



Parents as Active Agents in Building Emotionally Stable, and Healthy Communities: Testing PSsmile App

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Abstract. There is an increasing interest in implementing innovative actions tailored to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in children. Higher SEL is linked to successful participation in school life, better health, positive youth development. Moreover, research show that to pursue these goals, it is mandatory that adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes enhancing Social and Emotional Competences. ICTs applications should align with this perspectives' taking and involve significant adults in the educational settings. The paper fully describes the Mobile application PSsmile developed as intellectual output of the Erasmus+ PSsmile project, the recent steps undertaken to support effective use of this app. It is aimed at raising parents and teachers' awareness, promoting and strengthening their personal Social-Emotional competences making them more effective agents of the positive growth for children and for their communities.

Keywords: Social and Emotional Competences · Parents · PSsmile mobile app

1 Introduction

Social and Emotional Learning is an integral part of human education and development and is the process through which everyone, children, and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence. Social-emotional competence refers to “the ability to use social and emotional skills and knowledge to be resourceful, adapt to, respect, and work well with others, and take personal and collective responsibility” [1].

Within the most well-known model of SEL, these skills are organized as five interacting components: self-awareness (the ability to understand one's own emotions, personal

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goals, and values); self-management (the ability to regulate affects and calm oneself down); social awareness (the ability to understand others and take the perspective of those with different backgrounds and cultures, and to act with empathy and compassion); relationship skills (the ability to communicate clearly, to negotiate and to seek help, when needed) and the ability to take responsible decisions [2, 3].

Social and Emotional Education (SEE) refers to the educational process by which an individual develops social and emotional competence for personal, social, and academic growth and development through curricular, embedded, relational and contextual approaches [4]. Supporting SEL development increases, in fact, the chance of academic and workplace success reduces emotional distress and risks of behavioral problems, improvement of participation in the school context [5].

1.1 Supporting the Development of Key Social and Emotional Competence

The development of core competences depends on the quality of relationships that a child has the possibility to experience in different settings, including their families, schools, and communities [6]. Emerging evidence suggests that the recent pandemic may have exacerbated existing inequalities and created new inequalities. Students who are disadvantaged—including children from poor families, girls, children with disabilities, and those living in rural and disadvantaged regions—may have faced the biggest challenges both in terms of continuing their learning and of maintaining social and emotional contact [7]. As teachers underline, to this still active challenge new challenges are added for children as well as for adults, that is threats to peaceful life in diverse world contexts.

Social-emotional competence programs conducted in schools have been shown to be effective in promoting positive, behavioral, and academic results that are important for healthy development; predicting important results related to the future; support the behavior change process [8].

School-based programs are effective in preventing school violence, including bullying [9, 10]. Schools can be seen then as an ideal place to provide learning activities designed to help future adults achieve their best leadership chances, happy, healthy, and independent lives, and reach their unique career potential.

2 Opening Social-Emotional Learning to the Educational Community

Fostering SEL requires implementing practices and policies that help not only students but also adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enhance personal development, social relationships, and effective, productive work thus impacting the quality of life, satisfaction, and participation in diverse contexts of adults' life [11–13].

SEL development for teachers to support high-quality instruction is considered fundamental for the school of the future: higher SEL competences benefit class management and students' school and personal development [14]. As concern parents, evidence exists that positive parenting roles and SEL practices support children's efforts in school and lead to academic achievement and social skills improvement [15, 16]. Moreover, an

effective school-family partnership is effective in supporting and four improving children's learning. Additionally, benefits for children, teachers and families are achieved through positive changes in social skills and adaptive children's behaviors [17].

Parents represent the first socialization agency that shapes their children's social and emotional development and the benefit of growing up in a family environment permeated by SEL is translated into a positive parent-child relationship [18, 19]. Children that experience a socially and emotionally supportive environment are more likely to develop positive relationships both with teachers and peers [20] as well as better school motivation, engagement, and better grades [21].

