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The need for a more systematic approach to promoting mental wellbeing among children in schools.

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This policy brief summarises some of the preliminary findings and lessons learned from the EU H2020 project BOOST, more precisely from its formative research conducted in 2018. While the findings show that social and emotional wellbeing and learning is addressed by educational policies, there is a lack of consistency in policy formulation and implementation across policy levels, leading to insufficient resources and capacities to integrate and deliver high quality Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programmes in schools, in a sustainable way.



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Introduction

Mental wellbeing is essential to children and young people's health and wellbeing. Not ensuring mental health promotion early on can place great burden on the individual and society. Social and emotional skills are an important part of mental health promotion and many school-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programmes providing these skills have proven effective in increasing social wellbeing and academic achievement in children. However, several shortcomings have been identified in using these programmes, which may compromise their sustainability and long-term effect. One criticism is that they are time consuming and compromise academic teaching time. Furthermore, they are often implemented by outside experts, and as such are not integrated into general teaching or at all levels of school organization. Therefore, it is important to promote or develop preventive interventions that address these shortcomings and can create resilience with long lasting effects.

Relevance of promoting SEL for SDGs and EU policies

Since SEL skills have an impact on wellbeing and academic achievement, they are important for achieving many of the sustainable development goals. SEL skills can directly contribute to creating resilience and preventing the ever-increasing burden of mental health problems (SDG 3), as well as providing inclusive learning environments (SDG 4). In turn, this contribution will indirectly promote youth in education and employment (SDG 8) and the social and economic prosperity of communities (SDG 10). In other words, wellbeing is essential to sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda.

Well-being of people and children is also one of the main provisions of the Treaties of the European Union and recognised in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. In addition, EU's adoption in 2019 of OECD's framework for "the Economy of Well-being" is a further acknowledgement of the importance and interrelationship of well-being with the prosperity of countries. One cannot have prosperity without well-being.

Therefore, in its recommendations on key competences for lifelong learning (2018), the EU has acknowledged "Personal, social and learning to learn competence" (LifEComp) as being one of eight key competences. Besides learning to learn, LifEComp also has other learning goals including being able to reflect upon oneself work with others

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programmes work with promoting five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible

in a constructive way and remain resilient. This includes the "ability to cope with uncertainty and complexity, support one's physical and emotional wellbeing, maintain physical and mental health, and be able to lead a health-conscious, future-oriented life." (European Council, 2018)

These policies and competence goals all reflect the importance of promoting SEL in children's everyday life.

The BOOST project (2018-2021), a research and innovation project funded by the European Commission's H2020 framework program, is developing, implementing and testing a whole-school approach to promote SEL in schools. This approach targets school staff's social and emotional skills development, as well as service delivery and organizational development in schools. The overall aim is to promote SEL competence, and thus mental health and well-being in school children.

The BOOST approach will be tested in mainstream school environments by regular school staff in three diverse European contexts in Norway, Spain and Poland.

Preliminary findings from the Formative research

During 2018, the BOOST project undertook a Formative study in Norway, Poland and Spain, consisting of a literature review, a review of national, regional and local policies, as well as a series of focus group interviews and in-depth interviews among school personnel, children, and their parents.

The overall aim of the formative research was to provide research-based knowledge to inform the development of the BOOST approach.

The literature review confirmed that effective SEL strategies targeting children lead to increased wellbeing (short and long-term), increased academic achievement (short and long-term), and increased success in the labour market (long-term).

It also reaffirmed previous knowledge that SEL activities are usually implemented by outside experts and not sufficiently integrated into general teaching activities.

Furthermore, the literature review confirmed that SEL programs do not work if there is insufficient dosage and duration, if there is a sole focus on classrooms and if there is limited staff training, coaching and mentoring.

Finally, other findings from the Formative study revealed that there are gaps between policies at national, regional, local and school level which have implications for prioritizing working with SEL at school level.

Although school systems in the three countries differ in terms of which level of governance has what responsibility, it is clear that policies on SEL are not consistently formulated and applied across levels.

