



**LESSONS LEARNED REPORT**  
for school counselling services  
and policy recommendations

Palermo, Italy



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the world is only one creature



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For Children



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# 1. Introduction

This "**Lessons Learnt and Policy Recommendations**" report for school counselling desks has been developed in the framework of the "**REBOOT NOW – Prevention of Gender-Based Violence in Schools after Lockdown**", project no. 101049567, co-funded by the CERV programme of the European Commission. REBOOT NOW aims at supporting young people who have psychologically suffered because of the pandemic and may have fallen victims and/or witnesses of violence, while raising awareness on teen-dating violence.

More specifically,  
the project aims to:

**Support** recovery of young people from difficulties that have arisen from measures against Covid-19 pandemic, in particular through positive actions that support their well-being and mental health.

**Prevent and combat** gender-based violence among young people by supporting their psychological well-being through an evidence-based replicable service, with their active engagement.

**Create** an itinerant counselling desk for the psychological recovery of students, school staff and families.

**Build capacity** of school staff and families in the prevention and identification of cases of teen dating violence and gender-based violence among young people.



The **project consortium** consists of **CESIE** (Italy), **KMOP** (Greece), **"Hope For Children" CRC Policy Center** (Cyprus), **ZRS Koper** (Slovenia), **ANIMUS Association Foundation** (Bulgaria) and **Fondazione Hallgarten-Franchetti Centro Studi Villa Montesca** (Italy).

This report presents the national implementation of an itinerant counselling desks in **Palermo, Italy**, which was running in the period from **October 2022 to June 2023**, thanks to the work of **CESIE** with a local team of service providers (psychologists, pedagogists, social workers) in 2 first-grade secondary schools (ICS "Silvio Boccone" and SMS "G.A. Cesareo"). Particularly, as a way to draft CESIE's "lessons learnt", this report will firstly present the different ways in which the "pilot" desk was implemented in Palermo, adding some elements of evaluation based on the different levels of assessment which were created over the course of the project for the users' feedback, service providers and supervisors' view. Secondly, on the basis of the different experiences collected, the report will draft some recommendations for policy makers and other stakeholders willing to apply the **REBOOT NOW** itinerant counseling desk's model in other contexts, thus ensuring the sustainability of the project.

## 2. The REBOOT NOW itinerant counseling desk

### 2.1 Idea and rationale

The COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020 has worsened social issues across the EU. Children in particular have suffered from disruptions in schooling, social isolation, prolonged periods in closed family settings and inaccessibility of support service (such as victim/mental health support), and have been affected in many ways: online and family violence, psychological distress, disrupted eating, sleep and hygiene habits, changes in behavior and lack of interest in schoolwork and in relationships, to name a few. Already-struggling young people from marginalized backgrounds (migrants, refugees, ethnic and religious minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ youth etc.) were even at higher risk of psychologically suffering from the pandemic. In particular, because of the little to no social interactions during the COVID-19 period, except with the closer family or communication mediated by digital tools, "COVID-era teenagers" saw their social and emotional skills affected, in the key moment when first relationships with peers, even intimate ones, would begin.

Deriving from this, the REBOOT NOW project started from the idea to address these emerging challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic concerning children's wellbeing, mental health and safety in general, but particularly their increased exposure to gender-based violence (GBV) and the foreseeable difficulty to create safe/healthy relationships. In order to strengthen existing psychological support mechanisms in participant countries, the project has focused on the objective of preventing and addressing teen-dating violence by developing a practical and **concrete pilot intervention** in a form of itinerant counseling desks with online access point in elementary and secondary schools. Specifically, the REBOOT NOW itinerant counseling desks has targeted:



**Children aged 10-14**, including children from marginalized backgrounds as they have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 pandemic and related measures taken by governments. The choice to focus on children in early adolescence was made because in this critical age they initiate their first intimate relationships, thus raising awareness on gender equality may be more effective.



**School staff and educating community**, who can support young people in building healthy relationships far from GBV and restoring their wellbeing/sociality, while promptly responding to violence cases when occurring.



**Families and caregivers**, who have been put under pressure in multiple ways by Covid-19 measures and will thus particularly benefit from chances to cooperate with schools and to be supported in their parental role.



Before creating the national itinerant desks, in all partner countries representatives from the schools selected (including school directors, teachers and educators, representatives of students and families), public entities supporting the project and relevant stakeholders operating in the field of education or social services were invited to attend some "**national meetings**", aimed at analyzing each country context, building a common understanding around the need of supporting children's wellbeing and mental health in schools, with a particular attention to GBV, and at agreeing on the specificities that each desk would have been in each country. The result of these meetings was the signature of **6 Protocols of Cooperation**, gathering together all the parties involved at national level and defining the functioning, specific procedures and policies, including Child Safeguarding policies, as well as sustainability ideas for each itinerant desk.

In parallel, always to better frame the starting point of the REBOOT NOW action, partner organizations implemented also a **baseline data collection** among children from the participating schools, with the aim of gathering data about the feelings and emotions experienced during the pandemic, the needs they were facing, as well as the availability and eventual access to existing help services, in schools or outside, where these were already available. A specific **Comparative Baseline Data Collection** report was published in January 2023, analyzing all results collected in the implementing countries – available at [this link](#).



Also, part of the ignition phase was constituted by the recruitment of the "service providers", the professional figures who were employed in each desk. Namely, a minimum of three professionals (psychologists, pedagogists, social workers) per country were recruited and received a one-week training, at national level, on methodologies and tools for responding to the increased need of a psychological support caused by the pandemic; restoring children's wellbeing and sociality, and promptly preventing and responding in case violence occurs; as well as on the management and monitoring of the online and offline desks. Likewise, the training was specifically aimed at creating local adaptations to the REBOOT NOW desk model, designed by the partnership at EU-level, together with the professionals who would work on them. In addition, all national desks implemented a service of supervision for their service providers, operated by other psychologists.

Following these different methodological steps, the desk was finally launched in each participating country, each one with its peculiarities, starting from October 2022, and guaranteeing a minimum of 8 hours/week in each of the schools involved.

## Desk organization in Palermo, Italy

In Palermo, Italy, the first step for establishing the desk was to contact, in spring 2022, the local institutions supporting the desk's idea since the beginning – **the Municipality of Palermo – Deputy Major in charge of School matters, and the Regional School Office for Sicily (USR Sicilia) – in order to select the schools to be involved in the service, as well as the strategy of functioning.** Two schools were selected:

### Middle school "G.A. Cesareo"

**Middle school "G.A. Cesareo"** is located in the Oreto neighborhood, a peripheral area of Palermo and an eminently working-class district. **522 children** attend first-grade secondary school (aged 10 -14 years old). There are 3 scholastic levels divided into a total of 24 classes with an average of 21 students per class<sup>1</sup>.

### Middle school "Silvio Boccone"

**Middle school "Silvio Boccone"** is located in the Oreto-Perez neighborhood, a peripheral area of Palermo and an eminently working-class district. **453 children** attend first-grade secondary school (aged 10 -14 years old). There are 3 scholastic levels divided into a total of 29 classes with an average of 15 students per class<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://cercalatuascuola.istruzione.it/cercalatuascuola/istituti/PAMM00700N/cesareo-ga/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://cercalatuascuola.istruzione.it/cercalatuascuola/istituti/PAIC8A2004/ic-silvio-boccone-pa/>





Once selected, CESIE organised different National Meetings with **institutions and schools involved**, which culminated with the signature of a **Protocol of Cooperation defining objectives, rationale and roles for the local implementation** of the **REBOOT NOW** project.

