

What	BOOST Final Conference
When and Where	23th of May 2023, Brussels
Main relevant speakers	<p>Ms Sara Brazys, Project advisor at HaDEA, EU Commission</p> <p>Ms Maria Walsh, MEP EPP Ireland</p> <p>Ms Stine Hellum Braathen, SINTEF Scientific Coordinator</p> <p>Dr Robert Florkowski, Professor at Poznan University of Physical Education</p> <p>Ms Olga Gómez-Ortiz, Assistant Professor University of Cordoba</p> <p>Ms Agata Wiza, Associate professor Poznan University School of Physical Education</p> <p>Dr Nils Lundin, Pediatrician and School doctor, BOOST advisory board, Sweden</p> <p>Ms Gloria Azalde, SINTEF EU Coordinator</p> <p>Ms Eva M. Romera Félix, Associate Professor University of Cordoba</p> <p>Mr Kjetil Gulsrud Lundemoen, Development Manager in the education department, Modum Kommune</p> <p>Ms Ida Laudanska-Krzeminska, Associate Professor at Poznań University of Physical Education</p> <p>Ms Elżbieta Leszczyńska, Office of Education, BOOST Advisory Board, Poland</p> <p>Mr Johannes Theiner, Ambassador European Parents' Association, BOOST Advisory Board, Austria</p> <p>Ms Anna-Maria Giannopoulou, Deputy Head of Unit at European Commission</p> <p>Ms Francesca Centola, Policy and Knowledge Officer Mental Health Europe</p> <p>Ms Ase Marit Hovden, BOOST project Partner, Viken County</p>

Objective	<p>The BOOST project aimed to develop and implement a school-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) program to promote mental health and well-being in primary school children. The project faced challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the original design and implementation. However, these circumstances also provided unique opportunities to study the effects of COVID-19 measures on children and school climate. The project's final conference, scheduled for May 23, 2023, in Brussels, presented the outcomes of the BOOST project in Norway, Poland, and Spain, focusing on two special sessions: one discussing the BOOST approach and another exploring the impact of COVID-19 on addressing mental health in primary schools. The conference also discussed the project's</p>
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key takeaways and their relevance to current EU strategic initiatives on mental health.

Main outputs

Welcome by the European Commission

Sara Brazys

Opens the BOOST Final Conference, which is occurring during the European Mental Health Awareness Week.

She describes BOOST as a very good example of EU collaboration, and dedication to mental health research: one of its main aims is to look into social and emotional wellbeing and skills of youth in schools. Promoting these aspects creates a huge impact on society, and schools play a big role in enhancing mental health of our kids and adolescents. The Commission, through research programs such as Horizon Europe, has been very dedicated to funding mental health research, from disorders to risk factors and innovative solutions, adapted to new challenges of our societies. In the work programs we can find many opportunities addressing not only mental health but also its determinants such as climate change, urbanisation, digitalisation, new workplaces post-pandemic.

She invites the audience to share their ideas and points of view throughout the event.

General Presentation of BOOST (slides available [here](#))

Stine Hellum Braathen

Gives an overview on the project. The initiative started in 2016, and it came from Viken County (Norway) and they started discussing the partners and in 2018 they started the project.

The aim is to create an approach targeting school staff in order to strengthen social and emotional skills among children and young people in primary school, and thus promote their mental health and wellbeing. The decision of primary school comes from the need to have a common arena among the participant countries.

She presents the Consortium and the organisations leading the work packages, as well as the methodology. BOOST is made of 9 work packages and it is based on the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). The frameworks for SEL are EULifeComp, CASEL, OECD, UNICEF, UK/Young Foundation, and has three overall competencies: personal, social and learning one. The aim of developing these competences is to increase wellbeing through self-esteem, relationship skills and learning skills. It is important because, apart from the personal and mental wellbeing, it leads to increased academic achievement and success in labor market. The best SEL programs are preventive and promotional, and they are integrated into school staff.

Despite Covid-19, they managed to have good feedback and the main work now is up to work package 8 on exploitation, so to put the project in practice.

Keynote from the European Parliament

Maria Walsh

Mental health is a fundamental piece of the work of which she gives an overview of. Talking numbers: 1 in 6 people had mental health issues in 2016 for a total of 84 million people, and yet mental health is not on the discussion table at a policy level enough. Covid-19 allowed us to reflect on our own mental health, highlighting what stress looks like, and that young people often don't have the tools to address it. The growing burden on mental health caused by the crisis has referenced as a silent or a second pandemic, and ultimately nobody deserves to suffer in silence.

