Challenges and Opportunities for Social and Emotional Capacity Building: Suggestions for Educational Contexts from PSsmile Erasmus+ Project

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Abstract

Social-Emotional Capacity Building refers to the actions tailored to the construction of "knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" [1]. Recent studies describe the nature and structure of these skills, their development and relevance for a wide range of individual and societal outcomes [2], [3], [4]. There are numerous challenges that children and school have often to face in contemporary Europe and these skills are relevant for learning and psychological wellbeing, especially for children who present with vulnerabilities. Core Social-Emotional competencies can be taught in different ways and settings through explicit and specific instructions, teacher instructional practices, integration with academic curriculum areas, and organizational strategies. But addressing the numerous challenges of children of these times requires innovation in teaching strategies and in technology. With this in mind, the presentation will first of all highlight the contribution in terms of opportunities emerging from research studies and projects conducted in Europe, and from the national reports and transnational analysis carried out by partners of the Erasmus+ Strategical partnership project on Socio-emotional Capacity Building in Primary Education (PSsmile.emundus.eu). Some examples will be then provided of resources, together with technologically supported environments developed (e-learning, e-courses, apps). Strengths and weaknesses in programs available will be shown as well as recent more innovative attempts for developing and testing effective technological supports. Finally, issues, goals and relevance for policy and current school practices will be described.

Keywords: *Social-Emotional competencies, socio-emotional learning, socio-emotional education, emotions development, social-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, responsible decisions.*

1. Introduction

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is defined as: "*the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions*" [2]. It includes five interacting fields:

1. *self-awareness* (the ability to understand one's own emotions, personal goals and values)

2. *self-management* (the ability to regulate affect and calming oneself down)

3. *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)

4. *relationship skills* (the ability to communicate clearly, to negotiate and to seek help, when needed) and the ability to

5. *take responsible decisions*

As several studies have already acknowledged the relevance of socioemotional education for learning and psychological wellbeing of children and adults [4],[5], many countries in Europe, which recognized the numerous challenges that children and schools have to face, already included SEL within their national policies. Nonetheless, present scenario appears fragmented. To shed some light on the opportunities opened by SEL and the current situation in Europe, this study will (i) provide a general

overview of SEL in the context of European research, project and European countries national policies (Portugal, Greece, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Italy), (ii) present resources, as well as technologically supported environments developed, (iii) discuss strengths and weaknesses in programs available, together with innovative attempts for developing and testing effective technological supports, and, finally, (iv) describe issues, goals and the relevance of SEL for policy and current school practices.

2. Socio-emotional Learning and Education in Europe

Several studies have been conducted in the fields of Psychology and Educational Sciences to implement SEL programs in school settings. They mainly focused on Primary and further Basic Education. Also municipalities, NGOs and enterprises are involved in publication and implementation of SEL researches to complement the lack of resources and activities delivered in public schools.

Despite the important contribution of these researches, which often emphasized positive results, some deficiencies can be recognized. First of all, they are quite limited, as they evidence the need for contextual adjustment, choice of adequate assessment and the inclusion of more students. Moreover, they often do not cover the whole range of SEL, since they are mainly focused on emotional competence, leaving aside its social aspect, or vice versa. These deficiencies are reflected in European countries' national policies and European projects, which will be discussed in this section [6].

2.1 National policies

Generally speaking, all countries analyzed in *PSsmile* project developed under Erasmus+ KA201 programme (Portugal, Greece, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Italy) are investing in socio-emotional development. These actions are usually carried out by the national ministries of education or health, and they are developed according to two different perspectives working in synergy. Firstly, socio-emotional development is regarded in terms of health and, secondly, SEL projects and programs are supplemented to take preventive action. Thus, a more health centered model emerges more frequently, instead of following the biopsychosocial model of health suggested internationally [7].

Moving from this consideration, efforts aimed at providing SEL in schools are focused on improvement and acquisition of skills and competences for life. For instance, Portuguese Ministry of Health committed to SEL as a way to improve mental health and reduce risky behaviors in children and young adults. Similarly, Greece is taking actions to promote children psychosocial health to develop school-based preventive measures, while Lithuania is making efforts to apply SEL in order to reduce violence towards and among children, prevent bullying and substance abuse. Differently, in Bulgaria and Italy, SEL measures are connected to inclusive education and SEL skills are included as part of the competences that students should acquire, although they are not formally included in the curricula [6].