In parallel, CESIE composed the group of service providers to lead the itinerant school counselling desks in the 2 schools selected: **2 psychologists, 1 pedagogical coordinator, 1 supervisor**. The group organised a **1-week training** in September 2022 which was co-constructed, in a way to start mapping each one's expertises, field of competencies and interests, and brainstorming on the form that the local Desk would have in terms of **rules, working hours, days, types of service, rotation and booking systems**.

Since October 2022, the desk worked in rotation in the 2 schools (1 expert in one school, 2 in the other on the same days and hours) for **13 hours per week** (26 hours in total), organised as follows:

8 to 13 CET every Tuesday	14 to 17 CET every Wednesday	8 to 13 CET every Thursday
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An **online booking system** was activated in both schools for the individual consultations with psychologists, available on the project's platform [www.thegendertalk.eu](http://www.thegendertalk.eu) through a system of Google Calendar, and associated to two email addresses developed, one per school, under CESIE's domain for managing all communication among the team and the schools. The rest of the activities, including the **Pedagogist Coordinator's group** or **individual consultations**, could be booked through the email addresses. In order to coordinate the different activities, the 3 experts were in constant contact with CESIE's project manager, organizing frequent interventions and meeting the Supervisor online at least twice per month.

## 2.2 The starting point

To better frame the starting point of the REBOOT NOW action, CESIE implemented a **baseline data collection** among children from participating schools, about **the feelings and emotions experienced during the pandemic, the needs they were facing**, as well as the **availability** and **eventual access to existing help services**, in schools or outside, when available. A total of 155 children participated in the survey (85 from School "G.A. Cesareo", 70 from School ICS "Silvio Boccone"), offering the Palermo's local team a general picture of **children's emotional status** during the Covid-19 pandemic, **gender-based violence** incidence, availability and access to **already existing counselling support services at school**, and **children's needs** related to these topics.

Particularly,  
it emerged that:



Young people were mostly **worried or scared**, **having negative thoughts and feelings of anger** during the Covid-19 pandemic, but only 6 of them, out of 155, turned to psychologists to talk about their feelings, while almost one-fifth of them did not share their emotions with anyone, due to several reasons: because they believed it was needless, or since they struggle to explain how they feel, among others. This emphasised how uncommon the role of the psychologist among young people is.

While the majority of students affirmed not to have **experienced any type of violence** at school, the percentages change drastically when asking if they have witnessed any of these behaviours against a classmate (almost the 30% of them). Regarding gender-based discrimination, 17% went through embarrassing situations because of their gender, 5,8% suffered gender-based bullying and 12% had to behave in a certain manner according to "boys/girls standards".

The **"ideal" counselling desk**, according to the young people interviewed, would be made mainly of individual sessions with therapists (almost 60% of the responses), but also classroom workshops (20%) and group sessions (15%).

All in all, results shed light on the evident need to incorporate professional figures, namely psychologists and psychopedagogists, in the educative system, as well as to normalize their presence in the school environment. Given the responses, overcoming the stigma of the role of professionals of mental health becomes vital to promptly provide young people with the support they need during their development. For more information and details on the comparative analysis of the baseline data collection, you may download the complete report available [here](#).





### 3. Lessons learned

#### 3.1 Methodology and organisation of activities

Following the **Monitoring and Evaluation Protocol produced by ZRS Koper**, the following tools were used in Italy to properly measure the impact of the action:

- ✓ **Two anonymous Questionnaire for users**, to be completed after a) each individual consultation; b) each group/workshop/event sessions respectively;
- ✓ **One Monitoring log form per school**, to be filled in by all experts running the desk after each individual/group session;
- ✓ **One Monitoring Log for the Supervisor.**

The data showed below in the next section are taken from these forms, which are however confidential and would not be attached to this report.

**In total, 1031 users were involved in the desk activity, being students, school staff or family members as detailed below:**

<b>School 1 – SMS Cesareo</b>								
<b>Users</b>	<b>Age</b>			<b>Gender</b>				<b>Total</b>
	9–11	12–14	15–18	M	F	Oth	N/A	
<b>Children (individual consultation)</b>	10	30	-	11	28	1	-	40
<b>Children (group activity)</b>	192	276	-	220	244	3	1	468
<b>Total of children</b>	202	306	-	231	272	4	1	508
<b>School staff</b>	-			5	10	1	-	16
<b>Parents</b>	-			9	21	-	-	30
<b>Total of adults</b>				14	31	1	-	46
<b>Total</b>				245	303	5	1	554

<b>School 2 – ICS Boccone</b>								
<b>Users</b>	<b>Age</b>			<b>Gender</b>				<b>Total</b>
	9–11	12–14	15–18	M	F	Oth	N/A	
<b>Children (individual consultation)</b>	6	58	-	27	36	1	-	64
<b>Children (group activity)</b>	120	264	-	185	199	-	-	384
<b>Total of children</b>	126	322	-	212	235	1	-	448
<b>School staff</b>	-			2	11	-	-	13
<b>Parents</b>	-			6	10	-	-	16
<b>Total of adults</b>				84	21		-	29
<b>Total</b>				220	256	1	-	477

In order to promote user engagement, the desk was shortly and regularly presented in each classroom during the school year. In terms of activities held by the 3 experts within the itinerant desks, they were organised as follows:

<b>Psychological desk</b>	<p>50 min. sessions as individual or group support (max. 5 people) for students, school staff or family members, upon appointment booked via the online calendars' service with the 2 psychologists, Dott.ssa Laura Grillo and Dott. Ennio Iannitto</p> <p>Almost 70% of the attendees were regular users (more than 2 appointments attended over the school year)</p>
<b>Pedagogical desk</b>	<p>60–120 min. sessions as individual or group support (max. 5 people) for students, school staff or family members aimed at strengthening and giving meaning to educational co-responsibility in which parents, teachers and child/pupil are involved. Sessions were booked online via email and held by the Pedagogical Coordinator, Dott.ssa Valentina Grasso.</p> <p>Specifically, the pedagogical sessions proved useful as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>With teachers:</b> interviews and classroom observations provided them with pedagogical tools to improve organization and planning of learning approaches. Essential to promote listening of students in a conscious and oriented manner, so as to stimulate reflection and action on their part.</li> <li>- <b>With parents:</b> interviews helping parents to understand difficult situations and find viable paths both in view of the child's age and in relation to his/her/their specific educational role.</li> <li>- <b>With students:</b> interviews and classroom interventions through workshop activities or observation.</li> </ul> <p>Almost 90% of the attendees were regular users (more than 2 appointments attended over the school year)</p>

<p><b>Observation and group activities in class</b></p>	<p>Operated by all the 3 experts, they were organised following the request of school staff. The topics varied depending on the needs expressed (group management and peer relationships mainly). Among the activities carried out:</p> <p><b>Gameday:</b> using children's cooperative boardgames as fun ways to support emotional regulation, self-control, and social emotional development through gaming;</p> <p><b>Dixit Yourself:</b> using Dixit, Tarot or Oracle cards to improve self-consciousness, empathy and listening skills in young people. Thanks to their evocative power and the references they subconsciously trigger with archetypes and symbols which are deeply rooted, these tools can be used in autobiographical and emotional storytelling to indirectly address topics too complex and problematic to be approached head-on.</p> <p><b>Talking time:</b> space and time designed on the class needs, where we could deal with the main issues raised by the class and teachers. At least 4 weekly meetings 1 hour long.</p>
<p><b>Workshop for school orientation – "Symbolwork counselling scenarios"</b></p>	<p>Operated by the Pedagogical Coordinator, Dott.ssa Valentina Grasso with 3rd grade students at "GA Cesareo" school.</p> <p>The workshops lasted between 60–120 minutes and engaged a small group of 4–6 children who were asked to share interesting aspects of their personality, school practices and attitudes through symbols (Eg. Lifepath, Inner images, Islands of emotions).</p>
<p><b>Workshops "Theatre of the Oppressed"</b></p>	<p>Two cycles of 3-hour sessions operated by the Pedagogical Coordinator, Dott.ssa Valentina Grasso, in both schools for the whole school year with max. 30 students of all ages. Based on A. Boal TO method, workshops were based on a system of physical exercises, inventive games, image techniques and special improvisations whose goal was turning the practice of theatre into an effective tool for the comprehension of social and personal problems and the search for their solutions. In the context of the project, it was focused on gender stereotypes.</p>



