



National report on help-desk implementation

"Hope For Children"
CRC Policy Center – Cyprus



Partners

CESIE | www.cesie.org

KMOP | www.kmop.gr

"Hope For Children" CRC Policy Center | uncrcpc.org.cy

Fondazione Hallgarten-Franchetti Centro Studi Villa Montesca | www.montesca.eu

ZRS Koper | www.zrs-kp.si

Animus Association Foundation | www.animusassociation.org

Authors

Emma Mesikämmen – "Hope For Children" CRC Policy Center,
Nicosia, Cyprus



cesie
the world is only one creature



HOPE
For Children



animus
association
foundation



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them

Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. The REBOOT NOW itinerant counseling desk	6
2.1 Idea and rationale	6
2.2 The starting point	9
3. Lessons learned	11
3.1 Methodology and organisation of activities	11
3.2 Interpretation of the collected data	14
3.2.1 Users' views	14
3.2.2 Service providers' views	18
3.2.3 Supervisors' views	21
3.3 Conclusions	22
3.3.1. Barriers and recommended solutions	22
3.3.2. Systemic barriers	22
3.3.3. Additional barriers to utilization	22
3.3.4. Positive outcomes and best practices	23
4. Recommendations	25
4.1 Policy recommendations	25
4.2 Sustainability of the itinerant counselling desk	27
References	27

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 **Cyprus**, which was running in the period from **October 2022 to June 2023**, operated by **HFC** with a team of its own service providers (psychologists and social workers) in Gymnasium Agios Dometios and Gymnasium Arch. Makarios III Platy secondary schools. Particularly, to identify HFC's "lessons learnt", this report will firstly present the different ways in which the "pilot" desk was implemented in Cyprus, adding some elements of evaluation based on the different levels of assessment which were created over the course of the project for collecting and analysing the users' feedback, as well as service providers and supervisors' views. 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 counselling 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 Nicosia, Cyprus

In Cyprus, the counselling desk was implemented by "Hope For Children" CRC Policy Center (HFC) in 2 public middle schools, both located in the capital, Nicosia:



The total number of students in each participating school in the beginning of the project were **172 (Gymnasium Agios Dometios)** and **479 (Gymnasium Arch. Makarios III Platy)**.

A Protocol of Cooperation defining objectives, rationale and roles for the local implementation of the **REBOOT NOW** project was signed with the schools involved in the project at the end of June 2022. HFC also organised National Meetings at each school in early November 2022, which advanced the service providers' understanding of the demographics of the student population and the issues they may face.

In parallel, 8 professionals from "Hope For Children" CRC Policy Center were selected and trained in a **1-week training** on the themes of the project, and consequently prepared for the cases they might expect to encounter while attending to the counselling desks at the selected schools. However, due to some changes in the organisation of the desk, only **4 of them were actively involved** in the counselling desk, working on individual and group activities in the selected schools.

The counselling desk was operating in each participating school once a week during the 2022–23 school year, from late September 2022 to the second half of May 2023. At Gymnasium Agios Dometios, the desk was held on Mondays from 8:00 to 13:30, and at Gymnasium Arch. Makarios III Platy on Thursdays from 8:30 to 13:30.

Gymnasium Agios Dometios

Gymnasium Arch. Makarios III Platy

Mondays from 8:00 to 13:30

Thursdays from 8:30 to 13:30

The online booking system was not activated in Cyprus because the school staff suggested that a **walk-in method would work better given the students' limited online access**. Further, concerns were raised about breach of confidentiality in relation to the online booking system as users would have needed to enter their details.

2.2 The starting point

To better frame the starting point of the REBOOT NOW action, HFC implemented a baseline data collection among children and adults 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, the access to existing help services, in schools or outside, when available. A total of 153 children participated in the survey (34 from Gymnasium Agios Dometios, 119 from Gymnasium Arch. Makarios III Platy).

Initial data collected from the schools revealed that both schools have had one school counsellor during the pandemic period, but their role was very limited in terms of their ability to give suggestions to children asking for support, or they referred the children to external mental health providers.



