF Scientific Coordinator
Mr Konstantinos Antypas, SINTEF Senior Research Scientist
Ms Olga Gómez-Ortiz, Assistant Professor University of Cordoba
Ms Agata Wiza, Associate professor Poznan University School of Physical Education
Ms Celeste Simões, Associate Professor University of Lisbon
Ms Fatima Awil, Policy and Knowledge Officer, Education, Youth and Vulnerable Situations, Mental Health Europe
Ms Ase Marit Hovden, BOOST project Partner, Viken County

Objective This webinar presented the state of the art of the project and showed the latest results and data evidence about the impact of COVID-19 on the school environment over the past two years in the three BOOST countries: Norway, Spain, and Poland. Also, it was an occasion to deep dive into the impact of COVID-19 on children in the European Union and the tools and strategies currently in place to stem the consequences, with a close eye on the role of schools in promoting mental well-being from early childhood.

Main outputs **Ms. Alametsä** stressed three main topics: **school bullying, mental health issues, and emotional and mental skills.** Presenting the case of Finland: she shows us how the pandemic and the war have been rough for children. For this, in Finland **mental health clinics opened for all young people** in need. Children need emotional skills as they need academic results. On this topic, in Finland there is a lack of knowledge, for example on how to handle and prevent bullying and violence in schools. Kids impact the communities, and for a better wellbeing we need the right quantity of teachers and psychologists, seeking to give everyone those services. Ms. Alametsa underlines the importance of contacting politicians to give a voice to health priorities.

Stine Hellum Braathen introduced BOOST aims and structure as a project composed by a consortium of partners, with 9 work packages that evaluate how the approach has been implemented, in this case,

in 3 countries: Poland, Spain, Norway. BOOST is almost at the end of its life, but it has been **extended for 18 months** due to the implications of COVID-19.

Evidence shows that working with SEL in children, has long-term effects, for example, they are **more susceptible to learning**.

SEL programs are based on a bottom-up approach, implemented by all school staff, it is promotive, preventive, flexible, and involves students and parents with a continuous training for school staff.

BOOST has never been implemented as it was planned, because the pandemic was and still is very unstable.

Konstantinos Antypas showed the **preliminary results** of the Project in **Norway**. First, data collection was in October-November 2019, then in October-November 2020, and then again in March 2022 (**future collection in November 2022**).

Surveys show that students' relationships were affected in a negative way, while the ones with the teachers are more positive.

A **worrying result** is that the school now looks more like a **prison** than it used to be for young students.

Also, the relationship with adults was experienced to be weakened, while the relationship with students did not change so much. Young people in Norway perceive school as unfair, and we should work on it.

Olga Gómez-Ortiz presented data based on 7 different **Spanish** public schools and offered a good indicator of children's mental health after the **impact of quarantine**. First, collection of data was settled in September 2019 and then in September 2020.

The differences between the two times show:

- In 2020 we see an improvement in **family relationships**.
- After quarantine students pay more attention to emotions.
- But they also have a **lower level of understanding and cooperation**.
- Children show less emotional problems related to **hyperactivity** compared to 2019.
- Students' level of resilience is higher after quarantine.

So, we see some positive and negative changes, but the need to put in practice initiatives such as BOOST is evident.

Agata Wiza showed **qualitative data** from Polish schools.

First FGI's and IDI's in 2018 compared with 2021 and 2022, and 3 experimental schools were involved.

In **Poland**, head teachers suffer from a **lack of external support** and the redefinition of **professional roles** is a problem, together with the

lack of skills to manage sensitive situations involving mental health problems.

The major problems associated with the pandemic on school climate are the higher number of people associated with psycho-physical ailments, the absence of direct contact with students, the lack of training for remote work which leads the reluctance to work online. So, what can we do now? We must “rebuild” the school climate. In fact, improvements in peer relations and students’ behaviour were noted six months after students physically returned to school.

Celeste Simões presented some **key recommendations**. SEL objectives should be in the **curriculums** also with academic achievements, as mental health should be an indicator of school success. To do this, we need a **schematic approach** and a **bottom-up** approach: giving the voice to the students to understand their visions and including parents and other key agencies.

Despite this, some children have **special needs** (they may have been abused, violated, or with a special condition) so we should have targeted interventions to move in a positive way, and not penalize them with this insertion.

We also should address adult people: **teachers and school staff need to be trained** on how to connect and how to get to know children.

She gives some suggestions for the last steps of BOOST. For example, improving our **digital skills**, or adding the supervision of **psychologists**, which can bring some answers to questions that teachers do not know how to answer to.

Fatima Awil underlined that **prevention of mental health problems is the key**.

Also, poverty risk is a serious topic and a motive for exclusion and implies that mental problems will be more frequent in some groups than in others. To solve the problem, we have to **engage them and tailor it to their needs**.

These are challenging times for people but also for the Member States: a lot has happened and still happening, before with the pandemic, and then with the war, cross-border health crisis today is increasingly influent.

In the 2022 **SOTEU speech**, **Von der Leyen** affirmed that next year there will be more attention on mental health, also with more funding dedicated to it. EU and the Member States must **integrate policies and mental health** considering economic and environmental factors. We need an **action plan at a EU level and more investments on education**.

Ase Marit Hovden presented various learnings from the BOOST project:

- The need for a more systematic approach. **National policies lack a set of goals like *how to manage schools*.**
- A whole school approach must create a collective responsibility; it is also important to **create a structure of expertise inside the schools.**
- The importance to achieve school aims.
- Insert SEL in different subjects in schools. We must involve them in a more process-orientated way.

Another key point is the *sustainability* of BOOST. They have **connections with DG EAC and DG RTD** which are important to **reaching out to all regions and other partners** which are fundamental.

Want to know more?

- [BOOST Policy Brief \(2020\)](#)
- [Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing](#)
- [NESET](#)
- [A systemic, whole-school approach to mental health and well-being in schools in the EU](#)