### Workshop "Ulysses Journey"

Operated by the Pedagogical Coordinator, Dott.ssa Valentina Grasso, at "GA Cesareo" school in 1-hour sessions with 15 children (11–12 years old). They were hands-on workshop on the story of Ulysses in which representatives of each group present their drawing of Ulysses' journey and tell choices and solutions operated for the problems encountered. During the discussion, attention is given to the educational transposition of the workshop: it allowed to achieve in Philosophy reflections on the meanings of the myth; in Art and Image, the graphic representation of the stages of the Odyssey; in History, knowledge of the Greek world; in Geography, awareness of one's own body schema that is the basis of orientation and knowledge of the Mediterranean basin through the always fascinating theme of the journey.

## 3.2 Interpretation of the collected data

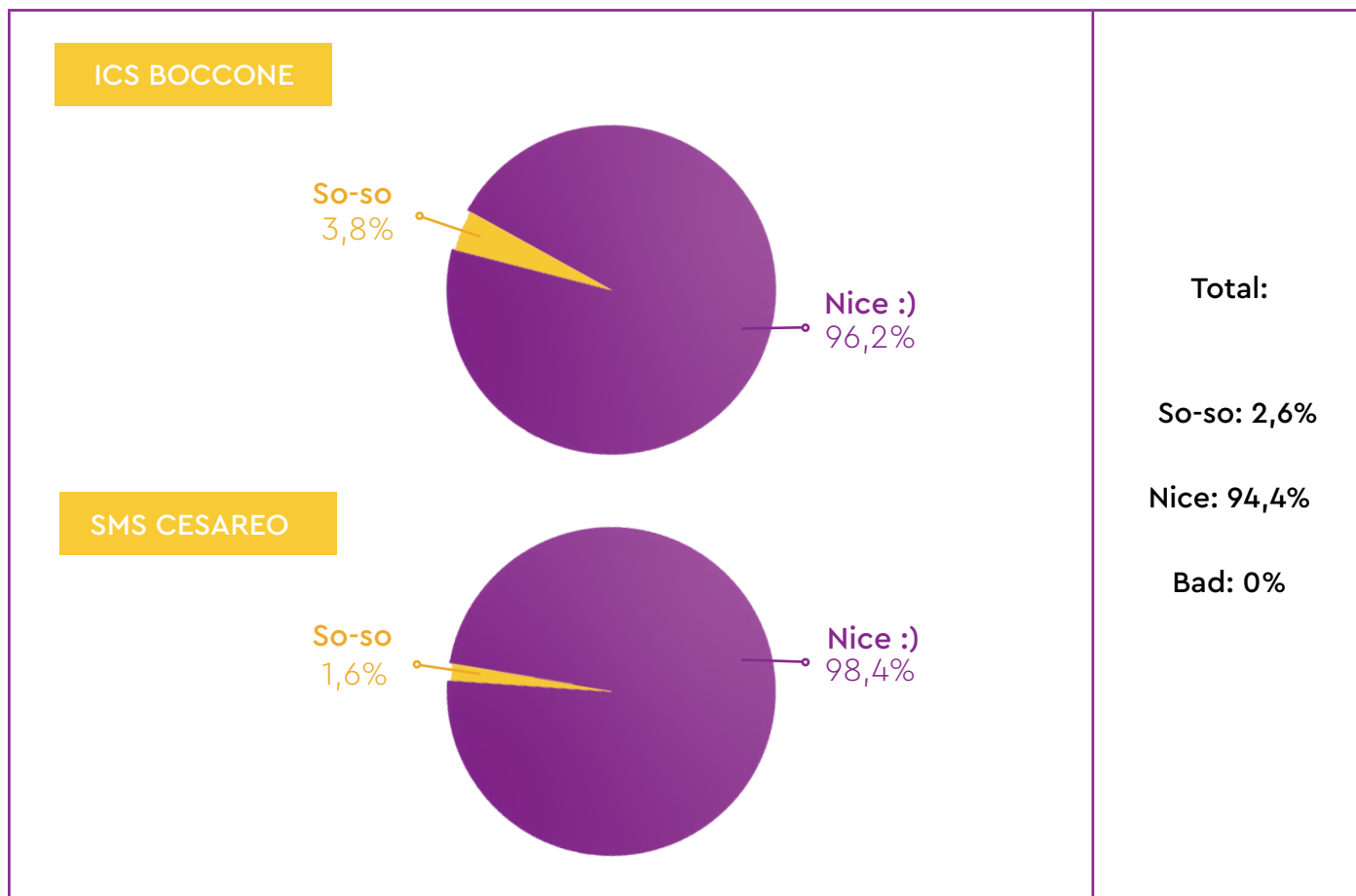
The following section contains the analysis of the feedback received by users and services providers from the activities detailed above.