Moreover, with their parenting and as role models the parents' social and emotional skills can help children to negotiate the numerous challenges and inequalities they experience in school and social contexts such as socioeconomic status, gender stereotypes, and ethnic prejudices thus significantly contributing to mental health and well-being [22].

Finally, involving parents and establishing a positive school-family partnership has been recognized as one of the drivers that can make a difference in achieving successful children's development.

2.1 Building Social and Emotional Competencies in the Educational Community

The premise for the proposal presented in this work is The European project PSsmile (Social-Emotional Capacity Building in Primary Education, <http://smile.emundus.lt/>). Beginning in 2019, it involves teams from Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, and Portugal. This project has its pillars in Social Emotional Education as a capacity-building process that involves all children, especially those from low-income, underrepresented backgrounds, and high-risk populations.

Based on the Positive Youth Development approach [23] the project develops along key goals. The first aim is in developing a training program for primary school teachers; the second one is to develop a training program for children to promote their SE skills to make them more ready to think about their future and facilitate school transitions. A third aim, specifically relevant to this work, is to provide teachers and parents with a tool aimed at fostering their SE skills, which is a specific app.

Following recent theoretical studies and challenges to everyone's well-being, promoting social-emotional competence in our view requires methodological choices and actions:

- Consider both emotional and social dimensions. It is mandatory to encourage and reinforce social skills such as greeting others, taking turns, cooperation and resolving conflicts, devoting a specific space to emotions and behaviors, knowledge and action level, awareness, and management skills.
- Adopt a 'double lenses approach.' Looking at the present and future objectives and undertaking a positive approach supports the decision-making process in all proposed activities.
- Actively, and personally involve significant adults. Creating an environment where adults take care of their Social and Emotional Well-being and children feel safe to

express their emotions with the contribution of teachers and family is essential for healthy social-emotional outcomes [24].

- Adopt innovative and at the same time easy-to-access technologies. Information and Communication Technologies can support Social-Emotional Competencies (SECs) development by providing innovative tools (see, videogames and mobile apps) designed to teach self-management exercises [25] and delivering fast and easily accessible courses and materials [26, 27].

These choices guide both the curricula developed for children and the educational activities proposed to the meaningful adults in their life.

3 The PSsmile App: An Integrative Tool for a Community-Based Education

PSsmile Mobile App is an intellectual output of the Erasmus + project “Social-emotional Capacity Building in Primary Education” (PSsmile). PSsmile aims to foster the development of socio-emotional capacity in primary education institutions by engaging in its activities with the whole community.

The PSsmile mobile app falls within this wider project goal, as it aims to develop a greater awareness of socio-emotional intelligence and deeper control of its related skills. The app can be seen as an opportunity to apply the most relevant outcomes within SEL studies, portraying a viable solution for those problems that have been often indicated in SEL curricula.

By raising adults’ awareness of SEL’s importance and developing their social-emotional competences, the app contributes to building emotionally stable, inclusive, and healthy communities where they take care of their own social-emotional functioning and support its development in children.

3.1 Drivers of the App

The app includes many daily exercises, a thorough and accurate explanation of the background knowledge on which SEL is based, infographics showing the progress made by the users, and a questionnaire for feedback, providing relevant data for research and the opportunity to improve the app, making it more suitable for the users. This organization escorts the learners through the entire course, building participants’ social-emotional skills in an incremental way, one that adapts itself to the needs of the trainee.

Parents and teachers have their own dedicated sections and activities since they play different and specific roles in children’s social-emotional development. Additionally, the PSsmile app is unique because it can also be used by parents and teachers simultaneously, making them active agents of change supporting positive development in future adults [28].

3.2 The Five-Week Program and Its Content

The *PSsmile Mobile App*, as shown in a recent paper [29] includes activities developing on a five-week-long programme (Fig. 1).