Recognition of SEL in policies

Findings from the policy reviews from the three countries showed that at national level in national laws there is a recognition of the importance of children's social and emotional development and competency, or of a good psychosocial environment in school. These policies also assume that schools will somehow address the development of social and emotional competencies in children and include them in the daily teaching processes and learning. In addition, the policies in all three countries emphasize the importance of the development of teachers' competencies in achieving this type of competency in children and desired environment in schools.

The formative study further revealed that schools find it important that national and regional policies are in place to ensure that implementation of policies at local level and in schools occur and to ensure that social and emotional learning is being actively worked with in schools.

Lack of clear set of goals in policies in working with SEL

The degree of implementation of national policies and how effectively primary schools in the three countries work with social and emotional development of children is dependent on the emphasis placed by these policies at national, regional and local school level. However, national policies lack a clear set of goals and mandatory plans on how school owners, school management and school

staff should work with SEL. As a result, there is a lack of policy development from school owners on obligations and expectations as well as lack of quality indicators with regards to working with SEL in schools. This gap in policies also seems to have an impact on how systematically schools are working daily with SEL.

However, over the past three years Norway has been working actively to remedy this, through the development of a new Core Curriculum, which emphasize SEL. Norwegian schools are implementing the new Core Curriculum in the autumn of 2020. Thus, there are no results yet concerning the implementation process in school, and the potential gains from the new curriculum.

Finally, interviews with principals and teachers, also revealed that they believe that SEL must be more integrated into teacher's education. This will not be addressed extensively in this policy review, as it is outside the main scope of the BOOST project.

Emphasis on academic achievement

One dilemma experienced by schools in all countries in working with SEL is that schools are being measured primarily on academic achievement. The national laws and national curricula emphasize working with SEL, but in reality, focus is placed on learning of highly structured, cognitively focused material. It seems that the obligations and expectations of schools to work systematically with academic competences are more important than the expectations and obligations to work systematically with SEL. Working with SEL need to be acknowledged as a basic component for academic achievement.

Recognition of importance of SEL at local level

The qualitative study also highlighted that school management, teachers, parents and students actually recognise that social and emotional development is highly important and should be included in the practice of schools. Therefore, schools need more focus on developing SEL skills, and school staff need competency in SEL skills in order to teach children SEL skills. However, although teachers provide SEL on a daily basis, they have not received much instruction on how to do this in a structured and systemic fashion.

In summary, educational policies in all three countries support students' social-emotional competence

development and is an integral part of the educational work of schools and teachers. However, how this competence is to be achieved is left to local authorities, school leaders and in some cases to the individual teachers.

Recommendations

Based on the preliminary findings of the formative study, the following 13 recommendations can be followed to achieve more systematic work with SEL and SEL policies across political levels.

Recommendation 1: **Work with policies needs to be done systematically at all policy levels.**

First of all, there is a need to put more effort in systematically working with SEL at European, national, regional and local levels. This is to ensure that policies on SEL align across the relevant levels of government, enabling schools to deliver good quality, sustainable SEL programmes. Political awareness and expectations concerning how schools can and should systematically work with SEL should be high up on the political agenda if countries want to achieve an economy of wellbeing.

NATIONAL LEVEL

Recommendation 2: **There is a need for a set of obligatory goals and plans with measurable indicators in national policies.**

Notwithstanding the recent policy changes in Norway, there is a general need for a set of obligatory goals and plans with measurable indicators in national policies.

At national level, policies should include a set of goals and mandatory plans so that school owners and school staff feel obligated to work actively with SEL. Having a mandatory plan with measurable indicators or checks, can make implementation goals verifiable even though implementation itself might be done differently at school level or if schools use different tools.

Recommendation 3: **SEL skills should be incorporated in teacher's education programmes and prioritised equally with other core learning skills required in teacher's education programmes.**

SEL skills should also be incorporated in teacher's education on equal footing with other core competencies like language, mathematics, science and third languages. These skills should be developed throughout the careers of teachers and include other school personnel as well, as part of their life-long learning.

Good relationships to children are key to facilitating work with other competences and subjects in school. Working with SEL helps ensure good relationships which will in turn increase school achievement for children. Newly educated teachers experience that the lack of SEL skills are a problem when they start to work in school. They say they lack knowledge and tools on how to handle real life situations in school. The lack of these skills can explain why some teachers give up teaching early on in their careers.