### 3.2.1 Users' views

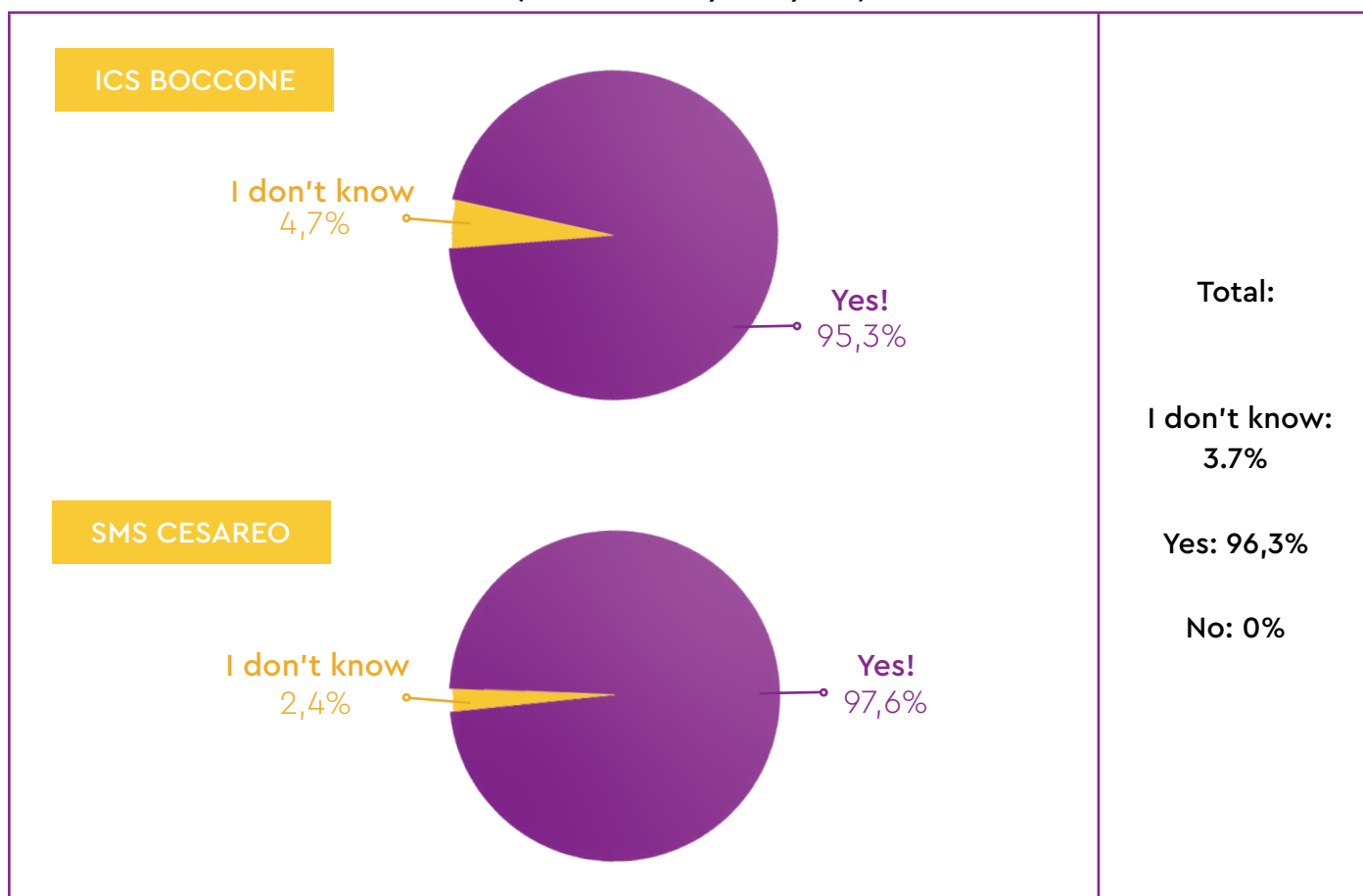
#### INDIVIDUAL CONSULTATIONS

**273 users** completed the questionnaire, of which 45,8% (from the "SMS Cesareo" school and 54,2% from the "ICS Boccone" school). 87% of the respondents are adolescents aged **11–14**, the majority (50,6%) being **13** years old. The rest of the respondents are **adults** (family members/school staff) aged between 41 and 61. 58,2% of the respondents are girls/women; 35,2% are boys/men; 4,8% identify themselves as "other" and 1,8% prefer not to answer.

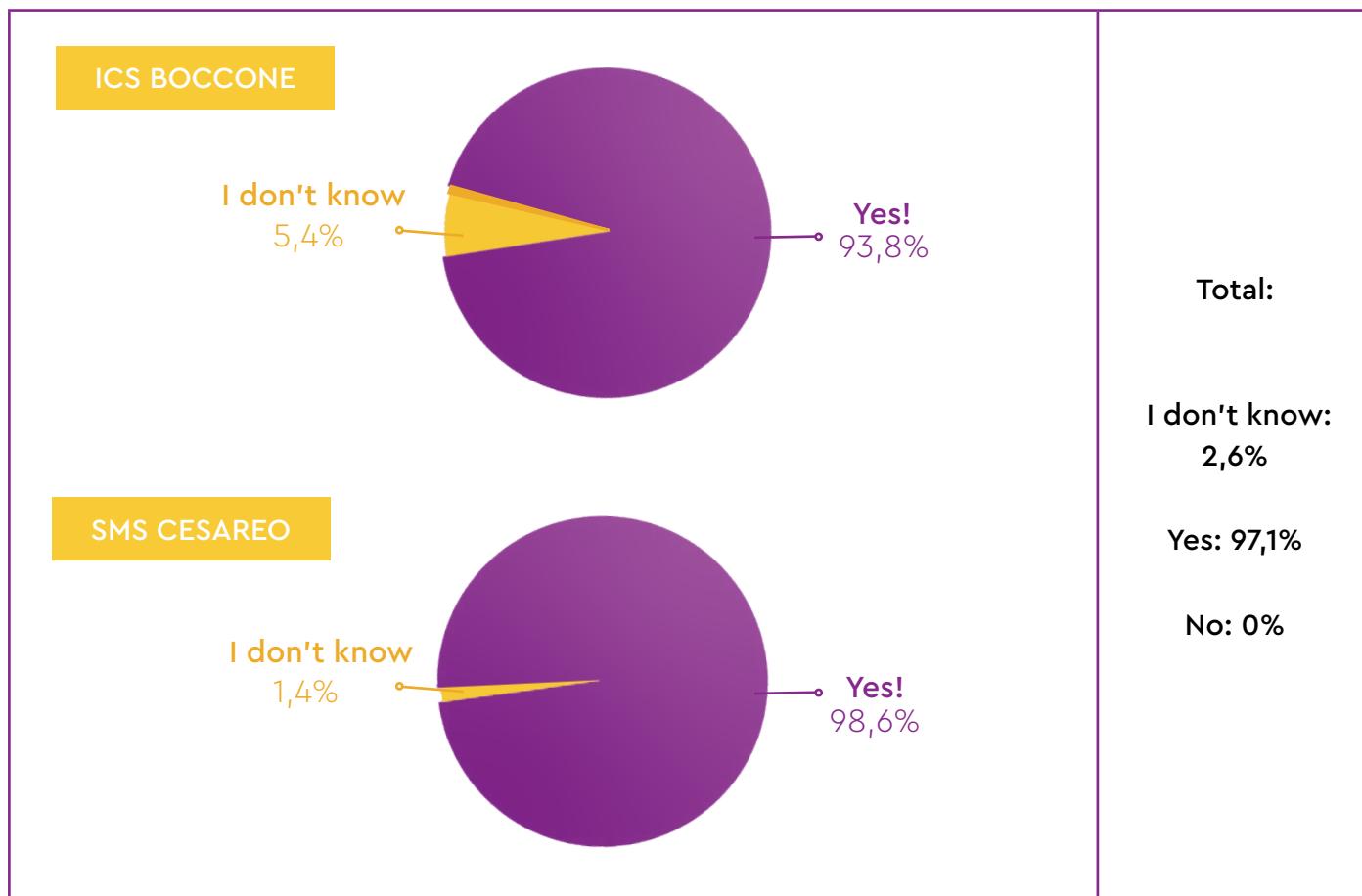
Question: What was it like talking to the psychologists and the pedagogist? (Nice / So-so / Bad)



Question: Would you like to come back and see the expert you spoke to again?  
(I don't know / Yes / No)



Question: If someone close to you were to have a problem similar to yours, would you recommend making an appointment for the helpdesk? (I don't know / Yes / No)



Overview of the comments left

#### SMS CESAREO

- I liked the simplicity of the dialogues
- The pedagogist helped me to study and understand the subjects better
- Useful for those who have difficulties
- It made me feel very comfortable

#### ICS BOCCONE

- Talking to psychologists was liberating
- I enjoyed talking to someone who knew how to listen to me
- I felt safer
- Very helpful, I feel lighter



