

Activity 1: Report on MHPSS in schools

(Semi-structured interviews research)

Introduction

In the middle of 2021, Médecins du Monde – Greece, Cyprus University of Technology, Citizens in Power, and Syncnify came to discussions and planned the project O.P.E.N (*Developing a tool to assess the need for psychological first aid to adolescent school pupils*), guarding the view of promoting a healthy and safe school environment.

The O.P.E.N project takes place in the framework of school education; its objectives prioritize teachers, school leaders and other teaching professions support as well as the development of key competences towards implementing innovative, inter-disciplinary and inclusive approaches to learning. This document serves as a Findings Report and an Annex to the Compendium of PFA Tools and Best Practices, in the effort to bridge knowledge derived from the academia and scientific personnel with actual facts and practices directly from the schooling community.

Prologue

Rendering such a set of tools simple to use and to consult in distress situations cannot happen without the proper participation of the aforementioned people in the forming process, taking into consideration the actual community's needs and challenges as well as their own recommendations, further enriching the creative process.

The concept of conducting semi-structured interviews with school workers has served the need to get a glimpse of actual challenges, needs and the way specific procedures work (or not) in school settings, regarding the detection, screening and resolution of matters and factors that affect the general welfare and especially mental health of children and adolescent students.

One of the most important goals of educational and training programs nowadays (a goal that is concretely considered in our project) is not to provide the participants with a soft theoretical or academic knowledge that will dissolve in the near future along the lines of the demanding and fast-paced work routine. On the contrary, the aim is to directly introduce practices that are congenial and capable of escaping from the shackles of what is a working habit and which erodes the efficiency of structures, including (if not mainly) the foundations of the educational sector in the country. Thus, it is crucial to hold onto mind that any newly introduced tools should be easily applicable and utile to people in charge of the proper functionality and effectiveness of primary and secondary school institutions.

A priori field research concerning these sensitive issues was deemed necessary to gain the trust of teachers and to cultivate a conciliatory relationship between Civil Society and educational institutions. In the context of introducing novel ways of operation within the school structures, (ensuring the role of the psychologist and social worker in Primary and Secondary Education) such co-operations are crucial in order to enhance the capacity of stakeholders and decision-makers in this direction.

Methodology

Qualitative methods of data collection and analysis:

For the needs of this Activity, the methodology of Semi-structured interviews was selected because they allowed the research to be focused on the topic of interest while still giving the autonomy to explore relevant ideas. Semi-structured interviews in qualitative research are a blend of structured and unstructured interviews in the sense that some questions are predetermined while others are not. In this phase the selected methodology stood crucial to both collect new data and explore the participants' personal insights about the topic at hand. The concept of conducting semi-structured interviews with school workers has served the need to get a glimpse of actual challenges, needs and the way specific procedures work (or not) in school settings, regarding the detection, screening and resolution of matters and factors that affect the general welfare and especially mental health of children and adolescent students. Due to the complexity of the subjects discussed, an Interviewer's Guide was created to navigate the discussion in the most effective way possible. The information collected was organized according to the Guide, which then facilitated data extraction.

Work Plan / Activity Plan

Phases	Timeline	Means	Results
Preparation	30/05/22 - 17/06/22	Letter of Invitation Form of Consent E-mailing lists	100 school stakeholders contacted
Implementation	20/06/22 - 31/07/22	Online semi-structured interviews Interviewer's Guide	35 Zoom meetings 15 phone calls
Conclusion	1/08/22 - 31/08/22	Collection and analysis of findings	Interviews Report

Findings

A. Profile of participants

A total of 50 people close to the school community (teachers, psychologists, pediatricians and social workers) participated in the conducted interviews. The vast majority of the interviewees were people working or living in the region of Attica (80%) while there were also people from other areas around Greece (20%), notably from the Aegean islands, Peloponnese, West and Northern Greece.

Concerning the age range of the participants, 70% were in the ages between 35 - 59, 5% in the age group of 60+, 25% were in the age range of 25 - 34. The sample was equally divided as far as gender is concerned, with 55% women and 45% men.

Teachers from all specialties that carry out classes at schools in the urban or regional areas were engaged (philologists, mathematicians, art-teachers, PE, etc.) while some of the participants held at the same time the position of the school principal. It was deemed useful to also discuss with pediatricians and a psychologist who specifically works with children, as to also include their input and recommendations next to the Compendium of Tools and Best Practices.