While many students had experienced negative feelings, not everyone felt comfortable talking about them or seeking help. More than half of the respondents (81 out of a total of 153) reported having felt worried or scared at some point during the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, while 85 respondents reported that they had not felt lonely, 69 respondents had negative thoughts sometimes, 16 respondents reported having had negative thoughts often, and 9 respondents very often. Notably, a fourth of the respondents (37 out of 153) did not tell anyone, including family members and friends, about their feelings during the pandemic, and the most common reasons for non-disclosure were: "I felt uncomfortable"; "I don't want to talk about my feelings"; and "I was afraid of their response". Another finding providing useful context for the starting point of the counselling desk in Cyprus was that only 5 students out of 153 who responded to the baseline survey had turned to a counsellor or psychologist to talk about their feelings during the pandemic.



When it comes to questions exploring the respondents' experiences of violence, the majority (**115 out of 153**) had never been victims of violence during the pandemic. However, **28 children** had experienced violence in the form of teasing, insults, bullying or rumours spread about them. Further, **11 students** had experienced physical attacks. In terms of gender-based violence, **16 students** reported that they had experienced situations in which they had not felt at ease because of their gender, **12 students** reported experiences of gender-based bullying, and **33 children** said they had behaved differently because of their gender.

Most of the children surveyed indicated that they knew of someone who could help them if they experienced violence or were feeling sad. However, as noted above, the survey also found that not everyone is comfortable talking about their psychological well-being, and only **28 respondents** reported that they know of existing services that can provide help and support in the event of violence or abuse.

The research in Cyprus concluded that students' emotional wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic was considered of secondary importance, which led to drawbacks in the aftermath of the lockdowns in Cyprus.



3. Lessons learned

3.1 Methodology and organisation of activities

Following the **Monitoring and Evaluation Protocol produced by ZRS Koper**, in Cyprus the desk's service providers were completing a monitoring log following each consultation, and distributing a feedback form to be filled in by the desk's users, as well as by participants of the group activities or workshops organised.

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

The REBOOT NOW project in Cyprus reached a total of 76 people (or 87 if repeat visits to the itinerant counselling desk are included). In addition to individual users accessing the itinerant counselling desk, some group activities were also conducted on themes relevant to the project – gender-based violence and healthy relationships.

As shown in the table below, at Gymnasium Agios Dometios, the itinerant counselling desk reached a total of **51 people** (or 62 if repeat visits to the counselling desk are included), distributed as follows:

✓ **26 individual consultations** (including repeat visits) with students (M: 10; F: 16), of which 24 were aged 12–14 years old, while 2 were 15–18 years of age. 15 were unique users (M: 8; F: 7; 12–14 years old: 13; 15–18 years old: 2). Important to notice that neither teachers nor parents accessed the service.

✓ **36 students** (M: 14; F: 20; Other: 1; prefer not to say: 1, all aged 12–14 years old) attended 2 group activities, one being a workshop on gender-based violence and one on healthy relationships.

Gymnasium Agios Dometios (unique desk users only)								
Users	Age			Gender				Total
	9–11	12–14	15–18	M	F	Oth	N/A	
Children		13	12	8	7			15
School staff	n/a			n/a				n/a
Parents	n/a			n/a				n/a
Total	n/a			n/a				15

Gymnasium Agios Dometios (group activities only)								
Users	Age			Gender				Total
	9–11	12–14	15–18	M	F	Oth	N/A	
Children		36		14	20	1	1	36
School staff	n/a			n/a				n/a
Parents	n/a			n/a				n/a
Total	n/a			n/a				36

At Gymnasium Arch. Makarios III Platy, the itinerant counselling desk reached a total of 25 people, distributed as follows:

✓ **12 individual consultations** with students (M: 6; F: 6), of which 9 were aged 12–14 years old, while 3 were 15–18 years of age. All were unique users. Important to notice that neither teachers nor parents accessed the service.

✓ **13 students** (M: 6; F: 7, aged 12–14 years old) attended one group activity on gender-based violence.

Gymnasium Arch. Makarios III Platy (unique desk users only)								
Users	Age			Gender				Total
	9–11	12–14	15–18	M	F	Oth	N/A	
Children		9	3	6	6			12
School staff	n/a			n/a				n/a
Parents	n/a			n/a				n/a
Total	n/a			n/a				12

Gymnasium Arch. Makarios III Platy (group activities only)								
Users	Age			Gender				Total
	9–11	12–14	15–18	M	F	Oth	N/A	
Children		13		6	7			13
School staff	n/a			n/a				n/a
Parents	n/a			n/a				n/a
Total	n/a			n/a				13

3.2 Interpretation of the collected data

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

3.2.1 Users' views

INDIVIDUAL CONSULTATIONS

All students who accessed the counselling desk completed the evaluation form. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and is detailed in the table below.

