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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## *Handbook development and evaluation of the Well@School online course*

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Mental health problems remain a critical issue in young ages. It is documented that health and school professionals need continuous training on how to confront and promote mental health among primary school children. Within the Well@School project, an online course was co-created to develop health professionals' and primary school professionals' competences on mental health promotion. The aim of this study was to evaluate the handbook of the Well@School online course.

**Material-Methods:** Focus groups were conducted in the five partners-countries (i.e. Bulgaria, Greece, Finland, Lithuania and Slovenia). Primarily, school professionals completed an online course and afterwards they participated in a pilot of the handbook. The focus groups were facilitated by the project research team members, and they were conducted in national languages. Content analysis was carried out for the analysis of the collected data.

**Results:** Positive results were obtained regarding the content and the methods presented in the handbook. Specifically, the content was considered as useful in the provision of knowledge related to mental health issues, the layout motivated participants to go throughout the whole content. They found useful and applicable the methods on how to promote mental health effectively.

**Conclusions:** This handbook supports the use of the Well@School online course and is applicable to current and future health professionals and professionals working in school settings. It provides a baseline from which innovative e-learning and teaching materials and pedagogical practice can be used.

*Keywords:* mental health promotion, handbook, online course, qualitative study, focus groups

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## INTRODUCTION

Mental health among children remains a critical issue not only for families but also for relevant stakeholders such as teachers and school health professionals. Evidence indicates that school professionals are faced with mental health challenges, and they feel unprepared and unaware on how to promptly identify and subsequently how to support effectively mental health problems among children [1].

It is documented that schools are suitable community settings for promoting children's health and well-being [2]. First, schools reach a large number of children, due to compulsory school attendance, therefore it is an easy accessible target population. Second, according to the WHO [3], early mental health promotion interventions are the most effective strategies regardless of socioeconomic determinants (i.e. income level). Furthermore, untreated mental health problems at early stages of life may continue during adulthood [4]. Moreover, in a recent systematic review, positive results were reported regarding digital-based interventions on mental health among primary school children [5].

Under this context an online course for school professionals was developed by the partners of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project "Well@School" (for more information visit <https://wellatschool.turkuamk.fi/>). The online course includes information and methods on how to promote mental health in primary schools, mainly with the use of digital methods. The structure of the course was based on the school professionals' needs and viewpoints in respect to the competences lacking for promoting mental health in primary schools, effectively, as expressed in an earlier study [6]. In the same study participants also

highlighted the need for lifelong learning to update knowledge on early prevention and intervention, collaboration with relevant professionals/stakeholders and families for integrated approach so as to eliminate stigma [6].

In order to support the implementation of the Well@school online course, a handbook was co-created to guide any interested stakeholders. The handbook was evaluated in a pilot phase among school health professions and the findings are presented in the current paper.

## MATERIAL-METHODS

For the evaluation of the handbook, focus groups were conducted in the five country partners (i.e. Bulgaria, Greece, Finland, Lithuania and Slovenia). The handbook structure is presented in **Table 1**.

In total 50 primary school professionals participated in the interviews (i.e. 10 participants from each country). More specifically, school professionals who primarily completed the online course were those who participated in the handbook piloting. The focus groups were facilitated by the Well@School research team members. They were conducted in national languages and relevant quotations were translated into English language.

**Table 1:** Handbook Contents

<b>THE 5 BIG QUESTIONS ABOUT THE HANDBOOK (WHY, WHO, HOW, WHEN, AND WHAT)</b>	
<b>PARTNERS</b>	
<b>INTRODUCTION TO THE WELL@SCHOOL COURSE</b>	
<b>CURRICULUM AND CONTENT OF THE COURSE</b>	
<b>COURSE GUIDELINES</b>	
	1.1 Technical requirements
	1.2 Instructions on how to use the Online Course (QR code) (Scan and register, Read the content, and Complete the course)
	1.3 Assessment and Procedures of Certification Process
	1.4 Copyright issues
<b>MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION IN SCHOOLS</b>	
<b>CONTENT OF THE COURSE</b>	
<b>PART 1.</b>	Mental Health And Its Determinants
<b>PART 2.</b>	Mental Health Challenges
<b>PART 3.</b>	Interpersonal Skills To Support The Mental Health Of Children
<b>PART 4.</b>	The Mental Health Promotive School Community
<b>PART 5.</b>	Digital Methods To Promote Mental Health
<b>GUIDELINES FOR COURSE IMPLEMENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION</b>	
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	
<b>REFERENCES</b>	