Although European countries' interest in SEL can be undoubtedly regarded as positive, there are still many deficiencies. First of all, the situation is too fragmented and it results in the presence of multiple diverse initiatives, hardly transferable in other contexts. As a matter of fact, all the countries analyzed require schools to take action independently and intercept the specific needs of students. This fact produces high heterogeneity. Similarly, although the provision of training is regarded as important, training provided differ in length, depth, formal recognition and content. Finally, all countries designate differently the professionals who are expected to provide socio-emotional education, adding more barrier to the consolidation of a common and comprehensive European vision of SEL.

Moving towards the analysis of European projects, it will be seen that such heterogeneity is recognizable even in their contexts.

2.3 SEL in European projects

Within *PSsmile's* transnational report, particular attention has been devoted to three projects related to SEL:

RESCUR Surfing the waves (www.rescur.eu) developed a curriculum based on resilience for early years and primary schools. It makes use of experiential and participative learning focused on skills development to reach explicit learning goals, i.e. building healthy relationships, developing a growth mindset, self-determination, and others.

EAP_SEL (European Assessment Protocol for children's SEL Skills) (www.eap-sel.eu) undertook a evidence-based education (EBE) approach for the development of a standardized assessment protocol and to offer evaluation guidelines for social and emotional skills in children, in order to provide

high-quality SEL. Main results of the project are (i) a teacher training, (ii) a curriculum containing materials for classrooms and (iii) the integration of ICT in SEL.

***EBE-EUSMOSI* (Evidence Based Education: European Strategic Model for School Inclusion)** (www.inclusive-education.net) combined EBE approach to inclusive education for students with "special educational needs" (SEN). Activities are proposed following 9 criteria aimed at providing implementation of inclusive education. It also designed the PROSEL (Prosociality and Social Emotional Learning) curriculum, which is specifically tailored to fulfill inclusive goals in primary school.

One positive aspect of EU projects is that they provide an opportunity for networking, allowing people and institutions interested in social and emotional development to devise new material, resources, curricula and practices that take into account different cultural contexts. In this way, results are available to a wide public of organizations and individuals.

Nonetheless, current EU projects are still representing the same fragmentation noticed in national policies and practices. As the examples provided above show, socio-emotional development is integrated to reach different goals and, sometimes, it is not adopted in a comprehensive manner. Moreover, recent studies evidence the relevance of adopting a community-based approach, in order to involve significant persons from different contexts of life. Not all projects do so, as often parents and families are sometimes neglected. To provide a more effective and comprehensive SEL, training should be imparted also to parents and educators. In addition, attention is mostly drawn on developing knowledge about programs and curricula, leaving limited consideration to the building of socio-emotional skills in teachers and educators themselves. Since their influence on children's life is considerable, this aspect should not be neglected. Finally, as the complexities of these times threaten wellbeing, SEL should focus also on everyday situations. However, all the curricula and activities described are still strongly based on management of current life and do not pay attention to future.

3. Suggestions for further steps

Despite its drawbacks, the situation is rapidly changing, as many countries already recognize the relevance of socio-emotional education (SEE) for their educational system and their countries in general. Institutions are aware and committed in support of socio-emotional education. Moreover, different projects already provide relevant material and resources for the implementation of SEE in different contexts.

However, to further improve results of current efforts, some actions need to be taken:

- Focus should be on both Social and Emotional skills, with a similar emphasis;
- Focus should not only be on awareness development, but also on management of everyday situations;
- Specific attentions should be devoted to diversities, vulnerabilities and learning difficulties;
- Practices should be updated to recent theoretical approaches;
- Innovative methodologies should be devised, paying particular attention to flexible and personalized use;
- Socio-emotional skills should also be taught to teachers and parents;

4. Conclusions

As SEL start receiving more attention and more efforts are made to its implementation in schools, its benefit will soon spread. Among its short term and more immediate benefits SEL will provide:

- Improved interactions and relationships in the classroom;
- An increased ability to manage conflictual interactions and decision making;
- Better attitudes about themselves, others, and school [8]

In the long term, SEE would help students become proactive and confident citizens who know how to set their personal goals and how to achieve them, playing a relevant impact on personal success. Looking from a wider perspective, social and emotional skills will help flourish societies and nations, favoring understanding, empathy, compassion, but also problem solving and critical thinking skills. As a matter of fact, a UNESCO report presented socio-emotional skills as essential to the attainment of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In their own words, Socio Emotional capacity building is directed "*towards building emotionally resilient individuals who are able to navigate the complex*

landscape of conflicting goals and dissonance to one of prosocial behavior that promotes human flourishing and the attainment of the SDGs" [9]. Thus, by understanding the considerably important role of SEE, this study aimed to highlight current scenario in Europe and provide important suggestions for its further development. More detailed information and further outcomes could be found at pssmile.emundus.eu.

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