QUESTIONS	AGIOS DOMETIOS	ARCH. MAKARIOS III PLATY
What was it like talking to the psychologists or the social worker? (Good; OK; Bad)	All 26 counselling desk users said it was "good" talking to the service providers.	Most of the 12 counselling desk users said it was "good" talking to the service providers, with only one saying it was "OK".
Would you like to come back and see the expert you spoke to again? (Yes; I don't know; No)	Most of the 26 users indicated that they would like to come back to speak to the expert again, with 5 saying they were not sure.	The majority of the 12 users said they would come back to see the expert, with only one responding that they would not.
If someone close to you were to have a problem similar to yours, would you recommend making an appointment for the help-desk? (Yes; I don't know; No)	The majority of the 26 users indicated that they would recommend the desk service to someone they know, with 6 students responding that they were not sure.	All but one of the 12 users said that they would recommend the desk service to someone they know, with only one student responding that they were not sure.

Overview of the comments left:

AGIOS DOMETIOS	ARCH. MAKARIOS III PLATY
<p>The positive response to the desk was elaborated through comments such as:</p> <p>"I like that she [the service provider] answered my questions";</p> <p>"Because I think about things that are relevant to us, and we have extra help from someone";</p> <p>"Because she [the service provider] talks well and explains things well";</p> <p>"Because I spoke about the things that happened";</p> <p>"Because she [the service provider] seems understanding - 10/10"</p>	<p>The evaluation forms did not include comments.</p>





GROUP ACTIVITIES

When it comes to the group activities, the evaluation forms collected at the end of the workshops show that half (18 out of 36) of the students who attended the workshops at Gymnasium Agios Dometios found the workshops overall **very interesting or extremely interesting**, and just over half (19 out of 36) found the content of the workshop **very interesting or extremely interesting**. Similarly, 6 out of 13 students who attended the workshop at Gymnasium Arch. Makarios III Platy, found both the workshop and its content **very or extremely interesting**. It is worth noting that the findings from the feedback forms also indicate that **girls found both the content and the workshops in general more interesting than boys**. One male student who found the group activity and its content moderately interesting would have wanted the workshop to be **"more entertaining"**, whereas a female student who found the workshop very interesting made a comment that "the program was very good" but **"it would have been better if some members of the team were not being naughty"**. It was observed during the workshop activities that some male students were visibly less engaged and more restless than their female peers.

The feedback from students who found the workshops very or extremely interesting indicates that the group activities enabled the participants to **accumulate knowledge** they considered important and useful. For example, one female student said that she "learned very interesting information that [she] will not forget", and another female participant wrote that "these kinds of sessions should be conducted at schools more frequently". The latter comment highlights the need for further non-formal education and other types of support for school children on topics such as gender-based violence, healthy relationships and bullying. This is further supported by anecdotal evidence from some of the school staff members who noted during conversations with staff involved in **REBOOT NOW** from HFC that they do not have many opportunities for discussions on topics covered as part of the project.

The vast majority of the students (**44 out of 49, or 90 percent**) thought that the workshops **promoted gender equality and the interests of all genders**. Those few students who did not think that the group activities promoted gender equality did not provide any comments to explain their perspective. However, one male student who thought that gender equality was promoted did note that in a scenario used in the workshop, a girl was sexually harassed by a boy, while in real-world situations boys can also be sexually harassed by girls. This suggests that the target age group can be highly sensitive to the topic of gender-based violence and potentially feel that they are being labelled, which may make them less receptive to the message, and care needs to be taken when discussing the topic with teenagers. It also highlights the need for further education on the topic, given that the proportion of women who have experienced gender-based violence continues to be higher than that of men, and that violence against women and girls intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic (UN Women 2021).

Finally, an interesting finding emerging from the evaluation forms is that some students expressed **confusion about the gender option of "other"**. In relation to this, anecdotal evidence from one of the educators involved in the project revealed that their school does not yet formally recognise people who identify as non-binary in terms of gender. **This suggests that further discussions about the idea of gender are needed in schools in Cyprus.**

3.2.2 Service providers' views

The monitoring logs from service providers show that the issues discussed during the counselling desk sessions varied from family relationships to bullying, stress, anxiety and angry outbursts. The most common issue discussed in individual consultations was a difficult relationship with a family member (15 accesses); for instance, some had a distant parent with whom they had problems communicating, while others felt they were given or had to take over responsibilities that would normally belong to the parent, such as caring for their siblings, and some reported a bad relationship with a sibling. The reasons for anxiety or excessive stress varied from parents' high expectations regarding school performance to responsibilities for one's siblings.