She affirms that mental health and wellbeing remain at the very forefront of her political journey from the very beginning in 2018 but actually many years before that. Every field she had worked in has mental health aspects, such as Employment and Social affairs, Culture and Education, Justice and Home affairs.

Mental health does not consist of mental illnesses or struggles, but it refers to everyone's minds.

A point of great importance is the rate of suicides among young people: suicide is the second leading cause of death among 10 to 19 years old people in the EU. Around 9 millions of young people are living with mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression, leading to eating disorders, physical harm, etc.

In 2022 half of young Europeans report unmet needs for mental health care and the number of young people with depression symptoms in several EU countries has more than doubled during the pandemic. These are data, and it is imaginable that these numbers are higher in reality.

At the Parliament level, there is the opportunity to work directly on a file dedicated to making cyber violence a form of gender-based violence. 10-15% of children and teenagers have been bullied online. In her opinion, school kids are missing out the care from dedicated trained staff. For this reason, she gives credit to the SEL approach under BOOST because it creates innovative approaches in order to strengthen social and emotional skills among children and young people in schools.

Schools and class environments can provide such positive education outcomes to improve our citizen participation, our democracy as well as promoting and protecting wellbeing.

BOOST gives way to arguments that mental health must be considered in all fields, as a thread between every piece of policy. Programs like BOOST are never 100% finished, but they are always evolving like everybody's mental health. Without data and cooperation, we will keep working in silos and young people are going to be the ones suffering the most.

Developing the BOOST approach: formative study design considerations

Robert Florkowski (BOOST Approach presentation [here](#))

Talks about the BOOST approach, which wants to facilitate interpersonal sensitivity via support of social and emotional learning in the school setting. The main issue is the empowerment of teachers leading to the empowerment of pupils through a cascade effect.

They started with the literature review, and then passed to an analysis and comparison of educational policies around the world, last qualitative research.

The characteristics of effective SEL approaches consist of flexibility, systematic and continuous inputs and engagement of the whole school, while the latter have specific needs among which: help in organisational development, access to set of SEL tools and support of staff further development of SEL competences.

In his opinion, a challenge is how to deal with parents, who can, driven by a negative input, damage the climate of the place.

He presents the innovation of the BOOST approach, among which we find the fact that it is based on the resources of each school, interconnected with school priorities and values, that is compatible with earlier adopted prophylactic programs. Furthermore, it encourages co-creation of all staff members and it is present in all domains of everyday school life. The last innovative characteristic is that it uses formal and non-formal "discussion arenas".

Talking about the implementation, the idea is around getting knowledge, rethinking knowledge, and trying to practice and share. In terms of cooperation process, after a first moment of scepticism, now there is a shift in a positive way. The impact of social context in Poland, for instance, was mainly characterised by social and financial status of teachers, overloaded and experiencing burnout, teachers' strikes, the pandemic, and the war in Ukraine.

Children from Ukraine for example enter into Polish schools, with overloaded and crowded classes, interpersonal issues, and cultural differences.

Gloria Azalde

The context of this project has been really important.

Creating a sustainable SEL approach means tackling the context of each country (Poland, Spain, Norway).

When the implementation started, the context determined the strategies to be used to carry out the approach, by listening to what schools and owners wanted. For instance, in Poland and in Spain, the implementation of physical meetings and discussions started from the very beginning, whereas in Norway they relied solely on the online platform. This created distances from the schools and influenced how they understood the approach. The platform had accessibility issues and with Covid-19 they experienced some challenges. Context also affects the development of the approach: the consortium was trying to build something sustainable in schools, but in order to do so they needed to include organisational learning, understanding that it was not possible to provide all schools with all learning opportunities and tools they needed.

Agata Wiza

The BOOST project was functioning differently in each school and the way in which it does it depends on internal and external factors. All this affected BOOST approach, especially children with special needs and staff, organisational context and the management style of teachers. Workshops for teachers have been really useful tools to bring some hints to the discussion arena. These meetings improved their wellbeing and support. The high level of cooperation confirms that the project is perceived as important.

Eva M. Romera Félix

In Spain, the educational context has a relatively long experience in promoting these concepts, even with support from government. The BOOST approach has been an alternative in Spain, they are used to unidirectional models in which scientists transmit evidence to professionals, which are difficult to put in practice. The BOOST approach has led to the development of a practice-based design in which researchers and education professionals have worked together to achieve a common goal. One of the main achievements was to include teachers in the decision-making processes, this has been a challenge for the implementation. During the implementation, in fact, they had to re-direct the process towards a more research-driven approach. The project has introduced significant changes in the Spanish schools, but the specific characteristics of the context had to re-shape and adapt the model.