Recommendation 4: **EU countries should find inspiration in EUs 8 key competences for life-long learning.**

European countries should draw inspiration from the EUs new 8 key competences for life-long learning, which places as much importance on personal and social learning development as other skills like languages, science, citizenship, entrepreneurship, and digital skills. This sends a signal that these are competencies which are important to both children and adults and necessary to achieve an economy based on other indicators than GDP.

REGIONAL AND SCHOOL OWNER LEVEL

Recommendation 5: **School owners must ensure that there is continuity and agreement between their SEL policies and the SEL policies in school.**

School owners must also work with SEL in a more systematic way. School owners must take responsibility to ensure that a common thread runs from their policies to what school management and school staff are doing locally in order to avoid SEL work from being an individual decision left up to individual school staff.

Recommendation 6:
School owner policies must also develop clear plans and measurable indicators.

School owners must develop robust SEL policies to ensure that schools work systematically with SEL as well. Just like with national policies, policies affecting schools should also come with mandatory plans and measurable indicators.

Recommendation 7:
School owners must ensure that policies on action and quality regarding working with SEL are being developed in schools.

School owners must mandate their schools to develop policies where quality and action regarding work with SEL in their schools are encouraged and are in line with school owner policies.

Recommendation 8:
School owners should put into place non-bureaucratic systems for reporting on defined goals.

Furthermore, school owners must have systems for reporting the clearly defined goals. The reporting must be easy to follow up and not be bureaucratic or burdensome to the already administratively burdened schools.

Recommendation 9:
School owners must ensure that there are available resources for working with SEL at school level.

Finally, school owners must make resources available which schools can use to follow up this type of work in their schools.

SCHOOL LEVEL

Recommendation 10:
SEL must be included in all school strategies and policies.

At school level, SEL should be included in school strategies and policies. School leaders should have the responsibility to ensure that teachers practice and develop their SEL skills to work effectively with SEL in school. On the one hand, there must be clear expectations to school personnel about working with SEL and about capacity building, on the other hand, school staff need knowledge and support to work with SEL.

Teachers must be given the knowledge as well as acknowledge that teaching provides the same opportunities for developing SEL competencies as any other interpersonal processes. Therefore, working with SEL is part of academic teaching and not separate from academic teaching. Development of SEL competencies must happen during every inter-personal encounter in various situational contexts.

Recommendation 11:
School strategies must include time for capacity building of school staff.

At school level, strategies must also ensure that teachers have time for capacity building and individual SEL practice.

Recommendation 12:
School strategies must emphasize preventive and promotive SEL work.

In addition, school strategies should work with SEL in a preventive and promotive manner. Many current strategies work on SEL issues once it has become a problem.

Recommendation 13:
School strategies should be based on previous strategies which have been shown to work.

Finally, strategies which schools use to work with SEL at school level should take into account previous research and knowledge on what works:

A whole school approach is important to build a SEL mindset and culture in a school. It is also important that work with SEL not be left to a few individuals in school. The school staff need time and arenas together for discussion and learning regarding SEL. Furthermore, it is necessary to create a collective responsibility to achieve the individual effect of SEL in the classroom. It is also important to build SEL expertise from within schools and not be reliant on outside expertise.

This research shows that school staff do not want to be overburdened with time consuming programmes. They want concrete tools for working with SEL.

Strategies should coordinate with partners outside of schools, including parents.

Conclusion

The BOOST project is currently developing an approach which aims to build SEL capacity of school staff and providing schools with a model for service delivery to ensure a whole-school-approach. The service delivery model can be used to implement SEL at school level, according to the needs and resources of the school. The approach is being developed to be as flexible as possible to work preventively, taking into consideration capacity building and previous research. We hope that the results of the implementation of the approach in our test schools will confirm that the BOOST approach is a good way of working with SEL in schools.

However, creating an approach for schools to use is not enough if necessary policies are not in place. With the recommendations listed above we hope to draw attention to the need for policy implementation at all levels in order to promote SEL at school level.

To read more about the BOOST project, go to: www.boostproject.eu



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