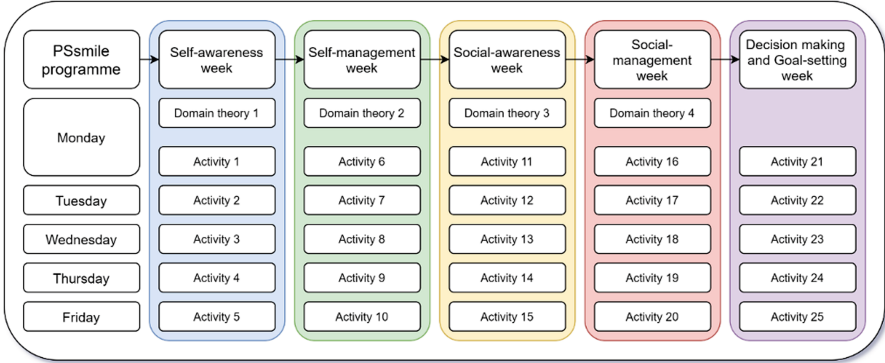


Fig. 1. PSsmile programme structure

The first four weeks are dedicated to getting acquainted with all the SEL domains, namely (i) Self-awareness, (ii) Self-management, (iii) Social-awareness, and (iv) Social-management, respectively. The fifth week is dedicated to learning to take responsible decisions and thinking about the future.

3.3 The Structure

The first thing a new user sees after logging in is a page containing the rules of the five-week *PSsmile Mobile App* and here user can get acquainted with the SEL domains by reading more about them (Fig. 2).

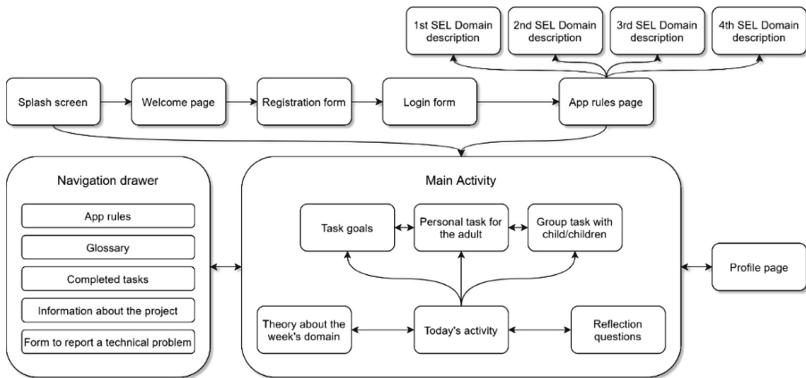


Fig. 2. Individual components of the programme

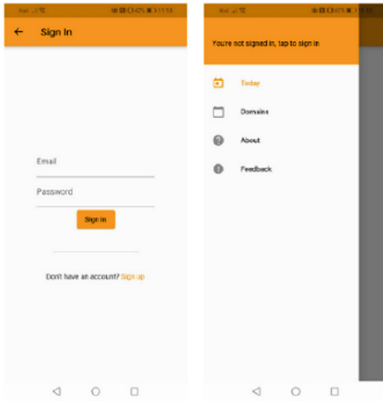


Fig. 3. Sign in page and menu

After agreeing to the programme rules, the users are presented with the Main activity. Main Activity has a bottom navigation bar connecting it to the Theory and *Reflection Questions* sections, as well as a *Profile* page button at the top right corner (Fig. 3).

If they did not download the app at the beginning of the week (on Monday), a notification on this screen will invite the users to come back on Monday or start learning about SEL in the Theory section. The best practice for the users is always to read more about the week's domain in the Theory section on Monday, before doing the first task of the week.

Each day of the week, from Monday to Friday, this page displays a unique SEL activity, related to the week's domain. The daily activity section is divided into three tabs – the first one contains the name, instructions, and goals of the daily task, usually paired with a visual; the second one contains a detailed description of the task that the adult must do alone, and the third one contains a detailed description of the task the adult must complete with a child or children.

