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DWELL
DIGITAL WELL BEING

DWELL

A holistic approach for the well-being in the broader digital education ecosystem



D2.3: Executive Report with the Findings and Conclusions of Focus Groups with Educators

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Executive Summary

The DWELL project (*Digital well-being: A holistic approach for the well-being in the broader digital education ecosystem*) examines how digital technologies shape well-being in school communities across Europe. This report presents a cross-country synthesis of educator focus groups conducted in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Poland, and Romania as part of WP2 – Research and Analysis. The purpose of the focus groups was to explore how educators perceive the impact of digital technologies on students' well-being across six interconnected domains: emotional well-being, behavioural well-being, mental health, social relationships, physical health, and cognitive functioning.

Across all participating countries, educators conveyed a consistent overall message: digital technologies are now structurally embedded in both school life and students' wider daily routines, and their effects are mixed, context-dependent, and shaped by how technology is used. Technology was not viewed as inherently positive or negative. Rather, educators emphasized that outcomes depend on the balance between purposeful and excessive use, the clarity of pedagogical aims, the presence of adult guidance, and the consistency of school-level structures and rules. Positive effects were most often linked to intentional, selective, and well-regulated use, while negative effects were associated with overuse, fragmentation, overstimulation, weak boundaries, and constant connectivity.

Introduction

This report contributes to the broader aims of the DWELL project by bringing together educators' professional perspectives on digital well-being in schools. The findings reflect diverse national contexts but show strong convergence across systems. Educators described digital technologies as deeply integrated into teaching, assessment, communication, and administration, while also influencing students' emotional states, behavioural routines, social experiences, and cognitive habits beyond school. The report therefore highlights a central challenge for contemporary education: schools are expected to prepare students for a digital world while also protecting concentration, healthy development, and well-being within that same environment.

The cross-country synthesis identifies both shared themes and country-specific emphases. Overall, it suggests that digital well-being should not be treated as a peripheral concern, but as a central condition of educational quality, pedagogical design, and school policy.

Methodology

The report is based on semi-structured qualitative focus groups conducted with educators across the partner countries using a common conceptual and procedural framework. Shared guiding questions ensured comparability, while flexible facilitation allowed participants to discuss local realities and emerging concerns in depth.

Data were collected through a combination of face-to-face, online, and mixed formats and involved participants from a broad range of educational roles, including teachers, principals, psychologists, and educational support staff. Sample sizes and national contexts varied, but the evidence base includes contributions from all participating countries. The analysis was conducted inductively across the six well-being domains, with additional attention to digital competences, SELFIE for TEACHERS insights, and other cross-cutting issues.

As a qualitative study, the findings reflect educators' perceptions and professional experiences rather than direct measurement of student outcomes. The evidence is not statistically representative of all schools or all educators in each country. However, the strong convergence of observations across varied systems and contexts gives credibility to the main cross-country patterns identified.

Cross-Country Insights

A clear cross-country message emerged: digital technologies amplify the conditions in which they are used. When digital use is purposeful, time-bound, and pedagogically justified, it can support participation, access, motivation, and learning. When it is excessive, fragmented, weakly regulated, or poorly aligned with developmental needs, it contributes to distraction, fatigue, stress, emotional instability, and superficial engagement.

Emotional Well-Being

Emotional well-being was one of the most consistently discussed domains and illustrates especially clearly the ambivalent role of digital technology in students' lives, resulting in an overall perceived impact that is mixed. Educators across countries reported that digital tools can support motivation, enjoyment, confidence, and participation when used intentionally. In Bulgaria, educators highlighted interactive tools, digital quizzes, inspirational video materials, and creative digital tasks as increasing