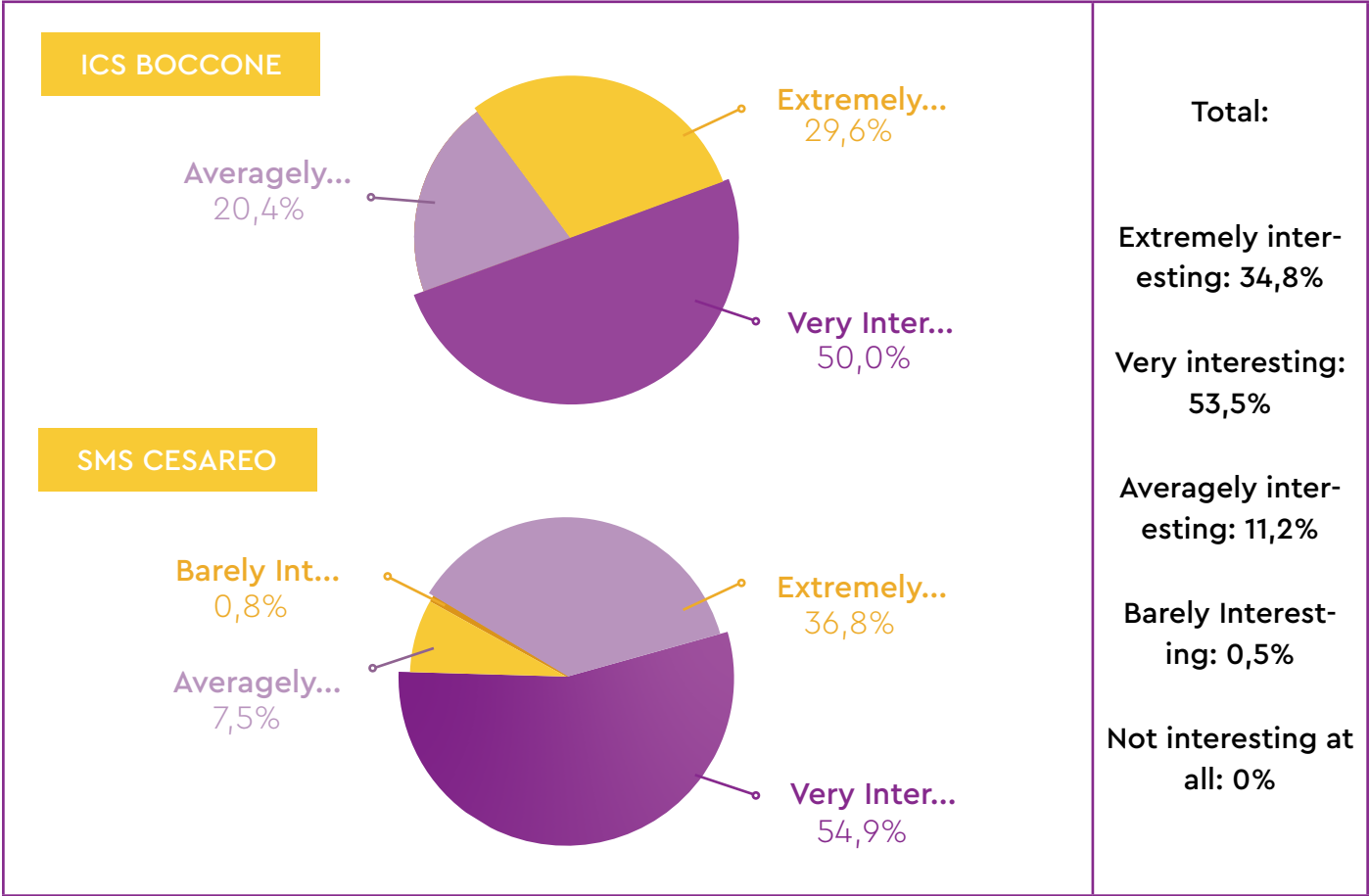




GROUP ACTIVITIES

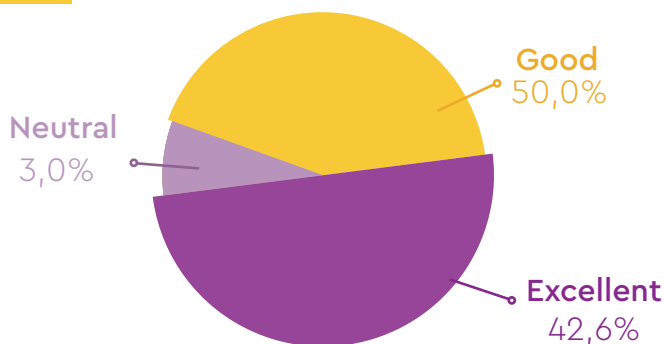
This also includes workshops and events organised with students. The total number of responses was **187**, of which 71,1% from the "SMS Cesareo" school and 28,9% from the "ICS Boccone" school. All respondents are between 11 and 14 years old. The majority (60,4%) are 13 years old. 47,6% of the respondents are girls/women; 48,1%% are boys/men; 2,1% identify themselves as "other" and 2,1% prefer not to answer.

**Question: Did you find the workshop interesting? (Extremely interesting / Very interesting / Averagely interesting / Barely Interesting / Not interesting at all)**

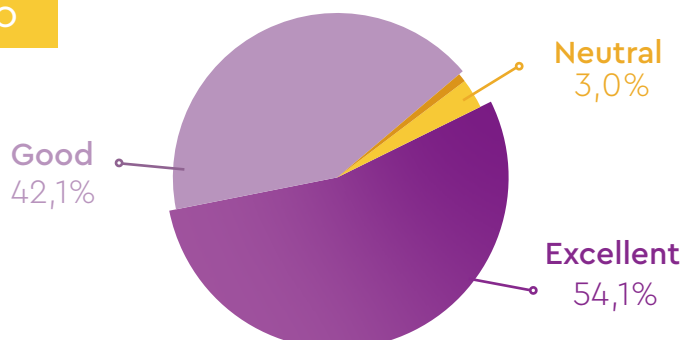


Question: Evaluate the general organisation of the workshop  
(Excellent / Good / Neutral / Poor / Very poor)

## ICS BOCCONE



## SMS CESAREO



Total:

Excellent: 50,8%

Good: 44,4%

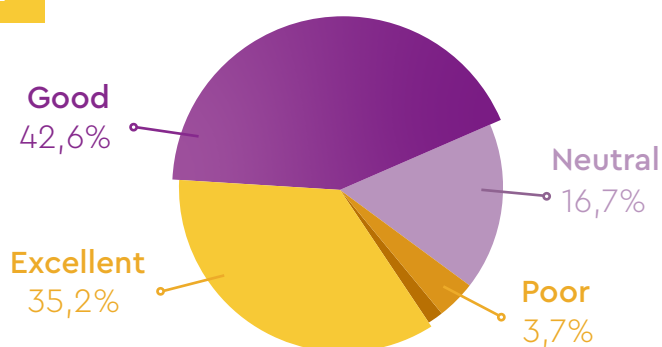
Neutral: 4,3%

Poor: 0,5%

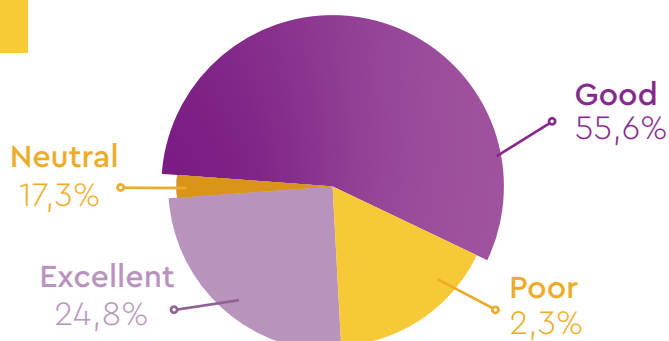
Very poor: 0%

Question: The quality of the space in which you made the workshop was  
(Excellent / Good / Neutral / Poor / Very poor)

## ICS BOCCONE



## SMS CESAREO



Total:

Excellent: 27,8%

Good: 51,9%

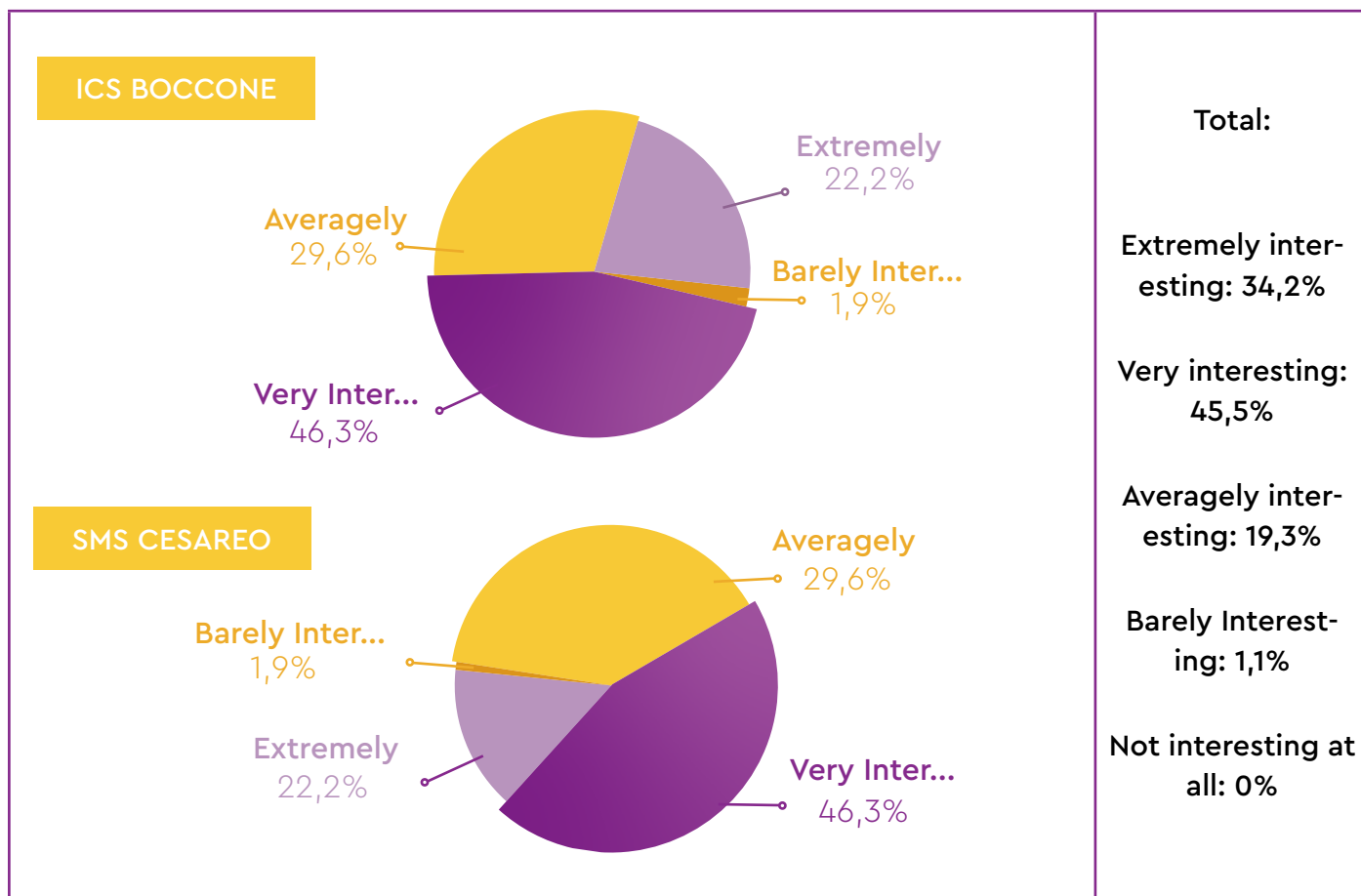
Neutral: 17,1%

Poor: 2,7%

Very poor: 0,5%



Question: The workshop content was (Extremely interesting / Very interesting / Averagely interesting / Barely Interesting / Not interesting at all)



### Overview of the comments left

#### SMS CESAREO

- I hope to have again the possibility to live a similar experience.
- Workshops were perfect to know more on ourselves
- Extremely kind and competent lecturers

#### ICS BOCCONE

- I loved the project and would like to do it again!
- It was stimulating to speak in front of others
- It should last longer, it was very nice



### 3.2.2 Service providers' views

The following typology of cases observed were identified from the monitoring logs:

#### Children – individual consultation (psychological and pedagogical support)

##### The most recurrent:

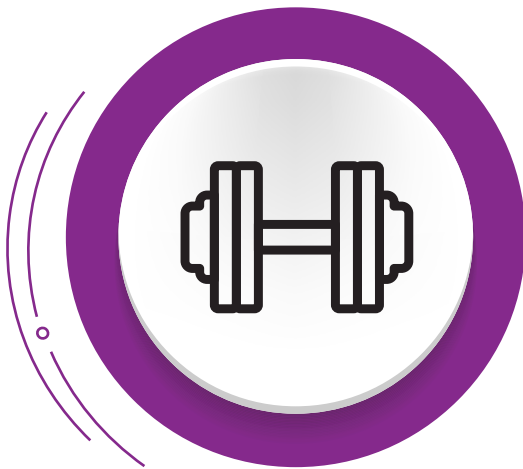
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class conflicts and difficulties at school and/or in their relationship with teachers</li> <li>• Difficulties at home, including in communicating with the family about personal needs or related to situation of arguments witnessed or divorces</li> <li>• Eating disorders</li> <li>• Emotional management, including difficulties in managing social relationships among peers</li> <li>• Inclusion, exclusion, being accepted, and social withdrawal</li> <li>• Bullying</li> <li>• Grieving and significant losses</li> <li>• Racism,</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulties expressing themselves freely,</li> <li>• Romantic relationships</li> <li>• Difficulties in managing emotions and social relationships among peers</li> <li>• Difficulties in managing negative emotions as sadness, anger and loneliness and in impulse control</li> <li>• Problematic use of the internet</li> <li>• Difficulties in concentration, lack of motivation in going to school or doing homework</li> <li>• Learning difficulties: expressive-elocutional (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia)</li> <li>• Organisational-motor-behavioural (hyperactivity, inattention, apathy), communicative-relational and emotional-affective, and disability.</li> </ul> |
|---|--|

##### Less recurrent but more intense:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dissociative problems</li> <li>• Behavioural problems</li> <li>• Disability</li> <li>• Obsessions</li> <li>• Self-harm and self-injurious thoughts</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxiety disorders</li> <li>• Panic attacks</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Clinically significant forms of adolescent problems</li> </ul> |
|--|---|

<b>Children – Group activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulties in peer communication</li> <li>• Lack of compliance with teachers</li> <li>• Severe behavioural issues in some cases</li> </ul>
<b>School staff – Individual consultations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help needed to assess and decide how to deal with a child in their educational functions, through intervention strategies, including interventions aimed at improving the climate in the classroom group, and to activate useful strategies for the management of complex situations; training paths on specific issues such as bullying and cyberbullying, social networks, affective education, specific Learning Disorders, etc.</li> <li>• Other clinical conditions</li> </ul>
<b>Parents/family members – Individual consultations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conjugal issues</li> <li>• Difficulties in dealing with specific problems of their children and need for parenting support, mainly on listening and living the relational and affective dimension with the child; knowing how to stay in conflicts with children without blaming oneself; giving sustainable rules in order to be authoritative and capable parents; building their personal and relational autonomy together with their children; educating on mass media, internet resources and limits of technology</li> <li>• Grief</li> <li>• Other clinical conditions</li> </ul>

Taking into account the different **types of activities** proposed in the 2 schools in Palermo, Italy and the **typologies of cases** which emerged from the desk's users, the following SWOT analysis can be drafted on service's providers experience providing interesting insight for learning:



## STRENGTHS

Good team of well-qualified and motivated service providers, with complementary skills and willingness to support each other, especially when faced with difficult decisions to be made;

Good internal communication among the team members, allowing the creation of shared solutions to daily problems;

Regular supervision and intervision sessions, considered extremely helpful also in terms of mutual exchange and fair distribution of responsibilities and tasks;

Good preparatory phase and brainstorming on the desk's features and functioning;

Attention paid on how to effectively reaching the potential users, in a legally safe manner;

Much attention also on creating a "safe space", which allowed both providers and users to feel protected and trusted;

In some occasion, through the pedagogical desk it was possible to overcome the potential "discomfort" or stigma that may characterise the psychological desk, thus providing support and shifting the focus to the subject's strengths.