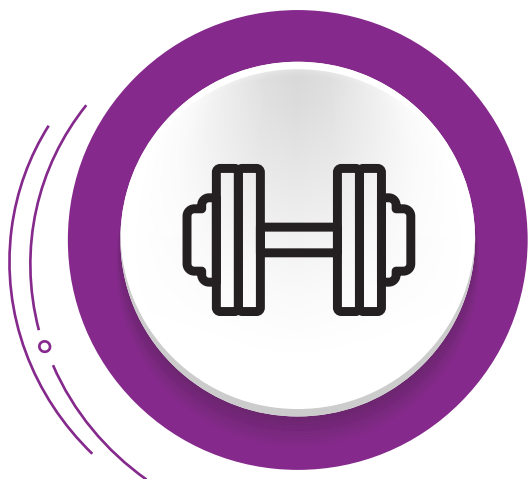
There were also some cases of students attending the counselling desk without presenting a specific issue to discuss. Conversations with the service providers revealed that it may have been the school staff or parents who referred these students to the counselling desk, which did not provide the most fruitful starting point for the session, as it was not initiated by the students themselves.

During discussions, the service providers also reported noticing that there continues to be stigma around mental health issues among the students, especially in terms of looking for professional help to address such issues. Reportedly, students also expressed concerns regarding confidentiality – they did not want their parents or teachers to know what would be discussed during counselling sessions. Other challenges related to students, observed by the service providers, were: issues with self-esteem or identity; concerns or uncertainty related to the future in general or career more specifically; and stress to do with studies as well as one's family relationships.

The average duration of the counselling sessions was 40 minutes across both schools.



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



STRENGTHS

The counselling desk service provided students with an opportunity to talk about the issues they were experiencing with a knowledgeable and supporting professional and work through the issues together with the professionals;

This applied especially to the students who accessed the desk regularly, with whom the service providers were consequently able to build a collaborative relationship.

WEAKNESSES

The structure of the counselling desk service could have been improved to make it more efficient;

The professionals found the booking system confusing;

At times, there were challenges related to communication between the implementing partner and the schools regarding the framework of execution, which impacted the effectiveness of the counselling desk initiative;

Students could have been better informed about the service.





OPPORTUNITIES

The counselling desk was seen as a great pilot for an important service, for which there is demand in schools

The counselling desk enabled the service providers to help children in an environment that differs from the usual space for the counselling services they provide.

THREATS

The counselling desk initiative revealed that there is still stigma around mental health issues and the act of seeking professional help for one's psychological wellbeing in the target group of middle and high school children;

The issue with stigma may have played a role in the number of people who accessed the counselling desk, and it is also a threat to similar initiatives in the future, which needs to be addressed through awareness raising and education;

Service providers underscored that any initiative of this kind requires long-term investment (such as a full school year or longer) – otherwise, it will not benefit its target group and could even be considered unethical.



3.2.3 Supervisors' views

The supervision of the service providers was provided by the Coordinator of HFC's Children's House who is a psychologist, and the format was individual sessions. Supervision was carried out over 17 days across the duration of the counselling desk initiative, with three sessions on average each day.

In the early days of the counselling desk initiative, supervision discussions focused on the development of trustful relationship and collaboration with schools, and counselling dynamics and format. This changed, over the course of the year, to more generic debriefing (discussion of usual issues for supervision) as the initiative progressed.

According to the supervisor, the professionals were eager to provide support to students. Further, the service providers reported that the counselling sessions with students went smoothly, as the children were informed about the procedure. The professionals indicated that it was highly beneficial to have direct access to children in the school environment, as it made it easier to schedule appointments with those who wanted to see the professionals again, and enabled the service providers to observe the students in an environment different from an external counselling space.

In conclusion, findings from the supervision sessions underscore the benefits of providing a counselling desk service at schools, as well as the importance of explaining to students how the counselling sessions work in order to build a safe environment and a relationship of trust.