B. Findings

General Information

Existing protocols give limited room for action and initiative to the educators, regarding the medium or long-term solutions to issues related to students' mental health, as any action towards this, requires parental consent beforehand. Almost every one of the interviewees were aware of the protocols that are in place from the Ministry of Education. However, most of them admitted that in practice, the procedure followed lies in the personal initiatives of the teacher responsible for the management of the situation.

Public schools are usually not adequately staffed, either with the right number of teachers (especially in rural schools in towns and cities) or with the necessary supporting scientific staff, i.e. a psychologist or social worker. This information comes from personal observation of teachers or from the complete absence of any reference to these specialists. Where provision is made for a psychologist, this is covered on a part-time basis and often one psychologist is required to cover 4-5 or more schools.

Concerning Private schools, these institutions normally provide the scientific personnel that are equipped and appropriate to follow the mental health trajectory of pupils. Educators that work in private institutions reported the existence of at least one psychologist, permanently appointed and present during school hours, who gets to meet the children upon first entrance at school and follows their course throughout all of their attendance at school.

Special Cases

90% of the interviewees made a special reference to cases regarding the need of a psychological assistance intervention. The frequency of serious psychological incidents is not particularly high (teachers' personal assessment indicates about 1 in 20 students), while milder incidents that affect or relate to mental health issues at school (bullying, alienation, isolation, panic attacks, anxiety attacks, etc.) are observed much more often in a larger number of students.

Even more rare but existent are the extreme cases that require immediate psychiatric help. Among those reported were anorexia nervosa and orthorexia nervosa, childhood depression and self-harm during school hours.

Challenges

One of the most important challenges mentioned seems to be the educational process itself, which revolves exclusively around the axis of excellence and is characterized by grade-centredness. Furthermore, the shortage of teaching staff and their limited vocational education and training make it difficult to manage diversity and socio-economic differences among students.

In addition, the unhealthy and unstable family environment of many students makes the role of the school in their proper education more imperative. However, at the same time the large number of pupils in classes does not encourage individualized learning and the development of trust between students and teachers that would create a sense of security for the pupils.

Moreover, one of the most recent challenges affecting the school community is the attachment of students to their mobile phones, especially during break time when the main priority should be to rest and interact with each other. While, more recently, the spread of pandemic and the period of confinement coupled with the indifference of the educational system for smooth readjustment of students to face-to-face teaching has disoriented the students to a great extent.

Recommendations

The semi-structured interviews also held a focus on the personal recommendations and suggestions of schoolteachers, in order to better shape the overall project's view and approach within the project's objectives.

When asked for their own contribution to the discussion of the students' mental health and wellbeing in the school environment, all interviewees first and foremost agreed that it is of great importance for schools to have permanently appointed psychologists and social workers who will systematically supervise children and that will be alert to respond immediately to crucial incidents. Following this, they suggest that the bureaucratic obstacles should be resolved, given that in some schools the consent of both parents is required before the psychologist can intervene.

Another unanimous suggestion is that free and compulsory training should be provided to all teachers on mental health issues, learning difficulties, interculturalism, etc. In addition,

teachers should be systematically checked and evaluated for their communication skills with children and their ability to detect problems they may face.

A large percentage of the participants also suggested that there is a need for a larger allocation of resources towards the educational system, which would then result in a more standardized and full staffing of schools, upgrading the school environment by creating smaller classes (of less than 20 students per class). This would also result in better management of an inconvenience or a turbulence that may arise, within schooling hours. In addition to this, according to the participating educators, time must also be invested in order to re-examine courses and to make them more creative with the aim of encouraging children's imagination and expression.

Conclusion

Questions surrounding mental health, health promotion and health in general, as a field that needs a multidisciplinary and integrated approach nowadays, are now at the center of discussions, both horizontally and within each sector. Particularly in the field of education, the teacher (a person that assumes a catalytic role not only in terms of education but also in the personal emotional development of children and adolescents) must now be constantly equipped with Emotional Intelligence (E.Q) skills, and seek personal development for themselves before demanding it from their students. In this direction, there are two crucial factors that should coexist alongside the implementation of lifelong learning educational activities, as confirmed by the present research: the active involvement of teachers themselves and their inclusion in the learning activity, together with the necessary improvement of conditions in education, on the part of public institutions and decision-making processes.

Disclaimer

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