

Australia

Country Overview

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Country name

Australia

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Introduction

Australia is a diverse landscape from geography to administratively concerning early childhood education and care (ECEC). Still, there are several examples of national initiatives regarding social and emotional learning (SEL). Several programmes are available, as well as nationwide assessments conducted that are relevant to early learning and SEL.

Development

In Australia, early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a shared responsibility between the federal government and corresponding administration on a state or territorial level. However, it has been found that this administrative and geographic diversity could affect the availability of SEL initiatives (Bowles et al., 2017). With this discovery in mind, in 2012, a new common quality standard called the National Quality Framework (NQF) was established. To support preschool curricula, NQF uses approved learning frameworks such as the default option for children from 0 to 5 years of age, which is *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. This framework prominently features wellbeing, and social and emotional skills as outcomes (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2010).

There are many SEL initiatives, such as frameworks, programmes and assessments, available in Australia. Though SEL is publically encouraged, the drivers of development are not always clear. There are several likely paths for SEL initiatives to come to fruition. For instance, a programme called *Animal fun* was first developed by a team at Curtin University, with later evaluation and development being funded by Healthway (a government health promotion agency for Western Australia) and the Mental Health Commission of Western Australia. Now, the licence has been transferred from Curtin University to one of the authors of the programme (*Animal Fun*, n.d.). Regarding multiple organisations developing or promoting SEL and mental health initiatives, there is also *Be You*, a national mental health in education initiative, which was created by the organisation *Beyond Blue* under appointment of the Australian Government. In addition, *Beyond Blue* has contracted *Early Childhood Australia* and *headspace* as service providers for *Be You* (*Be You*, n.d.a).

As Australia has a large population of native English speakers, programmes developed in the USA and UK could also be made available through public or private stakeholders. An example of this is *Second Step*, a programme based in the USA, that is now being licensed to an Australian/New Zealand publisher (*Positive Pieces Education*, n.d.).

Assessment

The overall assessment of ECEC providers lies under regional responsibility (state or territory regulatory authority), though it is supported by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) and the NQF. The NQF provides an assessment and rating process along with the National Quality Standard (NQS), which outlines 7 quality areas (ACECQA, 2020). Though not an extensive focus, there are still aspects of SEL being assessed, such as Standard 5.2: Relationships between children, which is further divided into elements of collaborative learning and self-regulation (ACECQA, 2020).

Early development is also assessed on an aggregated level in Australia using the Early Development Instrument that was first developed in Canada. The instrument uses teacher ratings and includes assessments of variables relevant for SEL such as social competence, emotional maturity along with communication skills. The assessment takes place every three years. The programme as a whole is called the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and is a government initiative (Australian Early Development Census, 2019). Data from AEDC is also used in research, such as the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (Growing up in Australia, n.d.).

Another form of assessment that is available for practitioners and researchers in Australia is the Early Years Toolbox; a collection of early childhood measures packaged in an application designed for use with a tablet. The application offers several assessment measures, including the Child Self-Regulation and Behaviour Questionnaire (CSBQ) for measuring self-regulation and social development, using Australian norms (Howard & Melhuish, 2017).

Intervention

A wide range of SEL programmes are available in Australia, though recommendations have been made to support the use of efficient and effective evidence-based programs in practice (Bowles et al., 2017; Laurens et al., 2021). One initiative that aims for progress in this area is the previously mentioned Be You, which also contains a programme directory. This programme directory has surveyed many of the programmes available in Australia. Although the common denominator is mental health and wellbeing in education, these kinds of programmes often overlap with SEL. These programmes are searchable, summarised and provided with a rating of evidence and implementation, such as available support and acceptability of the program (Be You, n.d.b). Note that this programme directory doesn't necessarily contain all relevant programmes available in Australia.

Since Australia has a large proportion of native English speakers, there are many options in importing existing SEL programs without the need of translation (one previously mentioned example being Second Step), although cultural adaptations may still be necessary. There are also programmes being developed and evaluated directly in Australia. One previously mentioned example is Animal Fun, a universal program consisting of modules where children train movements based on animals, with the last module focusing on social and emotional skills, such as promoting laughter, relaxing, identifying and labelling feelings (Piek et al., 2015).

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