## WEAKNESSES

Difficult professional experience, requiring intensive commitment and efforts, also on an emotional level;

Being a low-threshold service, it often happened that difficult cases emerged, causing extra work;

The desk was the only form of support offered hence had a high demand which sometimes could go beyond the scope of the service;

Hard to respond to all requests;

Difficult to effectively communicate with the school management, despite a good relationship instaurated in both schools.

Events such as the Wellbeing Festival, which were a real success in terms of children' participation and engagement, should have been organised earlier, in a way to involve them more since the very beginning;





## OPPORTUNITIES

Motivated school staff and families helped a lot and made a real change in the desk;

Good acceptance and trust from the school management, seeing the desk as a useful resource;

Possible to build a network between the school territorial services or people and cooperate with them;

Topics such as gender-based violence and respect, specifically to young people, entered schools and decreased the stigma about psychological support; protection of minors victims of violence;

The Pedagogical Desk was an opportunity for preventing ESL and learning difficulties, but also problems of interaction between peers (such as bullying), between teachers and pupils or between parents and children.

## THREATS

Stigma and social prejudices with regards to the desk and its usefulness, preventing many to ask for support;

Low awareness on the specific role of the desk and its providers from the school staff and parents, creating high or even wrong expectations that could not always be met;

Persistent difficulty to talk about "gender", because of the politicisation of the term in Italy;

Being a short term project, giving sustainability and deepening its impact was hard - more time would be needed to better involve parents for instance; to create deeper synergies; no continuity in the clinical management of the subjects involved by the desk service providers, with the risk of a drop-out in the users' awareness of their need psychological help;

Difficulty in engaging all students due to need to receive written consent from parents as part of Child Protection Policy, particularly impactful in the case in which ad hoc interventions were requested in some classes with either the school management or class board, but could not be organised because some members of the class were not authorised by their families.



In the words of service providers:

*"In my experience, the help desk in general was successful. By the beginning, we decided that both psychologists should be present in both schools – for me, a good choice in order to ensure a gender-balanced service (we were one woman and one man), but this also prevented us from staying many hours in a single school. It took some months before the majority of users got to know about our presence and decided to get involved in individual consultations, but after these first months, we had nearly all slots booked. In my opinion, if the help desk could last at least one more year in the same schools, we could easily achieve better results since school management, teachers, students, and parents know our activities and a good sense of trust and cooperation was created. Of course, the help desk was a low threshold service, so we identified many more issues that we could effectively deal with. In any case, it was surely useful because all these complex cases were rapidly oriented to different territorial services. Therefore, the overall impression for me is extremely good: despite we could only address a small number of situations compared to the needs, it was anyway good support".*

- Dott. Ennio Iannitto -

*"I believe that the idea of associating the psychological desk with the pedagogical desk has been a winning one, to support students in the difficulties they experienced related to school and mainly to didactic, orientation, among others. The opportunity for them to take advantage of a personalized and individualised educational actions allowed us to intervene not only on school failure and school dropout, but on the discomfort, sense of frustration and defeat related to a difficult and strenuous school career, that can also involved the relationship with family and teachers."*

- Dott.ssa Valentina Grasso



*"In my opinion, the help desk was successful. The psychological support service in schools in general should have more space in terms of hours and location(a comfortable dedicated classroom, for instance). In our specific case, we were able to recreate a listening/intervention setting with the time and spaces available (not always pleasant), but still the coordination between experts and project managers, the continuous exchange of information and contacts, and opportunities of exchange with teachers allowed the creation of an excellent working alliance that made the service very successful. Moreover, I believe that even when we had to refer the most critical cases to external territorial services, this brought to light a very important fact: the extremely important need for school psychological support in this age group."*

**- Dott.ssa Laura Grillo -**



### 3.2.3 Supervisors' views

The supervision of the team was operated by Dott.ssa Annaclaire Turco, psychologist. Most supervision sessions were conducted in groups with the entire team, consisting of the 3 service providers. On some occasions it was necessary to meet with them individually or in pairs, especially in some urgent circumstances. On other occasions it was useful to involve the project coordination team, for a more rapid and functional exchange of reflections and information. 23 supervision sessions were carried out, including seven extraordinary supervision sessions. Telephone discussion sessions were also carried out.

The following problems were shared during the supervision sessions:

- ✓ **Minors:** suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, problematic parent-child relationships, gender, sexuality, discrimination, paranoid and obsessive behaviors, socialization difficulties, anxiety disorders, alleged abuse, physical violence between peers (raising hands, sometimes used as a way of joking but which can create unpleasant consequences), problematic use of the web, relational difficulties between classmates in the same class;
- ✓ **Adults:** resistance of teachers and families related to psycho-pedagogical support and gender issues, problematic situations related to families with cases of parental separation, parents' verbal abuse of children, teachers' difficulties in handling problematic situations at school, difficulties in school-family alliance;
- ✓ **Importance of networking** with external public and private services.

### **Main difficulties encountered**

At the very beginning, the team was reporting 2 main sources of frustration: the lack of recognition of the value of their work by the school staff, identifying by the service provided as due to their young age, which probably created distrust on the part of the teaching staff; as well as a distrust towards any intervention from outside the school, due to a strong sense of belonging and resistance to change; the difficulty of communicating with families was also a challenge especially when the task is to mediate between the school and families. The consequences of this initial situation were ambivalent behaviors from teachers, in some cases also because they were unaware of students' and families' difficulties, or not prepared for managing oppositional behaviors in the classes, and from parents, unwillingness to allow their children's participation. In both cases, the team collaborated to find common solutions, support each other, exchange best practices, reflect and decide which activities to conduct individually or in pairs. Their attunement and organisational skills were very relevant, as was the exchange between psychological and pedagogical viewpoints. Their participation in supervision sessions was equitable and their interventions heterogeneous and participatory, always based on the collection of each party's needs, either through direct communication, even with families, or asking entire classes' teachers to fill in an anonymous form based on which they could then tailor solutions. They had the ability to support each other and in a circular manner during the most difficult moments. After this natural initial settling-in moment, thanks to the strong collaboration established by the service providers, not only the entire schools' confidence increased but also the communication with families. With regards to families, the team reflected to find the right key to dialogue with each interlocutor and adopted an appropriate way in the confrontation and shared restitution with families, especially in complex situations: this took time and the team was able to have the patience to find the most appropriate and at the same time fastest solution. Even in the last period of implementation of the activities, although the team felt the fatigue of the past year, the relational climate within and with each beneficiary person was positive, collaborative and efficient.





Other difficulties were related to the **obligation to collect consent forms** from families to authorise their children's participation in the project activities, in particular due to resistance or delays in the delivery of signed documents. In some cases, in the classes where not all families had provided documentation or refused to authorize their children, it was not possible to carry out class or group activities, thus putting more obstacles on the desk implementation. This kind of obstacles were discussed on several occasions by the group, in order to find together the best solutions and to have a more precise exchange of information in the team. In general, the team observed more difficulties in organizing extracurricular activities, than curricular ones.

Also, at the very beginning the team was facing an **overload of work**, due to several unforeseen occasions that required immediate solutions. In such occasions, flexibility and collaboration with the project coordination's team allowed to solve these problems more quickly.