Participants were asked the following:

1. In what way does the content of the Well@School handbook respond to the needs of the school professionals in promoting mental health at school?
2. Are the contents of the handbook and the methods presented useful, applicable and relevant to the promotion of mental health in school?
3. What are the most important contents of the handbook?
4. What contents or methods are missing from the handbook or what should be added to it?

Qualitative content analysis was conducted as described by Graneheim and Lundman [7]. Initial analysis was conducted in each of the national languages and subsequently relevant quotations were translated into English language.

### **Ethical considerations**

The study was approved by Turku University of Applied Sciences, as the leading organization [LP2\_2021], and additionally, by research ethics committees in each partner university. Participants were initially informed about the aim of the focus group and the issues regarding anonymity and voluntary participation, emphasizing their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. The focus groups discussions were voice recorded with prior participants' consent and the discussions were transcribed anonymously.

## **RESULTS**

Overall, positive feedback was obtained regarding the content and the methods presented in the handbook. Specifically, the content was considered useful in the provision of knowledge related to mental health issues.

Participants mentioned:

*"...the handbook contains information on knowledge development available to me and others working in this field. It also highlights didactic approaches such as lectures, quizzes, knowledge tests and other resources that can improve our skills and knowledge..."*

*"...useful background information on mental health topic (it increases the awareness for further search and consequently deconstruct stigma)...."*

*"...the Well@School handbook helps teachers to be well prepared to address mental health problems. Using this handbook helps school professionals feel prepared to promote mental health at school and develop their competences connected with their future career..."*

Participants also commented on the layout of the handbook and how it motivated them to go throughout the whole content. They highlighted several features related to the structure:

*"...comprehensive and practical..."*

*"...quick and easy navigation in the text..."*

*"...nice color and easy reading..."*

*"...good idea to include QR codes..."*

As for the methods, whether they were useful, applicable and relevant to the promotion of mental health in school, participants found them useful and applicable:

*“...I will definitely use the material to prepare a lesson on this topic, for what we call a class hour. And I will also recommend the course to my colleagues...”.*

*“...yes, they are relevant because they emphasize on the importance of the community for mental health promotion...”.*

*“...the Well@School handbook is a useful tool for school professionals. It is a compilation of useful information...”.*

*“...very useful to read before the online course...”.*

*“...the inclusion of description of each part is useful so as to make easy choices whether to complete the whole course or parts that interest the learner...”.*

Finally, participants provided the following suggestions which would improve the handbook:

*“...add epidemiological data on mental health from each country in order to draw the attention about the importance of the topic...”.*

*“.... add relevant mental health services of each country...”.*

*“...still I think more elaborate guidelines for course implementation in Higher Education could be provided...”*

*“...case studies...”*

## DISCUSSION

It is well documented that mental health problems among primary school children constitute a high burden not only in the family environment but also in the school setting [8]. Scientific evidence supports that school professionals need continuous training on mental health problems and on digital methods for promoting mental health. New competences

are needed to reach various groups of children and support them to develop resilience and cope with a wide range of issues challenging their mental health. However, it was recently documented that school professionals need continuous training on how to promote mental health in children [6]. This was the incentive for the Well@School project to provide an open online course to build new knowledge, practices and digital competences for professionals working in schools, including teachers, health professionals, social workers, etc. The ultimate goal was to reach as many as possible primary school professionals with diverse educational backgrounds.

In order to provide a comprehensive tool, as a practical guide of the online course, a handbook was created by all project partners. Positive results were obtained regarding the usefulness, the methodology, the content and the layout of the handbook. The provided information was clear and comprehensive on how to navigate through the whole online course.

