

Promoting Mental Well-Being in Secondary Schools in a Virtual Environment - The “wExchange” Project

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Abstract. The wExchange project aims to support mental health literacy and promote mental well-being of young people through peer-to-peer learning methods in secondary schools in a virtual environment. The current paper presents the school students' feedback on the two virtual camps implemented within the project. A total of 80 school students participated in two virtual camps and provided their feedback through a questionnaire with the response rate increasing from 41% to 100% from first to second session. After the first camp, 100% (n=33) of the participants and 93.8% (n=75) in the second camp found the experience interesting, while 97% (n=32) and 92.5% (n=74), respectively, considered the content important. School students reported feeling happy, excited, curious, and inspired, highlighting the positive impact of peer-based learning. The final wExchange material, incorporating peer-developed methods for mental well-being promotion, will be freely available on the project website in English, Finnish, Greek, Portuguese, and Slovenian, ensuring accessibility to all interested stakeholders in the field of school health promotion.

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1. Introduction

Adolescent health promotion is a critical area of public health, particularly given the unique developmental challenges faced by adolescents [1]. Among the various strategies employed to enhance health outcomes in this population, the peer-to-peer approach has gained traction as an effective method. The peer-to-peer approach takes advantage of the influence of peers to encourage positive health behaviors and outcomes, drawing on adolescents' social networks and shared experiences [2].

Peer-to-peer models in health promotion leverage established social networks and trust-based relationships to foster health behavior change. These models are adaptable to the values, perspectives, and cultural contexts of the target population, making them effective in youth-focused interventions. Grounded in theoretical frameworks emphasizing the impact of social influence on health behaviors, peer-to-peer approaches have been widely recognized for their role in promoting positive health outcomes [3-5].

In this context, the wExchange project emerges as an innovative initiative that integrates the peer-to-peer approach into practice, leveraging the power of peer-based learning to enhance knowledge exchange and promote mental well-being among adolescents. The overall aim of the project is to develop peer-to-peer methods to support mental health literacy and promote mental wellbeing. The project activities are carried out in collaboration with school students, so that the methods focus on everyday life of young people.

Literature supports that, after the pandemic, digital health technologies have been used more for health management among youth and there is a general appreciation and receptivity for digital health promotion [6,7]. Therefore, the peer-to-peer approach can be effectively adapted to virtual learning environments; in this context, the wExchange project implemented and tested such methods to promote mental well-being among school students. Virtual exchanges are educational programs that facilitate cross-cultural communication, collaboration, and learning among participants from different countries or cultural backgrounds through virtual platforms and digital technology. These exchanges aim to promote intercultural understanding, global competency, and meaningful interactions across geographic boundaries. Furthermore, the results indicate that the use of digital tools and collaborative approaches can enhance the acceptance and effectiveness of mental health interventions within the school setting [8,9].

The wExchange project objectives are: 1) to promote youth mental health literacy skills (aged 13-16 years), 2) to develop peer-based activity for promotion of mental well-being with young people, 3) to develop virtual exchange methods for schools and 4) to put the knowledge gained from the project into practice. In particular, the project will provide insights on multicultural methods and needs of mental health literacy through the following activities and results: 1) Peer-based mental well-being methods, 2) Development of peer activity and 3) Development of virtual exchange.

The aim of the current paper is to present the school students' feedback on the two virtual camps implemented within wExchange project.

2. Methods

This study is part of the Erasmus+ project “Promoting mental well-being through online exchange in secondary schools - wExchange” (2022-1-FI01-KA220-SCH-000087764). The consortium of this project includes partners from four European countries, one Higher Education Institution (HEI) and one secondary school from each country as follows: 1) Finland: Turku University of Applied Sciences (project coordinator) and Puustellin Yhtenäiskoulu 6.-9.lk, 2) Greece: University of West Attica and 9th Junior High School Kallithea “Manos Xatzidakis”, 3) Portugal: Escola Superior de Enfermagem de Lisboa and Agrupamento de Escolas de Santo Antonio and 4) Slovenia: University of Novo Mesto and Šolski Center Novo mesto.

The project team included 20 school students aged 13-16 from each partner country, teachers, and academics. The selection process was voluntary, and participation was open to school students regardless of prior knowledge about mental health topics.

Within the framework of the project, structured mental health promotion activities were designed and developed in the context of a virtual environment. Initially, they were carried out online with the project team and then piloted in the project partner secondary schools in each country using the peer-to-peer methodology. A set of two virtual camps and two workshops were designed and implemented by schoolteachers, together with school students and experts from HEIs. Additionally, teachers and HEI experts acted as facilitators and coordinators, supporting the school students in organizing peer-led activities.