Nils Lundin

He is enthusiastic of the project. In his clinical experience, he had to deal with suicidal thoughts, deep depression, and he thinks it is important not just to cure them, but even more to prevent them.

Working as an Advisory Board member led also to some anxiety, given that the only experience of SEL had been a thesis in Sweden showing the problem of the SEL programs and their negative consequences. Then the thesis was reviewed and showed medium results from students and their emotional, interpersonal skills, resilience and self-control.

From a SWOT perspective, we can see many strengths in the school arena, and the professionals' upskilling and learning opportunities, but also for parents, who can also be active.

Weaknesses come from outside of the school system and promoting health awareness activities, sustainability, teachers' motivation.

Research under COVID-19 conditions and insights from Norway, Spain, Poland

Kjetil Gulsrud Lundemoen

Schools in **Norway** were closed for around two months from March to May and when they opened it was really organized, small groups of students with dedicated teachers. However, **for the school staff, teachers and school leaders** it was **really chaotic** because there were lot of things to be organized. The **impact on children mental health in Norway was limited** given the fact that the schools were closed for just two months. However, the early opening raised concerns about safety for school staff and children. The **most complicated role** during the pandemic was **the one of school leader** because they needed to adapt the environment to rules that were changing so quickly. The **BOOST approach was mainly an innovation**, they learnt throughout the project and it gave a really nice occasion to reflect over the activity that schools were already doing regarding social and emotional skills. Even if the context was different in each country, **the BOOST approach now is a universal approach** that it is designed for every context. Collaboration and cocreation are fundamental to address crisis situations.

Ida Laudanska-Krzeminska

In Poland, schools were totally **unprepared for online teaching**; they were not equipped with the tools necessary to organize online teaching. Teachers had computers but without the software needed. There was a huge effort by school principals and teachers, they used their own private time and resources to organize online home teaching for kids. They felt abandoned by the Ministry of education. School principals also described the phenomena of "**disappearing**

kids", indeed especially children with problematic backgrounds did not participate in online classes for a long time. Despite this, there were some **positive effects** such as the willingness to use the new tools and methods acquired even after the health emergency. In Poland they had the longest time of online teaching, it was around 45 weeks, and this impacted all aspect of health **teachers** emphasized that they **have been impacted physically** and they noticed a **reduction in mental resistance**. Moreover, teachers were not able to assess the conditions of the kids and they pointed out that they had **no opportunity for individual conversations** with students. Classes aiming to develop SEL skills were considered less effective than traditional classes. Regarding children mental health, **Polish children suffered from emotional problems more than Spanish and Norwegian school kids**. Many children asked for psychological support, but they didn't receive it because of a lack of specialists. Furthermore, teachers reported that after months of remote school, once back to normality the main goal was to integrate students with the school again. The **BOOST handbook and materials** offered to teachers **were very helpful** in their opinion. In BOOST schools there were around 15-20% of students from Ukraine in each school, and this was a big challenge for teachers. They carried out the project in extremely difficult conditions and they were able to do it thanks to the determination of the research team and of school principals and teachers. Regarding mental health, after the pandemic, the **need for a psychological support is no longer a taboo**. During the researches they realized that preparing projects with universal proposals or results is rather impossible because even teachers from Poland manifested different expectations and needs. Therefore, **flexibility should be at the basis for such proposals**.

Olga Gomez Ortiz

In Spain, the situation looked like the one in Poland. The Covid-19 pandemic brought an **informatic challenge for teachers** and they needed to cope with it. Moreover, when the situation was getting better the school organizations also changed. There is the scientific perspective and the teacher's personal perspective. A study that focused on Spanish students showed that there was an **increase in emotional problems** during confinement, with differences regarding gender and age. **However**, the results of the BOOST project showed that **students improved their resilience**. An important lesson from the pandemic is that children's mental health is very connected with the one of their parents. Even with the pandemic situation, they found some positive results regarding the BOOST project. **BOOST approach demonstrated to be effective** and it should be used in school to improve mental health and resilience. Also, the Spanish

team is responsible for the assessment of effectiveness. With the Covid-19 situation they had the opportunity to assess specifically the impact of the pandemic. They had the possibility to compare the methods previous and after the pandemic, thus regarding a methodological perspective it was an opportunity.