students' curiosity, participation, self-expression, and sense of competence. In Romania, teachers similarly noted that gamification and immediate feedback can boost motivation, particularly for students who are usually hesitant or less active in class. In Finland, some educators observed that certain students perform better in digital formats than in traditional ones, and that allowing choice between digital and pen-and-paper work can support autonomy and emotional security. In Cyprus, educators also stressed that digital technologies can provide enjoyment, relaxation, communication, and a sense of belonging through hobbies and entertainment beyond formal school tasks. At the same time, concerns were described more consistently and in greater depth than the benefits. In Finland, educators linked digital tasks to stress and frustration through technical problems, unclear task purposes, digital submission systems, and uncertainty related to AI, with a particularly notable example concerning arts subjects, where digital submission practices were seen as encouraging perfectionism and pressure rather than confidence. In Poland and Bulgaria, educators described students as increasingly overstimulated, emotionally fragile, irritable, and less able to calm down after prolonged digital exposure, while Polish participants also linked digital environments to dependence on rapid feedback and external validation. In Cyprus, Finland, and Greece, educators referred to anxiety and insecurity generated by online comparison, visibility, and performance pressure. In Poland and Bulgaria especially, teachers noted emotional discomfort, frustration, and tension when devices were removed, suggesting that digital habits are increasingly shaping emotional regulation itself. The Cyprus contextual material reinforced this interpretation by describing children as emotionally absorbed in phone use, pressured by trends, and increasingly irritable after long periods on social media.

Behavioural Well-Being

Behavioural well-being was one of the most visible domains in practice, with an overall perceived impact that is mixed but characterised by predominantly negative patterns. Educators frequently connected digital technology with distraction, compulsive checking, impulsivity, and weak self-regulation, while also acknowledging that structured digital use can support organisation and classroom participation. In Bulgaria and Romania, educators noted that digital tools can support task organisation, homework completion, and predictable routines when use is guided and limited. In Poland, Greece, and Bulgaria, digital tools such as quizzes and gamified activities were seen as effective in generating short-term engagement and classroom participation when clearly linked to learning goals. Finland provided the clearest example of positive behavioural effects under strong structure:

where device use followed predictable and limited routines, students were better able to engage, settle, and adapt to classroom expectations. However, across Poland, Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania, smartphones were described as major behavioural disruptors, with Polish educators in particular referring to students as mentally attached to their devices even when not actively using them. In Bulgaria, educators described impulsive task-switching, impatience, hyperactivity, and a growing preference for simplified, bite-sized content, while Greece reported similar concerns in contexts where attention was already fragile. In several countries, educators stressed that students should not be assumed to regulate digital environments independently, a concern strongly echoed in Cyprus and Greece, where children were described as checking phones constantly, interrupting routines, and struggling to limit screen time without adult support. Finland offered especially strong evidence that reducing device presence through school-wide phone policies improved concentration and classroom calm, with teachers noting that even occasional phone retrieval could disrupt lesson flow. In Poland and elsewhere, inconsistent teacher-by-teacher phone rules were described as conflict-generating and ineffective, whereas behavioural well-being improved where expectations were school-wide and consistently applied.

Mental Health

Mental health emerged as one of the most serious areas in educator reports, with an overall perceived impact that is mainly negative, though potentially protective when balanced. Technology was rarely seen as the sole cause of distress, but it was repeatedly described as an amplifier of anxiety, fatigue, overstimulation, and difficulty disconnecting. In Bulgaria and Romania, some educators noted that clear, purposeful, and achievable digital tasks can support a sense of competence, control, and positive engagement. Across countries, there was also recognition that students may experience satisfaction and agency when digital tools help them pursue interests, understand difficult content, or successfully complete meaningful tasks. A recurrent cross-country message was that mental well-being is best protected not by rejecting technology, but through balance—between digital and non-digital work, stimulation and rest, and connection and disconnection. At the same time, concerns were substantial. Poland was especially explicit in linking excessive screen exposure, gaming, and constant connectivity with fatigue, reduced emotional stability, and broader mental strain. In Bulgaria, educators referred to doomscrolling, gaming addiction, lower tolerance for boredom, and growing inner tension. Across countries, participants described anxiety linked to digital visibility, rapid response culture, and social comparison, while in Finland this was intensified by pressure associated

with digital assessment systems, remote feedback, and school communication platforms such as Wilma. Several reports connected late-night messaging, gaming, and scrolling with tiredness, irritability, and reduced next-day resilience, a pattern strongly reinforced in Cyprus, where children were repeatedly described as arriving at school tired after late-night device use. Teachers across countries also suggested that students increasingly struggle to disconnect because they are expected to remain mentally available across school, home, and peer spaces. In Finland and Poland, uncertainty around AI emerged as an additional mental burden, raising concerns about fairness, authenticity, expectations, and assessment.