All sessions were conducted via the Zoom platform, with students from each partner country participating remotely through their respective schools. This form of virtual exchange, defined as online people-to-people activities that foster intercultural dialogue without physical mobility, provided a meaningful and accessible context for youth engagement in mental well-being initiatives [10].

More specifically, between September 2023 and June 2024, four online meetings (two virtual camps and two workshops) were held to introduce school students to the concept of mental health and well-being, as well as to raise awareness about the areas of life that contribute to the protection and promotion of their mental health and well-being. The virtual camps were structured to introduce school students to key mental health concepts through interactive discussions, experiential activities, and peer-to-peer interactions. Following this, school students created and actively participated in activities such as online games and quizzes, group discussions, experiential exercises, interactive and creative activities, in addition to the use of new technologies. Additionally, school students were given the opportunity to exchange ideas for the implementation of all these mental health promotion activities in their own schools.

As part of the project, the school students in the project team piloted various activities with their classmates in their schools to test the effectiveness of peer-led interventions, contributing to the development of practical mental health promotion strategies. At the end of each virtual camp, the participants responded to an online evaluation questionnaire, assessed through a self-administered evaluation questionnaire, providing their feedback, measuring interest and perceived usefulness, open-ended questions capturing personal reflections which described their experience. The survey was anonymous to minimize response bias.

The themes included based on the "Hand of Mental Health" were the following: 1) Sleep and Rest, 2) Food and Eating Habits, 3) Relationships and Emotions, 4) Exercise and Mindfulness, and 5) Creativity and Pleasure. "Hand of Mental Health" framework encourages reflection and dialogue on how daily lifestyle choices affect mental well-being, including factors such as sleep, rest, nutrition, relationships, and emotional regulation [11].

The study received ethical approval from institutional relevant committees, and informed consent was obtained from school students and their parents or guardians before participation. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

3. Results

A total of 80 school students from partner schools participated in the two virtual camps (20 per country). The evaluation participation rate in the first camp was relatively low, with only 33 school students (41%) responding to the evaluation questionnaire, while at the second virtual camp, all 80 participating school students (100%) responded, reflecting a significant increase in engagement and interest (Table 1).

Regarding the first virtual camp, all responders (n=33, 100%) reported that the virtual camp was interesting. Additionally, the majority of the participants indicated that the content of the virtual camp was important to them (n=32, 97%). Likewise, in the second virtual camp, most participants (n=75, 93.8%) found the camp interesting, and most of them (n=74, 92.5%) considered the content to be important.

When participants asked to name three words that represent how the camp made them feel, school students responded similarly after both virtual camps. Their responses reflected positive emotions and experiences. In the first virtual camp, participants reported a variety of positive emotions, including happiness, enthusiasm, satisfaction, excitement, and they characterized their experience as engaging, adventurous, intellectually stimulating, and overall enjoyable. In the second virtual camp, participants again noted happiness and satisfaction, but also described feelings of calmness, comfort, inspiration, and curiosity and they additionally, described the experience as informative, inclusive, engaging, and entertaining.

Table 1. School students' feedback on the two Virtual Camps

Question	Response	Virtual Camp 1 (N=33)	Virtual Camp 2 (N=80)
Do you think the camp was interesting?	Yes	n=33(100%)	n=75 (93.8%)
	No	n=0	n=5 (6.2%)
Where the contents important to you?	Yes	n=32 (97%)	n=74 (92.5%)
	No	n=1(3%)	n=6 (7.5%)

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Active participation of school students in all processes focused their engagement and highlights the perceived interest and importance of the content to them. The peer-to-peer approach enabled school students to connect, exchange experiences, and learn from one another in an interactive and meaningful way.

The initially low participation rate in the first camp suggested that school students may require time and structured guidance to fully engage in virtual peer-learning environments. However, this study contributed to the growing body of research on peer-led mental health education, emphasizing the value of school student-driven learning methods in a virtual camp environment. The results highlight their potential in fostering mental health awareness, engagement, and mental well-being. In addition, the virtual format allowed for consistent engagement despite geographical and logistical challenges, highlighting the feasibility and effectiveness of mental health promotion.

The final wExchange material includes two methodological guides, a training package of peer-based methods for schools to support the mental health literacy and promote mental well-being among young people and a virtual implementing guide which is a manual for teachers for using these virtual methods. All materials will be available as open access at the project website (<https://wexchange.turkuamk.fi>) providing useful and innovative material that can be utilized by members of the school community to promote mental health and well-being of young people. The guides will be available in five languages (English, Finnish, Greek, Portuguese and Slovenian).

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