3.3 Conclusions

3.3.1. Barriers and recommended solutions

The analysis of the data collected during the counselling desk implementation indicates that both systemic and non-systemic barriers were faced during the implementation, which impacted the effectiveness of the desk. However, clear positive outcomes also emerged, which highlight the importance of the counselling desk initiative. Both the barriers and positive outcomes identified during the initiative are outlined below, and recommended solutions to the barriers are discussed in Section 4.

3.3.2. Systemic barriers

In Cyprus, the key systemic barrier faced during the implementation of the counselling desk was difficulties fitting in with the schedule of the schools, as well as changes made to the duration of the school year by the Minister for Education – namely, the shortening of the school year through the action of bringing forward the end-of-year exams. These barriers made it challenging to implement the counselling desk as well as related activities at the schools to their full potential.

3.3.3. Additional barriers to utilization

An additional barrier to the counselling desk utilisation was stigma around mental health issues. The service providers involved in the initiative observed that students in the target age group may still feel uncomfortable talking about mental health issues or hold the view that only “crazy people” go to see a psychologist, as one student commented during the counselling desk launch event at Gymnasium Arch. Makarios III Platy. The findings from the survey conducted for the Baseline Data Collection Report in earlier stages of the project support these observations.

3.3.4. Positive outcomes and best practices

The key positive outcome of the counselling desk implementation is that it provided participating students with an opportunity to talk to a dedicated professional about the issues they were experiencing and to obtain advice or tools from the service providers to work through the issues. This kind of service is generally lacking in public schools in Cyprus, as noted earlier in this report.

The key best practice is continuity of the service provided. This enables the professionals to build a collaborative relationship with the users of the service which will in turn enhance the regular users' ability to work on the issues they are experiencing and help improve their wellbeing.

What is also noteworthy is that the majority of the students who participated in the counselling desk activities thought that the activities promoted gender equality. However, it was also found that some teenagers – especially boys – may feel that they are being labelled by group activities such as workshops on gender-based violence, and that care needs to be taken when this topic is discussed with the target group.

Summing up, the lessons learned in Cyprus are the following:

- ✓ Initiatives such as the itinerant counselling desk have significant potential to make a positive impact on school students' psychosocial wellbeing. The positive feedback from the users of the counselling desk as well as the service providers acts as evidence of this potential.
- ✓ Initiatives such as the itinerant counselling desk need to have continuity. They need to be implemented for at least a full school year. This enables service providers to build a relationship of trust and collaboration with regular desk users, which in turn has positive implications on the outcomes of the sessions. Shorter initiatives may be counterproductive.
- ✓ The most common psychosocial issue faced by students is challenging relationships with family. Healthy relationships is an area of life students need further support with.
- ✓ There is still stigma around mental health issues as well as the act of seeking help for these kinds of issues in Cyprus. This may have impacted students' willingness to access the counselling desk service.
- ✓ Confidentiality regarding a counselling service is a concern to students. They do not want their guardians or teachers to know what is discussed during counselling sessions. Confidentiality is a matter that needs to be discussed with students openly and in detail in the early stages of an initiative such as the counselling desk.

- ✓ Girls seem to be more interested in topics addressed by the REBOOT NOW project than boys. Further attention needs to be paid to thinking about how to engage pre-teen and teenage boys in non-formal education activities related to gender-based violence, healthy relationships, bullying, etc.
- ✓ There is a lack of knowledge about the idea of gender (as opposed to sex) among the target group of students between 10 and 14 years of age. Some students expressed confusion about the gender option of "other" in the evaluation forms. Further, some educators noted that schools in Cyprus do not yet formally recognise people who identify as non-binary when it comes to gender. Further discussion of the idea of gender is needed in schools.
- ✓ A Wellbeing Festival or similar event should be organised in the early stages of an initiative such as the counselling desk. This would help address the stigma around mental health issues and the act of seeking help for these issues through the provision of non-formal education activities. It would also help ensure that the target group of the initiative is well aware of the initiative.
- ✓ The framework of the service provided needs to be made clear to all stakeholders from the start. This includes the way appointments are made and how students should be directed to the service.
- ✓ Open and consistent communication is key. Dealing with stakeholders such as schools, which have a busy schedule with many competing demands, can be challenging during the process of implementation of an initiative such as the counselling desk. As the initiative progressed, it was discovered that persistent but courteous communication with the schools helped build rapport with the school staff and facilitate access to the schools – although it did not enable the implementing team to fully overcome the systemic barriers outlined above.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Policy recommendations

1. Increase resources for counselling services in public schools responding to school children's psychosocial needs.

While there are counsellors at public secondary schools in Cyprus, their job description is broad, including career counselling and liaising with a number of stakeholders related to a student's situation (MOEC 2021, pp. 19–20), which means they have limited resources to focus on each individual child's psychosocial needs. Increasing resources for counselling services in public schools would help improve students' mental and social wellbeing.

