



Strengthening Social and Emotional Education as a core curricular area across the EU

A review of the international evidence

Executive Summary



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CASEL Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (US)

ENSEC European Network for Social and Emotional Competence

EU European Union

MS Member states

OECD Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

PSCD Personal, social and careers education (Malta)

PSHE Personal, social and health education (UK)

RCT Randomized control trial

SAFE Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit (pedagogical approach to SEE)

SEAL Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (UK)

SEE Social and emotional education

SEL Social and emotional learning

SPHE Social, personal and health education (Ireland)

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

WHO World Health Organisation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many children and young people in contemporary Europe are unfortunately coming to school carrying heavy social and emotional burdens, which are, of course, unfavourable to their learning and psychological wellbeing. Amongst the many challenges they may face that affect their education are: poverty and social inequality, bullying and cyberbullying, family conflict, consumerism, media exploitation and technological addiction, academic pressure and stress, loneliness and social isolation, migration, human trafficking, mobility, and changing family and community structures.

Policymakers and educators across the world are increasingly coalescing around a specific approach to address these many challenges, namely, social and emotional education (SEE). SEE is intended for children to develop competences in both self-awareness and self-management, and to raise social awareness and improve the quality of their relationships. These competences combine to enhance their ability to understand themselves and others, to express and regulate their emotions, to develop healthy and caring relationships, to empathise and collaborate with others, to resolve conflict constructively, to enable them to make good, responsible and ethical decisions, and to overcome difficulties in social and academic tasks. Social and emotional education is something that can be offered by schools to all children, including those affected by the additional challenges arising from various forms of disadvantage.

There is mounting evidence that social and emotional education is also related to positive academic attitudes and higher academic achievement, to increased prosocial behaviour, and to a decrease in anti-social behaviour, anxiety, depression and suicide. More broadly, it contributes to harmonious relationships, to social cohesion and inclusion in communities, to positive attitudes towards individual and cultural diversity, and to equity and social justice.

In light of this, the objective of this report is to make recommendations — on the basis of international research, EU policy, and current practices in Member States — for the integration of social and emotional education as a core component of curricula across the EU. More specifically, the report seeks to:

- Define and identify the key competences within social and emotional education;
- Review the literature to assess the effectiveness of SEE across the school years and to identify key conditions for its effective integration into curricula;
- Discuss how the universal provision of SEE may accommodate children and young people from different socio-economic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds;
- Explore how SEE is integrated into the school curricula of Member States, and to identify examples of existing good practice from several countries;
- Make recommendations at EU, national and school levels, for the effective, sustainable and feasible inclusion of SEE as a core feature of regular school curricula across the EU.

Key findings

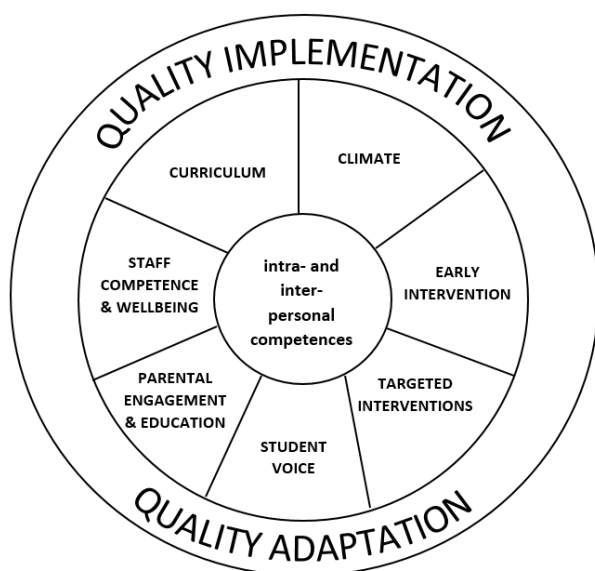
There is clear and consistent evidence on the positive impact of social and emotional education on social, emotional and cognitive outcomes. We draw this conclusion based on a comprehensive review of international research, including an in-depth analysis of thirteen major reviews of studies and meta-analyses. Evidence was also gathered from numerous additional reviews, studies, and research reports, amongst them several from Europe. Specifically, the findings are that:

- SEE is related to increased social and emotional competence, positive attitudes, prosocial behaviour, and mental health;
- SEE is related to reduced mental health difficulties in children and young people, such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and antisocial behaviour;
- SEE has a positive impact on academic attitudes and achievement, which in turn significantly increases academic performance, and which serves as a meta-ability for academic learning;
- These positive impacts have been reported across the school years from early years through to high school, and across a range of geographical settings, cultural contexts, socio-economic backgrounds, and different ethnic groups;
- These impacts persist over time, and positive outcomes have been observed during follow-up studies undertaken six months to three years after initial interventions, and longitudinal studies have indicated various positive outcomes in important areas of adulthood, such as enhanced education, employment and mental health, as well as in reductions of criminal activity and substance abuse;
- Social and emotional programmes that are universally offered to all school children have an aggregate positive impact on children, including at-risk children from ethnic and cultural minorities, from deprived socio-economic backgrounds, and those that are experiencing social, emotional and mental health difficulties. Such programmes therefore serve as a protective factor for such children, help to reduce socio-economic inequality, and promote equity, social inclusion and social justice;
- SEE is most effective when started as early as possible, from early childhood education;
- SEE facilitates both school education and lifelong learning, and contributes to lifetime success;
- SEE offers strong economic and financial returns on investment, with various studies showing that costs have been measurably exceeded by benefits, often by a considerable amount; some studies report an average cost-benefit ratio of about 11 to 1;
- SEE is also beneficial for school teachers, raising their skills, confidence and satisfaction.

Conditions for effective social and emotional education

From the literature analysis, this report subsequently develops a framework for the integration of social and emotional education as a key curricular area across the EU. The framework proposes that curricula be balanced between intra- and inter-personal competences with regular instruction in SEE skills, and supported by cross-curricular activities, the classroom climate, and a whole-school approach (Figure 1).

Figure 1. SEE implementation framework



Source: Developed by the authors from the literature analysis.

The proposed framework includes eight key components.

- 1) **Curriculum:** Social and emotional competences can be developed directly by children and young people through competence-based experiential learning, if goals are well-defined and allotted a sufficient amount of focused time in the curriculum. SEE competences should also be embedded in the other content areas of the curriculum (transversal, cross-curricular area). Teachers need to be adequately trained and supported in delivering the SEE curriculum at curricular and cross-curricular levels.
- 2) **Climate:** Social and emotional education in the curriculum needs to be accompanied by a positive classroom and whole-school climate; that, is, the active participation of the entire school community.
- 3) **Early intervention:** Social and emotional education is most effective when started as early as possible, from early childhood education. SEE in the early school years is related to important outcomes in adolescence and adulthood.
- 4) **Targeted interventions:** Social and emotional education needs to be accompanied by targeted interventions for students at risk or in difficulty, particularly those with chronic and complex

problems. This includes policies and practices for behaviour, bullying and diversity. A whole-school policy will also include both universal and targeted SEE interventions.

- 5) **Student voices:** Students need to participate actively in the planning, implementation and evaluation of initiatives, including the design, development and assessment of the curriculum and resources.
- 6) **Teachers' competence and own wellbeing:** The social and emotional competence, health and wellbeing of teachers and other members of staff is a key area of social and emotional education taken as a whole-school approach.
- 7) **Parental collaboration:** Parents' active collaboration and education, facilitated through an empowering, bottom-up approach, is crucial for the success of social and emotional education.
- 8) **Quality implementation and adaptation:** Adequate and continuous teacher education at pre-service and in-service levels, good planning, and provision of financial and human and resources, are necessary conditions for the effective implementation of social and emotional education. Social and educational programmes must also be sensitive and responsive to the particularities of schools' cultures and students' needs and interests; this includes linguistic, cultural, social and other areas of diversity. In other words, SEE programmes and interventions developed in other cultures and countries need to be adapted to the needs of the context where they are being implemented. Quality adaptation, however, needs to find a balance between preserving the integrity of the intervention and making it responsive to the needs of the fresh context.

Key implications and recommendations

A review of the current state of social and emotional education in Member States shows that, while they often acknowledge and recognize the importance of social and emotional education, there are considerable differences in the level of policies, curriculum frameworks and programmes available to help schools and students to develop SEE competences. Furthermore, although there are numerous instances of good practice, there does not seem to be, as of yet, a sufficient common focus on SEE as a core curricular area. While other related areas — such as citizenship, health education, and prevention of violence and bullying — overlap with some of the goals of SEE, SEE should have its own distinct place within curricula. This requires a focus on both intra- and interpersonal competences, and it must be granted sufficient time for effective delivery. The international research evidence strongly supports the benefits of SEE in social, emotional and academic outcomes; this justifies the acceleration of SEE policy as a priority across Member States and at EU level. SEE should become a core aspect of curricula across Europe, with adequate and sufficient resources, given the amount of training and time that prioritizing it would dictate.

The following list contains the main conclusions and recommendations of this report.