To score points, the user must click the completion-confirming buttons in the second and third tabs and answer all three reflection questions.

For the users' convenience, the *Main Activity* also contains a navigation drawer in the top left corner. Here the user finds the rules of the five-week program, a glossary with more complex definitions presented in the content, a section to review already completed tasks, a section to read more about the *PSsmile* project, as well as a form to report a technical problem.

The application is implemented using Android Studio. When users open the application, they are always greeted with a Splash screen – a colorful loading screen containing the project logo. If it is their first time using *PSsmile* application, they are directed to a Welcome page, which invites them to use this innovative social-emotional learning tool.

The first thing the users must do is to register or log in if they already have an account from earlier (Fig. 4). For this aim, they must provide basic information, such as their name or nickname if they are a teacher or a parent, email, and chosen password.

After registration, the users receive an email confirmation letter. The users must open it and validate their email before logging in. After this process is completed, the users can log in using their email and password. Although, it is important to note, that the registration using email and password feature will only be active during the research data collecting period.

3.4 Using the Program

The user is suggested to start using the *PSsmile Mobile App* at the beginning of the week. Every Monday morning the user should read the theory to learn more about the week's domain. In addition, each working day the user should read the first part of the daily

task in the morning. After that, during the day, at any convenient time the adult should mindfully do the personal task, and only after that experience the task with a child or children. It is evident that adult should first learn more about SEL skills and evaluate them on themselves before practice with children.

Weekends are meant for resting or if one wishes – reading more about SEL, repeating activities.

3.5 A Closer Look to the App: Starting the Activities



Fig. 4. Screenshots from day one

When the users start to use the *PSsmile Mobile App*, they will first encounter a description of the first domain – Self-Awareness – and then the first activity titled the Tree of emotions (Fig. 4). With this task, the users start their social and emotional learning journey by improving how to better express emotions verbally.

3.6 Data Collection and Participant Profile

Basic information (name or nickname, gender, and age group) is collected from each participant: Status (parent or teacher), Activities completed, Domain and Final score, Answers to *Reflection Questions* the participant answers after each activity, and Answers to the App Evaluation Questionnaire.

The reflective questions represent an important section for users to self-monitoring their learning across the five domains. They could increase their awareness of domains where they experienced more difficulties or reached higher goals, where they gained more benefits in everyday life. This section also provides useful information on the activities that have an impact on the users, and which ones were disregarded. For the same reason, the tool includes the App Evaluation Questionnaire with the following questions:

The program I participated in was unique and positively different from other experiences I have had.

Information was presented in a straightforward way.

Interacting with the app was simple.

The navigation structure was easy to use.

The application interface was visually appealing.

Do you have any suggestions for the creators?

Respondents are required to provide an answer using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

4 PSsmile App's Modules

The modules developed within PSsmile mobile app are based on the five domains defined within the Methodological Guide developed through the cooperative effort of all project partners. The modules are:

Self-awareness: This refers to the users’ ability to describe their own emotions; to understand why they feel the way they do (Yoder, 2014). This module also aims to develop an accurate understanding of themselves, focusing both on individual strengths and deficiencies, to identify areas that need improvement.

Self-management. This domain often includes meta-cognitive skills, which go from being able to cope with stress and manage emotions to developing positive motivation and a sense of hope and optimism. Self-management skills play a significant role in dramatically reducing the risks of emotional problems, attention deficit, internalizing and externalizing disorders, as well as decreasing the uptake of unhealthy habits (Shanker 2014).

Social Awareness. Within this domain, users will improve their ability to take others’ perspectives into account and they will also increase their empathy, learning how to recognize the emotions of others and manage their own according to the social contexts. Particularly important in this regard is also the ability to recognize and appreciate diversity.

Social Management. Also called “*Relationship Skills*” in the CASEL Framework (CASEL, 2020), it includes the skills useful for establishing and maintaining healthy and supportive relationships. People with important levels of *social management* can navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups by communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, and working in group to solve problems.