It is recommended that further resources are allocated to the following services:

1.1 Employ more school counsellors for public schools. This would help decrease the high workload of school counsellors currently employed at public schools and shorten the time students in need of assessment are required to wait.

1.2 Provide funding for a counselling desk initiative such as the one piloted within the framework of the REBOOT NOW project. This would provide students with increased opportunities and easy access to obtain support from an expert service provider. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society organisations (CSOs) with the required expertise would be well-positioned to help bridge the current gap in demand and supply.



2. Provide education on gender equality and identity. The findings emerging from the student evaluation forms collected as part of the REBOOT NOW project show that there are gaps in school children's understanding of gender (as opposed to sex). There is also public resistance to the announcement by the Ministry of Education to include sexual education in the curriculum across all levels of education from pre-primary to high school from September 2023, following the passing of the law on sex education in late 2022 (Marathovouniotis 2023). While the new curriculum is a positive development, the success of its implementation as well as its impact on children's understanding of gender fluidity remain to be seen. In the meantime, it is recommended that complementary actions are taken to support the new sex education curriculum.

It is recommended that the following specific actions are taken:

2.1 Provide awareness-raising sessions on gender fluidity to parents/guardians of children. This would enable parents/guardians to support their children to the best of their ability. These sessions should be run by educators (be them teaching staff or educators working for CSOs) trained to provide educational activities on gender. Increased education on gender fluidity among guardians of children would help promote inclusion and acceptance. It also carries the potential to address gender identity issues school-aged students may be experiencing and consequently improve their wellbeing.

2.2 Deliver non-formal education on gender fluidity and gender equality in schools. It is proposed that in addition to formal education regarding gender, delivered as part of the commencing sex education incorporated in the curriculum, non-formal education activities are to be organised in schools to further support school children's understanding of gender and to reach children who may be less open to obtaining knowledge from formal education. This non-formal education on gender could take the form of the Wellbeing Festivals piloted in the REBOOT NOW project.

2.3 Measure the impact of formal sex education. In order to understand whether the new sex education delivered at schools is improving students' understanding of the idea of gender and gender equality, the impact of the education needs to be measured. Tools for measuring and evaluation (M&E) need to be created if they do not yet exist, and M&E activities need to be carried out in schools to gain an understanding of the impact of the program, best practice, and points for improvement.

3. Increase education on psychosocial wellbeing in schools. The findings emerging from the various data collected within the framework of the counselling desk initiative of the REBOOT NOW project show that there is still stigma around mental health issues among the target group of school children. Incorporating further discussion of and activities related to psychosocial wellbeing to different levels of primary and secondary education would help normalise the idea of talking about one's psychosocial wellbeing among the target group, and therefore help address the stigma around seeking help for psychosocial issues. This would, in turn, lead to improved psychosocial wellbeing of primary and secondary school students.

It is recommended that the following specific actions are taken:

3.1 Provide non-formal education on bullying. The national baseline data collection indicated that nearly a fifth of the children who completed the survey had experienced violence in the form of teasing, insults, bullying or rumours spread about them, and seven percent had experienced physical attacks. Bullying was also one of the issues that students who accessed the REBOOT NOW counselling desk discussed with the service providers. Further, children who



References:

Marathovouniotis S (2023, June 19), 'Ministry announces sex ed curriculum, in response to criticism', in-cyprus.com. Available at: <https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/news/local/ministry-announces-sex-ed-curriculum-in-response-to-criticism/>

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth (MOEC) (2021), Annual report 2021, Republic of Cyprus. Available at: https://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/605/annual_report_2021_en.pdf

UN Women (2021) Measuring the shadow pandemic: Violence against women during Covid-19, United Nations. Available at: <https://data.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/documents/Publications/Measuring-shadow-pandemic.pdf>

REBOOT



thegendertalk.eu



cesie
the world is only one creature



HOPE
For Children



animus
association
foundation



Co-funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them