For policymakers at EU level:

- Social and emotional education should be recognised as a core curricular area in the education of children and young people, and as one of the major constituents of quality education in Europe. It should accordingly be included as a distinct key area in the EU Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning.
- The proposed framework for a whole-school approach to SEE should be considered throughout the EU as a roadmap for Member States to promote quality social and emotional education.
- More pilot projects need to be established, with the support of the European Commission and Member States, to develop culturally sensitive SEE materials through cooperative projects across the EU. Sharing good practice, particularly in view of the diversity of approaches and perspectives found amongst Member States, would also serve to enrich SEE and make it more meaningful in the European context. Further EU initiatives to encourage collaboration and sharing of good practice amongst Member States through publications, research and networking, is strongly recommended.
- Funding should be provided for research projects, evaluations and analytical reports on SEE in the EU, including a meta-analysis of SEE evaluation studies which include documents in all EU languages.

For policymakers in Member States:

- Universal social and emotional education should become a mandatory content area in the curriculum frameworks of all Member States. National SEE quality standards should form a part of each Member States' curriculum, detailed in clear policies and provisions, and contain mechanisms to coordinate and guide quality implementation at regional and national levels. Social and emotional education should feature both as a key learning area of curricula and as a transversal cross-curricular theme, as a taught and embedded content area. Formative assessment should be the assessment of choice for SEE, avoiding competitive examinations and rankings of students, schools or countries. Provisions should be made for an increased amount of time to dedicate to SEE in the curricula of most Member States, so as to ensure sufficient coverage and adequate mastery in line with the proposed revision of the Key Competences Framework.
- Member States should thus examine their education objectives, curricular frameworks and learning outcomes to see whether their current policies and practices currently target a comprehensive set of social and emotional competences, such as those specified in this report, and to accordingly make appropriate revisions.
- Teacher education programmes across Member States should include competence frameworks that outline the key teacher competences necessary for the effective delivery of SEE in schools. Such competences should also include the development of teachers' own social and emotional competences.

- Social and emotional education needs to be anchored in policies across different sectors, particularly education, health and social services, to ensure integrated support and to address the socio-economic determinants of children and young people's health and wellbeing.
- Member States should provide adequate funding for the inclusion of social and emotional education into national policies and curriculum frameworks, and for providing the required resources, education, training, monitoring and evaluation; adequate funding is crucial for the feasibility and sustainability of SEE.
- Proactive dissemination of the evidence about, and best practices in, SEE, is necessary to ensure its implementation. Networks within and across Member States should be formed to raise awareness and to communicate the value and benefits of SEE to policymakers, educationalists and the global community.

For schools:

- The mission statements and objectives of schools should include a whole-school approach to social and emotional education. School policies should be clear on how they intend to promote and implement SEE policy at instructional, contextual and organisational levels.
- Schools should conduct a needs analysis to ensure that their curriculum matches the needs of their school community — including linguistic, cultural, social and other areas of diversity. Schools should also make the adaptations necessary to meet the established national standards for SEE. Schools could smooth the implementation process by integrating existing good practices in SEE when they introduce new initiatives.
- All key stakeholders, including students, parents and teachers, need to be actively involved in the curricular design, delivery and evaluation of SEE initiatives at each school. Student voices should permeate all aspects of the planning and implementation process.
- Schools need to provide adequate and continued financial and human resources for effective delivery at curricular and contextual levels.
- Schools need to have mechanisms in place for effective planning, delivery and quality assurance, and to provide support, guidance and monitoring to all school staff.
- Teachers' professional development, mentoring, social and emotional competence, and social and emotional wellbeing, are all crucial for the successful implementation and effectiveness of SEE. The professional development of school leaders is important, to ensure they will be able to inspire, guide and support their staff in the effective delivery of SEE in their school.
- Schools need to make provisions for the adequate support for students at moderate risk or with chronic and complex social and emotional needs. This is in line with the whole-school approach to social and emotional education, which includes additional external support.

These recommendations are more likely to work if they are accompanied by parallel interventions to break down barriers and create structures and systems which promote mental health and wellbeing,

equal opportunities, and social justice. Placing the burden of responsibility on the ‘victims’ of poverty and exclusion to overcome disparity, without addressing the structural sources of poverty and exclusion and putting in place adequate social structures and systems, would be antithetical to the very essence of social and emotional education. Furthermore, the policy goals of SEE need to ensure that it avoids potential pitfalls, such as being used as an instrument of social control and conformity; it needs to be child-centred, recognizing individual differences, while avoiding pathologising children and young people.

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