Decision Making and Future Goals Setting. Decision making refers to the ability to develop appropriate strategies to solve problems, whether academic, personal, or social. This competence includes strong personal and prosocial dimensions, as people acquiring it need to become more self-reflective and learn how to make decisions based on moral, personal, and ethical standards, recognizing the importance of making responsible decisions that affect themselves and others. As Fig. 5 shows, they represent the overarching component within the “*PSmile Framework*”, as both participate in the development of awareness and management.

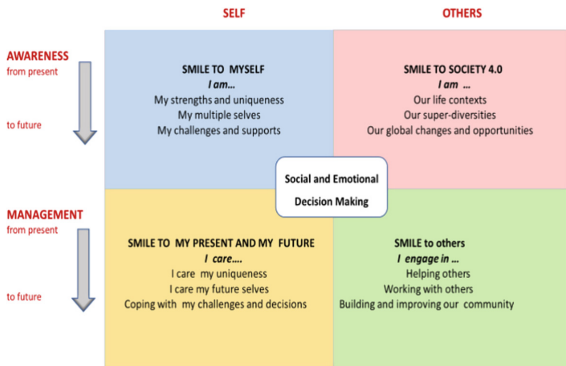


Fig. 5. Visual representation of the domains and the overarching components in PSmile project

Activities are not immediately available to users, but they are unlocked after 24 h. This is expected to promote incremental skills development and to provide learners with enough time to reflect on what they have learned.

Each day is further divided in two sections:

Theory and Tasks. The first provides an overview of the domain’s theme, illustrating to the user the theoretical background of the activities and the skills they will learn. The second, instead, provides the activities of the day. This section is further divided in four other segments (see Fig. 6):

Goal: the objective of the day’s theme and activities.

Personal: an individual task assigned to the user.

Group: an activity to conduct in groups, with both adults and pupils.

Reflection: self-assessment questions, analyzing the successfulness of the activities and helping the users reflect on them.

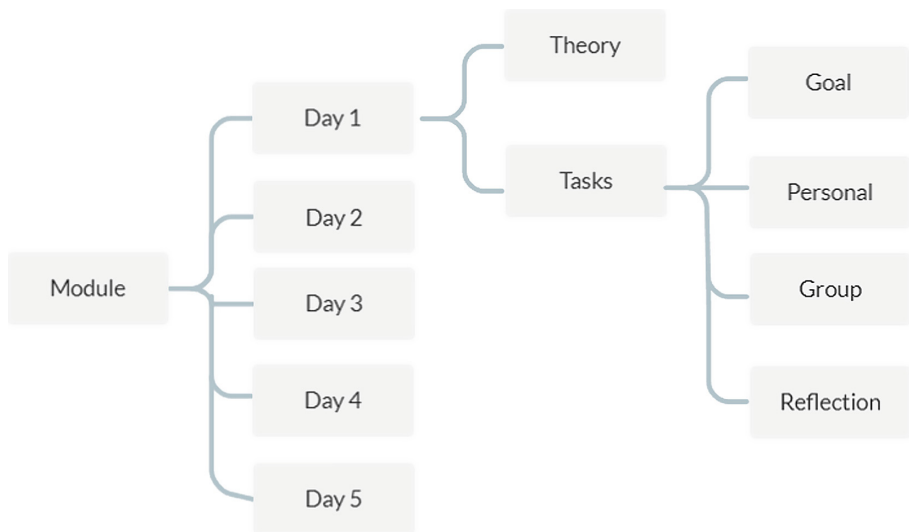


Fig. 6. PSsmile App modules’ general structure

As an example, consider the activities in the PSsmile first module **Self-Awareness**. It is divided into the following five daily activities: *Tree of Emotions*; *My strengths*, *My Uniqueness*; *Strengths Chain*; *Let it Out*; *Snap Future Me!*

Starting from Day 1 of Module 1: “*Tree of Emotions*”, the users begin their journey towards stronger socio-emotional skills by learning new vocabulary on how to better express and understand their own emotions. The self-directed exercise asks them to look at an image of people climbing a tree and describe their feelings. Supported by Plutchik’s “*Wheel of Emotions*” (see Fig. 7), app users will become able to define nuanced emotions and feelings.