It is supported that educational materials should be user-friendly and easily accessible to relevant stakeholders, especially in distance learning methods [9]. Therefore, in order to proceed with the development of the Well@School handbook, the partners took into consideration the different educational and cultural backgrounds of school professionals.

Moreover, in the fourth industrial revolution, the use of digital methods for health promotion are considered as effective tools for providing health information [5]. Technology offers a great range of custom applications according to personal or community needs [10]. This handbook supports the use of the Well@School online course and is applicable to

current and future professionals working in school settings. It provides a baseline from which innovative e-learning and teaching materials and pedagogical practice can be used. The positive feedback gives an insight for similar activities in other community settings and different age groups with various health-related problems for the implementation of effective health promotion strategies.

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ΠΡΩΤΟΤΥΠΟ ΑΡΘΡΟ

## *Ανάπτυξη και αξιολόγηση εγχειριδίου διαδικτυακού μαθήματος του ευρωπαϊκού έργου Well@School*

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### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Εισαγωγή: Τα προβλήματα ψυχικής υγείας παραμένουν ένα κρίσιμο ζήτημα στις νεαρές ηλικίες. Είναι τεκμηριωμένο ότι οι επαγγελματίες υγείας και εκπαιδευτικοί χρειάζονται συνεχή κατάρτιση αναφορικά με τον τρόπο αντιμετώπισης και προαγωγής της ψυχικής υγείας των παιδιών δημοτικής εκπαίδευσης. Στο πλαίσιο του ευρωπαϊκού έργου Well@School, συν-δημιουργήθηκε ένα διαδικτυακό μάθημα για την ανάπτυξη δεξιοτήτων των επαγγελματιών υγείας και των επαγγελματιών της πρωτοβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης σχετικά με την προαγωγή της ψυχικής υγείας. Σκοπός της παρούσας μελέτης ήταν η αξιολόγηση του εγχειριδίου του διαδικτυακού μαθήματος Well@School.

Υλικό-Μέθοδος: Ομάδες εστίασης διεξήχθησαν στις πέντε χώρες-εταίρους (Βουλγαρία, Ελλάδα, Φινλανδία, Λιθουανία και Σλοβενία). Αρχικά, οι επαγγελματίες ολοκλήρωσαν ένα διαδικτυακό μάθημα και στη συνέχεια συμμετείχαν σε μια πιλοτική εφαρμογή του εγχειριδίου. Οι ομάδες εστίασης διευκολύνθηκαν από τα μέλη της ερευνητικής ομάδας του έργου και διεξήχθησαν στις εθνικές γλώσσες. Για την ανάλυση των δεδομένων πραγματοποιήθηκε ανάλυση περιεχομένου.

Αποτελέσματα: Τα αποτελέσματα ήταν θετικά αναφορικά με το περιεχόμενο και τις μεθόδους που παρουσιάζονται στο εγχειρίδιο. Συγκεκριμένα, το περιεχόμενο θεωρήθηκε χρήσιμο αναφορικά με την παροχή γνώσεων σχετικά με θέματα ψυχικής υγείας, ενώ η δομή του παρακίνησε τους συμμετέχοντες να παρακολουθήσουν όλο το περιεχόμενο. Βρήκαν χρήσιμες και εφαρμόσιμες τις μεθόδους για την αποτελεσματική προαγωγή της ψυχικής υγείας.

Συμπεράσματα: Το παρόν εγχειρίδιο υποστηρίζει τη χρήση του διαδικτυακού μαθήματος Well@School και έχει εφαρμογή σε σημερινούς και μελλοντικούς επαγγελματίες υγείας και επαγγελματίες πρωτοβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης που εργάζονται σε σχολικές δομές. Παρέχει μια βάση από την οποία μπορούν να χρησιμοποιηθούν καινοτόμα υλικά και πρακτικές διαδικτυακής εκπαίδευσης.

*Λέξεις κλειδιά:* προαγωγή ψυχικής υγείας, εγχειρίδιο, διαδικτυακή εκπαίδευση, ποιοτική μελέτη, ομάδες εστίασης

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