

Belgium

Country Overview

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Country name

Belgium

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Introduction

The development of practices for promoting early childhood social and emotional skills (SES) development is organised at a regional level in Belgium, as the communities (Flemish, French and German speaking) are in charge of education and welfare. Belgium has a split system for the organisation of early child education and care. This country overview is describing the situation in the Flemish community.

For childcare provisions for children under 2.5 years of age, a pedagogical framework for childcare for babies and toddlers, came into force in 2014. One of the main goals of the framework is to ensure the well-being of the child, (Laevers, et al., 2015).

Four areas of experience are defined to offer each child integrated development opportunities (Kind & Gezin, 2019). These areas of experience integrate social-emotional learning competences like self-confidence, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills and social awareness.

For pre-primary education, the Flemish government defined broad developmental objectives, in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes. The goals related to social and emotional learning are situated in the learning area "human and society", which include self-awareness, social skills, society, time and special orientation (onderwijsdoelen.be). Very specific for working on social and emotional skills with young children in the educational system in Belgium is that the pursuit of objectives in this area always takes place in an integrated and implicit manner. Social skills are applied and practised in (simulated) realistic settings. Teachers practise a basic attitude that is centred around observation and responding to the needs of children. For the specific assessment of SES, ECEC services select tools or measurements they find most suited for this topic. The Leuven Scale for Well-Being and the Leuven Scale for Involvement are instruments commonly used in this respect.

Development

The development of practices for promoting early childhood social and emotional skills development is organised at a regional level in Belgium, as the communities (Flemish, French and German speaking) are in charge of education and welfare. Belgium has a split system for the organisation of early childhood education and care. Accordingly, in all three communities, different ministries are responsible for the provision of children under 2.5 years of age and for children from 2.5 years of age and up. In Belgium there is no compulsory school attendance, but compulsory education (home schooling is allowed) from 5 years of age and up. At 6 years of age, children transition from preschool to primary school (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2017). This country overview is describing the situation in the Flemish community.

Childcare: (0 - 2.5 years)

In April 2014, a new Government Decree on the organisation of childcare provision (Decreet Opvang van Baby's en Peuters) came into effect for the childcare settings in the Flemish Community. A pedagogical framework for childcare for babies and toddlers has been implemented. Ensuring the well-being of children is one of the main goals of the pedagogical framework. The wellbeing of children refers to: "the positive feeling a child has when the situation

he is in fulfils his basic needs: this concerns physical needs, the need for love and affection, the need for clarity and security, the need for appreciation and respect, the need to feel able to do something by himself and the need to matter”, (Laevers, et al., 2015).

The framework defines four areas of experience in which practitioners offer each child integrated development opportunities:

1. “Me and the Other”, because children develop their identity during early childhood in a world full of other adults and children;
2. “Body and Movement”, because during early childhood the child's body undergoes extensive changes;
3. “Communication and Expression”, because children learn to express themselves verbally and non-verbally during early childhood;
4. “Exploration of the World”, because during early childhood children get to know and understand the world, both objects and people.

(Kind & Gezin, 2019, p. 10)

The different areas of experience integrate social-emotional learning competences like self-confidence, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills and social awareness. The aim of the pedagogical framework is to give a best efforts obligation for childcare facilities. The early childhood settings are expected to work along the lines of the vision, however the implementation will always be customised to the local context. Children's development will not be measured in order to assess the quality of the organisation (Verhaeghe & Wastijn, 2018).

Pre-primary education: (2.5 - 6 years)

For pre-primary education the Flemish government defined broad developmental objectives, in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes. These developmental objectives do not have to be achieved but are aimed at. The developmental objectives form the common core curriculum and are divided into six areas of learning. The goals related to social and emotional learning are situated in the learning area “human and society”, which include self-awareness, social skills, society, time and special orientation (onderwijsdoelen.be). This learning area is divided into three categories of development objectives: 1) me and myself, 2) me and the other, 3) me and others in a group. Every governing body or school board must include the attainment targets or developmental objectives in the curriculum and the way in which these developmental goals are translated in a curriculum is decided by the school (Hulpia, 2014). So, although there is a broad framework which entails different aspects of social and emotional learning competences, the implementation is context related and always integrated in a broad and holistic educational approach.