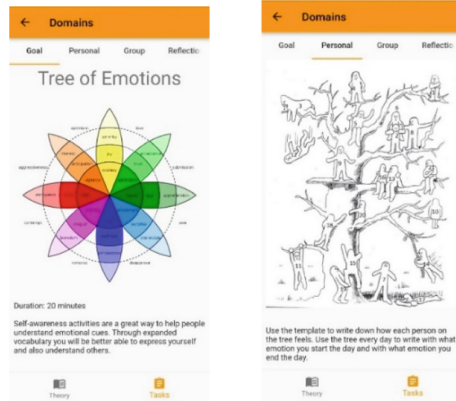


Fig. 7. Day 1 “Tree of Emotions”: Goal and Self-Directed exercise

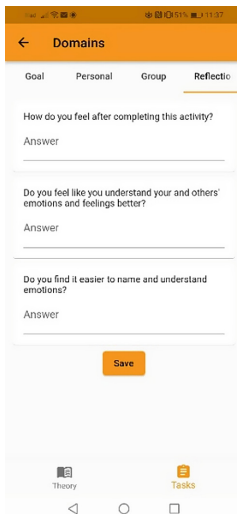


Fig. 8. Day 1 “Tree of Emotions”: Reflection section

After completing the Group task, users are invited to complete the Day activities by moving to the Reflection section and answering some questions. The questions are designed with a double purpose. From one side, they assist users in evaluating the results of the activities, inviting them to reflect on what they have learned. On the other hand, they provide useful feedback to the content designer and app developers, who may monitor the effectiveness of the activities and update the app and its contents where needed. For instance, as shown in Fig. 8, the Reflection section from Module 1, Day 1 (“Tree of Emotions”) proposes the following questions:

- How do you feel after completing this activity?*
- Do you feel you understand your and others’ emotions and feelings better?*
- Do you find it easier to name and understand emotions?*

If the users answer positively to these questions (by stating, for instance, that they find it easier to name and understand emotions), the activities have been successful, the users have improved their socioemotional skills, and the app delivered its purpose.

After answering the questions, users save their progress by clicking on the Save button. The next day, a new day will be available as well as new tasks.

5 PSsmile App in Practice: What to Learn and How to Use It

The app is designed to increase the socio-emotional skills of teachers and parents and, at the same time, help them pass those same skills to their respective pupils and children. +

The strict steps of the app, which requires users to wait one day before proceeding to the subsequent activities, have been implemented with the intention of increasing the

skills of the target groups in a gradual but constant way, giving ample space to reflect on the issues addressed in each day. Whether the user is a parent or a teacher, it is highly recommended to stick to the programme, as the activities have been designed to be conducted one after the other, in a consequential manner.

The app is very flexible, as it could be implemented in different contexts, being that at school, at home or even in other educational centers, where children perform additional educational activities and interact with their peers by playing. The group activities for children should always be performed with the supervision of one or more adults, who can steer the dialogue among children and guide them towards a higher understanding of their and other emotions.

Moving from modules to modules, both adult learners and pupils will acquire the following competences:

Self-awareness. Within this module, all learners will increase their *“ability to recognize their own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.”* At the end of this module, users will be able to:

- Identify personal, cultural, and linguistic assets.
- Identify personal emotions.
- Link feelings, values, and thoughts.
- Examine prejudices and biases.

Self-management. Through this module, users will learn how to regulate their own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. This includes also better stress management, control of impulses, and increased motivation. Specific skills of people with prominent levels of self-awareness include also:

- Positive management of emotions.
- The ability to delay gratification.
- Identification and adoption of stress management strategies.
- Acceptance of difficulties as positive challenges.