Social Relationships

Social relationships were described as one of the most ambivalent domains, with an overall perceived impact that is mixed. Digital tools were recognised as supporting communication and participation, especially for quieter students, but educators also expressed strong concern that mediated interaction may weaken empathy, direct communication, and group cohesion. In Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, educators noted that quieter, more withdrawn, or socially anxious students may find it easier to participate through digital platforms, chats, or collaborative online tasks than through open classroom discussion. Across countries, digital systems were described as helpful for school-related communication, collaborative work, and maintaining peer contact beyond lesson time. In Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, teachers highlighted that students frequently use messaging applications, shared platforms, and video-based tools to exchange materials, communicate, and sometimes study together during homework activities. At the same time, one of the strongest cross-country concerns was the displacement of face-to-face interaction. In Poland, educators described students communicating through screens even when physically together, with similar observations in Bulgaria and Romania where mediated communication was often prioritised over direct interaction in shared spaces. Bulgaria and Poland also referred to weaker live communication, more superficial relationships, reduced vocabulary richness, and poorer interpersonal and public-speaking skills. Finland provided especially strong evidence on cyberbullying, noting that bullying increasingly shifts into social media and messaging spaces and then returns to school as conflict, stress, and additional teacher workload, while Bulgaria and Poland also referred to online shaming, hostility, and digital exclusion. Finnish educators additionally stressed that phone-free breaks, cafeterias, and informal shared spaces are important for real conversation and group cohesion, indicating that device use affects not only classroom interaction but the wider social ecology of school life.

Physical Health

Physical health was one of the clearest negative domains across the evidence base, with an overall perceived impact that is mainly negative. Although some positive examples were mentioned, they were secondary to repeated concerns about bodily strain, sedentary routines, and sleep-related effects. In Bulgaria, educators pointed to movement-break applications, guided exercise videos, and health-related apps as ways technology can potentially support physical well-being, while in Romania, teachers referred to opportunities to integrate digital tools into more active or varied learning routines. The Cyprus material further reinforced the importance of sports and extracurricular activities as necessary counterbalances to sedentary digital time. However, across Poland, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Finland, educators consistently identified eye strain, poor posture, fatigue, and bodily discomfort as visible effects of prolonged screen use. In Poland, teachers referred to declining stamina, posture problems, and reduced physical fitness, while in Bulgaria, chronic tiredness, sedentary behaviour, and eye strain were emphasised. Poland also linked screen-heavy routines to declining physical fitness and possible obesity, while in Cyprus, children were described as increasingly preferring to stay indoors and engage in gaming rather than go outside. Across all countries, sleep disruption emerged as a major cross-cutting mechanism, with late-night device use associated with tiredness, lower resilience, and weaker classroom functioning the following day. At the same time, symptoms such as tired eyes, fatigue, and poor posture are becoming normalised as routine side effects of both school and leisure screen use, which may lead to an underestimation of their broader impact.

Cognitive Functioning

Cognitive functioning generated some of the most nuanced discussion, with an overall perceived impact that is mixed. Educators acknowledged clear gains in access, explanation, interactivity, and creative production, but also raised strong concerns about attention, depth of processing, AI dependence, and weakened independent thinking. In Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, educators noted that digital tools can broaden access to information, help explain difficult concepts, and support research, revision, and project work. Across countries, interactive applications, visual resources, and content-creation tools were described as capable of supporting more active learning. In Finland, some educators observed that certain students perform better digitally than through traditional formats, and that flexibility between formats can support both confidence and cognitive engagement. In

Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, teachers also described students using digital tools for assignments, presentations, research, and increasingly AI-supported preparation for schoolwork. At the same time, shortened attention span and reduced concentration were among the most widespread cognitive concerns. Poland strongly linked short-form content, speed, and constant stimulation to weakening sustained attention, while Greece and Bulgaria reported similar patterns. In Bulgaria and Romania, educators warned that multitasking, overstimulation, and digital reward systems can encourage superficial engagement focused on points, speed, or completion rather than real understanding. Poland and Finland were especially explicit in raising concerns about overreliance on AI and ready-made answers that bypass critical analysis, source verification, and independent reasoning, a point echoed in Cyprus, including the remark that students appear not to "use their brains anymore." In Poland, teachers also referred to the weakening of handwriting, memory, and non-digital problem-solving, while Finland stressed that deeper thinking, writing, and comprehension are often better supported through pen-and-paper methods in some tasks and subjects.

Digital Competences and SELFIE-Related Insights

A major cross-country finding is that there is an important distinction between digital integration and digitally sustainable practice. Educators across countries generally reported confidence in using platforms, resources, and common digital teaching tools. However, they were less confident in addressing the wider pedagogical and well-being implications of digitalization.

The SELFIEforTEACHERS reflections reinforce this pattern. Across countries, educators' competence levels tended to cluster around Integrator (B1) and Expert (B2) levels, showing that many teachers are active users of digital technologies. Yet the evidence also indicates that stronger operational competence does not automatically lead to healthier or more balanced digital environments for students. Weaker areas were often related to assessment, learner empowerment, and digital well-being-sensitive pedagogy.

Another strong pattern was educators' rejection of the assumption that students are naturally digitally competent simply because they use digital technologies frequently. Instead, educators described students as often demonstrating fluency without maturity: confidence in smartphones, social media,

gaming, or AI tools, but weaker capacities in critical evaluation, self-regulation, information management, independent thinking, and ethical digital use.

Overall, the report suggests that digital competence in education must go beyond technical mastery. It must include balanced and pedagogically justified use, media literacy, AI literacy, algorithm awareness, and the ability to design digital learning environments that protect concentration and well-being.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The report concludes that digital technologies are now a permanent part of educational life, but their impact on well-being depends heavily on purpose, balance, structure, and guidance. Across countries, educators described a consistent pattern: positive outcomes are associated with selective and meaningful use, while negative outcomes are linked to excessive, fragmented, and weakly regulated use.

Several cross-cutting conclusions stand out. First, digital intensity and fragmentation affect multiple well-being domains simultaneously, including attention, mood, sleep, behaviour, and social interaction. Second, constant smartphone presence and always-on digital environments make self-regulation harder for students. Third, students' apparent digital fluency often conceals important weaknesses in critical thinking, information evaluation, and responsible AI use. Fourth, teachers' digital competence is generally stronger in operational use than in well-being-oriented pedagogy. Fifth, school-level consistency in rules, routines, and expectations plays a major role in improving digital well-being. Finally, digital well-being is best understood as systemic and relational, involving schools, families, policies, and the broader social context.

The report recommends that schools and policymakers adopt a more holistic and strategic approach to digital well-being. This includes:

- using digital tools in ways that support emotional security, curiosity, and participation without increasing unnecessary pressure
- establishing clear, school-wide expectations around device use, phone policies, and digital routines

- recognising digital well-being as inseparable from mental well-being, including in relation to stress, overload, and sleep
- protecting face-to-face interaction and explicitly teaching respectful digital communication and cyberbullying prevention
- integrating movement, ergonomic awareness, and screen-balance principles into digital learning design
- preserving slower and deeper forms of learning, including handwriting, discussion, reflection, and critical thinking
- strengthening educator professional development in digitally sustainable pedagogy, including AI literacy, assessment design, media literacy, and strategies for protecting concentration
- reinforcing home–school collaboration, since many digital habits affecting school well-being are shaped outside school
- embedding digital well-being into wider policy frameworks, teacher development strategies, and school guidance systems

In overall terms, the report's core message is clear: digital well-being is not an optional addition to digital education. It is a central condition for meaningful, sustainable, and high-quality learning in contemporary schools.

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