However, in the Flemish early childhood education and care system, considerable attention is given to how (young) children feel. The quality criteria for good experiential education: ‘wellbeing’ and ‘involvement’ are used as a measure of deep learning and of the effectiveness of the learning environment. It focuses attention on the immediate context of education (the setting), the people involved and, not least, the children whose basic wellbeing and motivation must be a constant concern of teachers. Its nurturing of broad competences or life skills is entirely suitable to early childhood education and care, but is also relevant to later education where motivation, self-organisation and social competence continue to remain essential goals (Laevers, 2011).

Following the decree concerning pupil guidance in nursery and primary education, secondary education and pupil guidance centres, every Flemish school is obliged to develop, implement and evaluate a policy on pupil counselling. The decree was ratified in April 2018. Four areas are defined for the pupil guidance policy: 1) learning and studying, 2) school career, 3) preventive health care and 4) psychosocial functioning. (Eurydice, 2018) Furthermore, the school must offer broad basic care and increased care to pupils who need it. Every school needs to appoint a pupil counsellor. Every school is supported by a Centre for Pupil Guidance, (Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding CLB). There are 73 CLBs in Flanders, financed by the government, (Nusche et al, 2015). Because of the decree on pupil guidance, schools are obliged to comply with the conditions and the education inspectorate takes into account the quality control of the school policy. Attention to SEL is increasingly decided at the policy level.

Assessment

In the Flemish educational system, schools are taking the (ped)agogical project into account, which are responsible for the provision of quality education and for the support of education to be offered in a high-quality manner (Decreet betreffende de kwaliteit van onderwijs, 2009). The reference framework for Quality in Education describes a number of context and input characteristics, which schools can take into account when shaping their education. The core of the reference framework consists of quality expectations. This framework was created under the coordination of 'The Education Inspectorate'.

The Education Inspectorate assesses and stimulates the quality and quality development of education and inspires both the education world and the policy in a reliable, independent and transparent way. In this, the development of each learner takes a central position, (onderwijsinspectie.be).

The Inspectorate is also responsible for the audit of schools. Every school is audited at least once every six years. Four areas are scoped during this audit: The quality development, one or more quality areas, teaching and learning practises and habitability, safety and hygiene. The inspections are carried out at both the policy and classroom level.

For the specific assessment of SES, schools select the tools or measurements they find most suited for this topic. The Leuven Scale for Well-Being and the Leuven Scale for Involvement are instruments commonly used in this respect. This score is based on the observation of signals for well-being: enjoyment, being spontaneous and being oneself, being relaxed, open and curious, radiating, feeling confident. The level of well-being indicates how well children or adults are doing emotionally and how well the environment enables them to satisfy the basic needs (www.cego.be).

Intervention

Very specific for working on social and emotional skills with young children in the educational system in Belgium is that the pursuit of objectives in this area always takes place in an integrated and implicit manner. This is an integral part of a play oriented curriculum that aims to have children experience wonder and have meaningful learning experiences in an authentic and hands-on learning environment. Rather than talk with children about emotional skills, they practise with peers and adults in increasingly complex situations. Social skills are applied and practised in (simulated) realistic settings. Teachers practice a basic attitude that is centred around observation and responding to the needs of children, whatever the nature of these needs may be. If teachers suspect that a child has needs of a more specific nature, they can call upon the Centre for Pupil Guidance for an expert diagnostic and the referral to more specialised services and support.

A process-oriented self-evaluation instrument for care settings (SiCs) has been designed to support the early childhood education services in evaluating their strengths and weaknesses for creating the best conditions for children to develop. The self-evaluation instrument relies strongly on data collection through observation and a process of reflection and action. The whole team is involved in this process (Laevers et al., 2005.)

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