Social Awareness. In the third module of the app, learners will increase their ability to understand others' emotions, and improve their empathy, particularly towards those with diverse backgrounds and cultures. Related sub-competencies are:

- Good listening and attention to emotional cues.
- Recognition of others' strengths.
- Reading of key positive relationships and social networks.
- Accurate reading of social situations and external realities.

Social Management. The fourth module focuses on the improvement of relationship skills, improving learners' ability to manage relations with others and the capability of establishing and maintaining healthy and supportive relationships with different individuals and groups. Prominent levels of relationship skills are often associated to:

- The ability to analyze situations and cooperatively find solutions.
- Pro-social behaviors.
- Active citizenship.
- High sociability.

Decision Making and Future Goals Setting. This last module addresses the overarching components of the PSsmile framework, which includes elements of awareness and management. For this reason, they are addressed in all the previous modules, thus helping the learners practice the skills learned in everyday situations. Users are expected to:

- Increase the ability to take responsible decisions for self and others.
- Establish a positive mindset about themselves and their future.
- Set goals and define strategies to achieve them.

6 PSsmile App – Alpha Testing and Pilot Use

At the current stage, the alpha version is already available on the Google Play Store (https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=lt.vrlab.ps_smile), where all project partners and adults in the pilot study had the opportunity to download it and use it. The alpha test involved 2 to 3 staff members from each of the six project partner organizations, which provided qualitative feedback on: The app’s structure; The content; The User Experience (UX) design. Key points characterizing the app emerged.

Concerning the *app’s structure*, all the twelve persons involved in the testing provided positive feedback, claiming that it is coherent with the general project’s goals and the specific goals of the app. The incremental design of the activities was particularly praised, as many participants claimed that it will help users acquire the expected skills quite easily.

Similar opinions were shared regarding the app’s *content*, i.e., the theoretical information and the tasks provided. Members from the project partners’ team particularly appreciated the variety of single and group activities offered in each domain, which were claimed to be very “*creative, clear in their intentions and effective in developing the expected skills.*” Moreover, the use of multiple sources for the tasks, such as stories, videos, and images, was found to increase users’ engagement and was considered “*especially useful for imparting SEL to children.*”

The self-assessment questions available in the “*Reflection*” segment were found to be helpful in expanding the effectiveness of the tasks offered. “*By inviting users to reflect on the exercises carried out, these questions offer them not only the opportunity to evaluate whether the tasks achieved the expected results or not, but they also make them reflect on the goal of the exercises themselves, motivating users to understand SEL process in greater depth.*”

Additionally, specific choices were crucial for the *User Experience (UX) design*:

- *Auditory and visual elements* indicating the completion of the activities. The completion of an activity can be reported by clicking the “*Done*” button collocated at the bottom of each task’s page. Sounds and images appear after pressing the button providing immediate feedback on task completion.

- *Feedback on the task completed.* To motivate users, a screen congratulating them for completing the task was effective.
- *Module-related colors.* Every “*Domains*” menu has a specific color for each domain and the completion of the tasks within each domain is reported with the same color or tick.

7 Conclusions

The significant role that schools, and contexts may play in supporting a whole children’s development, will be ensured with all members of the community receiving the support that they require, first from the closer significant adults in their life, which is from teachers and parents.

Recent actions implemented to improve and evaluate the *PSsmile* app, although involving project partners who may have some favourable bias and specific knowledge, nonetheless provide evidence of its usefulness and show that thanks to the methodology and the principles adopted, the innovative tool developed is ready to be effectively and simultaneously used by parents and teachers while their primary school’ pupils are taking part in the related school curriculum.

A systemic approach involving all members of the educational community can go further to not only support children currently and during future school disruptions, but also all individuals as educators, parents, and responsible adults that take care of their personal and community members’ wellbeing.

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