**Communicating with school staff** also made the management and organization of activities complex and slow in some cases, but the flux of work became more stable as soon as the team entered into the schools' dynamics and adapted to them the REBOOT NOW methodology. In some cases, it was difficult to deal with the school referral figures, probably due to their overload of work, which can be understandable from the perspective of the difficulty to managed "complex schools" as the ones the desk was active in.

The **booking system** caused difficulties in some cases, especially for students: many requests were coming from the same students, at the same time, but with different service providers. Another source of frustration was the impossibility of communicating remotely with minors, as it was not possible to contact them directly for child protection reasons.

Finally, being a **low-threshold service**, in many cases it was necessary to deal with very complex cases requiring more confrontation with school contact persons and a heavy additional workload. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the importance of the territorial network of public and private services, which made it possible to initiate useful interlocutions to strengthen support for minors and give continuity to the pathways after the conclusion of the project.

## **Conclusions and recommendations related to the supervision.**

Despite all these difficulties, the desk received a great amount of requests of support from the school communities, both adults and minors, from the very beginning. Many of the requests came from teachers to intervene in their classes, especially in the several cases when they were very heterogeneous, but also from minors and families, due to the excellent way of promoting activities and handling requests, discussed in many occasions during supervision sessions. This can be considered one of the success of the project from the point of view of the supervision.

For the future, because of the initial difficulties encountered in the foreseen supervision's format, a more consistent scheduling of supervision sessions is recommended, including "extra time" for emergency consultations. Similarly, a need emerged for the team to have more time available for the preparation of activities, understood as back-office work.

Also, it is recommended to invest in the establishment of a strong relational alliance with the teaching staff, which can on the one hand nurture mutual trust and on the other hand allow the exchange and sharing of educational approaches. This is useful in the beginning, since during the implementation of activities it becomes more difficult and there is less time to devote to this dimension. At the same time, this aspect also facilitates mediation with families and makes it possible to work more calmly on the school-family alliance, reducing frustrations and practical difficulties for the team.

Added to this, it could be useful to set a specific and periodic timetable also for the school staffs to interact with service providers, to facilitate adequate communication. In general, the teaching staff represents an exhausted target audience, much in need of psycho-pedagogical support and with whom to dialogue with extreme care. In general, it seems that the implementation of the activities was more fluent in one of the two schools involved, possibly due to better organization within the school itself.

Also, a stronger system could be created for getting students' and teachers' more informed of the feedback received after the implementation of the activities.

In conclusion, an excellent level of evolution of the working group can be reported from the point of view of the Palermo's supervision sessions. All critical issues encountered had a good resolving response during a suitable timeframe. There was excellent intersection between the actions of the psychological support figures and the educators. Also, a mature process in the team and with the coordinator can be reported with respect to the network of services outside the project, public and private, and the ways of accompanying the conclusion of the paths and possible strategies for sustainability of both the activities in a generic way and the individual paths.

Finally, the exchange among the teams from different countries increased motivation and satisfaction with respect to the work accomplished and the possibility of exchange and growth, and this aspect was shared by the team itself during the several supervision sessions.

## 3.3 Conclusions

### 3.3.1 What we have learnt – Barriers and recommended solutions

- ✓ Critical need for psycho-pedagogical support in schools.
- ✓ Opening a listening space could assist in identifying numerous issues that require attention in more organised territorial services – the desk was a starting point for many users.
- ✓ For teachers, it is very **useful** to have more space and time to address delicate situations that necessitate the involvement of other services, even externals, as the schools themselves have limited resources.
- ✓ Need to train school staff on how to handle gender-based issues and how to legally handle some challenging circumstances that call for the involvement of public authorities.
- ✓ Useful to have specific figures within the school staff to help teachers to deal with delicate situations and legal issues.

### 3.3.2 Systemic barriers

- ✓ The obligation to always receive the informed consent by parents, as sometimes it represents a barrier for intervention.
- ✓ The difficulty to involve parents.
- ✓ The limited hours available within the schools, which makes it difficult to deal with all situations and makes it slow to build trusting relationships among school personnel and students.
- ✓ The young age of users and lack of parental control over the help-desk implementation, which required more efforts and responsibility on service providers to keep the contact with users.
- ✓ The lack of direct communication channels for exceptional communication, aside from the service institutional email address.



### 3.3.3 Additional barriers to utilization

- ✓ Language difficulties related to pupils with a migration background.
- ✓ Stereotypes about the figure of the psychologist.

### 3.3.4 Positive outcomes and best practices

- ✓ The possibility to ameliorate the communication between pupils-pupils, pupils-teachers, teachers-parents and parents-pupils;
- ✓ The possibility to effectively support pupils who were more in need;
- ✓ The possibility of encouraging correct and motivating school attendance;
- ✓ The capability of addressing the needs of the individual towards specific interventions;
- ✓ The capacity of encourage reflection on educational skills, difficulties, doubts and fears related to the parental role;
- ✓ The possibility to offer the teaching staff a place to welcome and discuss difficulties relating to their role as teachers and their relationship with pupils and parents;



## 4. Recommendations

### 4.1 Policy recommendations

Based on the Italian experience lived in Palermo by the REBOOT NOW staff and service providers, we are drafting here 10 policy recommendations for institutions and decision-makers to improve the situation of children mental health and psychological wellbeing starting from schools:

To establish a Counselling Desk in every public school in Italy.

To always include the figure of the Clinical Supervisor in the functioning of the desk, in order to support the service providers in their action in the schools;

To create additional spaces, timeframe, resources and tools for service providers to deal, after an initial general assessment, with the most delicate situations involving psycho-educational issues, distress, neglect, abuses and other issues affecting children's wellbeing;

To employ in each Counselling Desk a varied pool of service providers (min. 3) with different specialties and professional backgrounds, of which the role of Psychologists and Pedagogical Coordinators, working together as a group.

To diversify the tasks of the Psychological Desk not only on individual psychological consultations, but also group activities and workshops where to discuss sensitive topics and deal with the dynamics of the classroom.

To train teachers, at institutional level, on the dynamics of classroom relationships, as well as on specific topics, such as how to identify possible children mistreatment, including gender-based violence occurrence.

To ensure that the Counselling Desk in each school is visible while reserved, and has adequate and nice spaces where to run, in order to have the whole school informed about it and users' encouraged to attend it.

To include, among the roles and responsibilities of the Psychological Desk, the one of raising awareness on the importance of gender, affective and sexuality education in the school curricula, as a way to prevent teen dating violence and gender-based violence.

To create solid protocols and mechanisms in each school for a better cooperation of school staff, service providers and public institutions in charge of children and families' wellbeing, outlining responsibility and means to operate.

To change the "perspective" in which society sees schools: not only as a place consecrated only to education, but to relationships-building. Therefore, to give a major and shared role to the Ministry of Health too, rather than just on the Education and Merit one.



## 4.2 Sustainability of the itinerant counselling desk

At the same time, starting from the assumption that the REBOOT NOW itinerant desk experienced in Palermo recorded an high degree of satisfaction among the users, being both children or adults, and represented for the schools in which it was running the only support received for the prevention of adolescent discomfort, conflicts between peers, between peers and teachers, between adolescents and families, thus being capable of bringing more benefits than costs, we are convinced that it should be maintained and replicated in other contexts and territories.

Below we draft some possible ways for ensuring its sustainability:

- ✓ To have the public institutions supporting the project since the beginning ensuring the continuity of the service, allocating extra funds on the desk service, thus covering the entirety of the service for the next school year;
- ✓ To have additional public institutions to allocate funds, also for the replication of the service in other territories and contexts.
- ✓ To establish a new protocol of cooperation promoted by schools' public institutions and subscribed by schools, private and non-profit actors, as a way to cooperate over the many needs detected in schools and raising over time.



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