Ase Marit Hovden

One of the main messages from the project is that there is a gap between the framework and what it is happening in the classrooms and in schools in practice. **Working with SEL is crucial** base for increase well-being and academic achievement and it is so important to continue with the dissemination of SEL through research and knowledge. Another message is that the gain in working with SEL **must be in the agenda in all policy levels** because the responsibility of working with SEL includes more than just schools. Moreover, social and emotional competencies should be acknowledged as skills.

The understanding of universal measures and promotion of mental health demands that all sectors must take responsibility and work with long-term objectives. The acknowledgment of SEL at the EU level is also an important measure that will have an impact on EU countries that are working on mental health. Indeed, in Norway, SEL competencies are not acknowledged as key competencies therefore they are not prioritized as they should be.

Elżbieta Leszczyńska

As Advisory Board member, Ms Leszczyńska stated that the BOOST approach is a holistic approach to the development of social and emotional skills. To some extent, **social and development programs are neglected** by teachers which are more concentrated on academic achievements. However, there is a **strong correlation between school achievements, climate of schools and well-being of students**. Indeed, a positive school climate and social and emotional learning gives better school performances.

Promoting mental health through the educational sector should be put as a priority by ministries of education in every country. Moreover, the topic of social and emotional learning in school should be included into teachers' education.

Johannes Theiner

The **burden cannot be all on the teacher**. It is important to involve parents and the staff from the social sector in the schools with the aim of sharing responsibilities. The prerequisite of being inclusive in schools is not about hiding weaknesses but seeing the options by getting in touch with every individual and fostering the potentialities.

To proceed and improve good mental health in schools it is important to move forward in a coordinated way and take everybody on board as far as possible. To do this, parents, teachers and experts should turn into learners again. Moreover, it is claimed that **some support must be given to those parents that are in problematic situations** because **parents are primary educators**.

Anna-Maria Giannopoulou

The BOOST project gives answers and options to practitioners, policy makers, parents and children. It has a lot of potential.

In 2018, the EC proposed the key competencies framework and one of them was about personal social and learning-to-learn competences. It has been assessed that early school leaving has been reduced, but it was still above 9% on average in the EU so, there was still some work to be done. Another worrying feature was that 20% of children at the age of 15 were underachieving in basic skills. Finally, 20-25% of learners and teachers reported the idea of alienating themselves from school because of well-being issues. These are the reasons behind **the Pathways to School Success** which has been adopted by EU Member States on 28 November 2022 as a response to the crisis. It tackles three things, it aims to **reduce early school leaving**, to **increase basic skills** and to **put wellbeing of teachers and pupils at the center of the educational process**. In connection with the Pathways to School Success, it has been set up an Expert Group for well-being and a supportive learning environment with 19 members, and they are not all teachers. In the first year, they have been asked to produce some policy guidelines, and self-assessment and to offer ideas and possibilities for dissemination both for practitioners as well as policymakers. The BOOST project is a perfect example of dissemination and it deserves lot of attention. With Pathways to School Success the emphasis is to give to every child the opportunity to realize its potential regardless of its social economic background.

DG EAC is involved in the New Communication on the Comprehensive approach to mental health in the EU. Mental health is very high on the new policy agenda in fact in the State of the Union speech, President von der Leyen mentioned the importance of mental health and that there will be new initiatives in September 2023. The framework provided in Pathways to School Success looks at different measures, mostly preventive measures.

Francesca Centola

Mental Health Europe is a European Network bringing 73 members from 30 EU countries. Recently, they led a thematic network about mental health in all policies on the EU Health Policy Platform, and

they have published a Joint Statement where they have put forward the vision of a Europe where everybody's mental health can flourish. It is **important to act even before school period** to ensure that every child has the opportunity to materialize its potential. However, school environment is key to promote mental health even for children that have not a safe environment at home. **Promoting mental health in all policies is of utmost importance** first because it is an integral part of the right to health, and also it is a condition for the enjoyment of all other rights that belong to human being. Moreover, there is also a **win-win situation**, promoting good mental health in school allows outcomes that are not health related. There is this increased value given to mental health, it is time to translate it into concrete actions by different stakeholders at the EU, national and subnational levels. **One path of transformation is to reshape the environment in which we live, interact and work.** This is also related to the topic of European Mental Health Week 2023 edition aiming at raising awareness about mental health. This year the topic is about mentally healthy communities and the focus is on the importance of the environment in which we operate.

Chiara Piccolo, EU policy advisor (from the audience)

BOOST will be included in the list of good practices for the Working Group because it is a good example to follow.

Want to know more?

- [BOOST project website](#)
- [BOOST approach website](#)