

Canada

Country Overview

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Country name

Canada

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Introduction

Canada offers a multitude of initiatives regarding social and emotional learning (SEL) for early ages, though there does not seem to be a clear agenda for it on a federal level and can therefore be dependent on the territory or province. Still, this literature search will discuss the progress that has been made, giving a brief overview by providing a few examples of developments that either stem from, or are available in Canada.

Development

Canada is a federation that consists of 13 provinces and territories. The main responsibility for education and early childhood education and care (ECEC) lies with each province and territory. As such, ECEC is not organised on a federal level (Friendly et al., 2020). This also means that there is no national agenda regarding SEL (Guyn Cooper Research Associates, 2013). Funding, research, development and provision of SEL is instead more typically concentrated on the individual ministries, universities and other types of organisations (e.g. commercial or non-profit). For example, The University of British Columbia developed a database for resources regarding SEL (<http://www.selresources.com/>). British Columbia also has examples of how SEL is embedded in the curriculum and teacher training (Hymel, Low, Starosa, Gill & Schonert-Reichl, 2018). Another example is Ontario's kindergarten programme that features SEL in several areas, such as chapter 2.1 Thinking about belonging and contributing; or chapter 2.2 Thinking about self-regulation and well-being (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

This doesn't necessarily preclude any federal or other nationwide initiative to further the development of SEL in Canada. One example of this is the Mental Health Commission of Canada who also addresses early childhood mental health. Their activities include (Mental Health Commission of Canada, n.d.):

Consulting with caregivers and persons who work with young children and families;

Identifying major challenges and opportunities in services, policies, programs and environments that support infants, young children and their caregivers;

Identifying national priorities in early childhood mental health;

Supporting and spreading best practices and programs for early childhood mental health.

Note that Guyn Cooper Research Associates (2013) issued a brief, summarising the responses from 23 interviews with various people working with SEL. Several recommendations were made, such as creating a nationwide SEL network, supporting programs, rigorous evaluations, and aligning with federal or provincial initiatives.

Assessment

As previously mentioned, SEL activity directed at ECEC does not typically emanate from a federal level in Canada. Any large-scale, formal assessment of social and emotional factors concerning ECEC would most likely be conducted on a provincial or territorial level primarily. Again, using Ontario as an example, kindergartens are expected to gather and communicate evidence of learning through various sources, such as observations or samples of the child's work. As it is linked to the kindergarten programme, one of the primary goals is to assess and develop self-regulation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018).

There are also more quantitative methods for large-scale assessment. The Early Development Instrument (EDI) includes social competence and communication skills and is an example of a measure that is both developed in Canada and has seen extensive use on a population level and in research, even internationally (Early Development Instrument, n.d.; Janus, Harrison, Goldfeld, Cuhn, Brinkman, 2016).

There are many options available for assessment on a local or individual level, especially when the end user's maternal language is English. Users of quantitative measures should however be aware about whether or not the measure is validated and standardised with respect to a Canadian population (where applicable). As an example, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is available in both English and French, but normative data for the general Canadian population has not yet been fully established (Hoffmann et al., 2020).

Barring this potential limitation, there are many methods available for assessing social and emotional factors in early childhood.

Intervention

There is a relatively large amount of interventions focusing on SEL available in Canada. Likely due to Canada's own initiatives, while also being close to the USA geographically and linguistically, where many SEL-interventions have their origin and remain available throughout North America. An example of this is Second Step, which has seen considerable use in Canada (Schonert-Reichl, n.d.).

Even if the focus is solely on ECEC, several examples of interventions remain. This is true even if criteria are more rigorous, like only choosing interventions that have faced rigorous evaluation, or interventions that can be considered Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit (SAFE; Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010).

One example is The Minipally Puppet program, a structured social skills intervention. The program is aimed at children from 2 to 5 years of age, although there is a version available for even smaller children. The version aimed at children 2 to 5 year of age was recently evaluated in a randomised control trial which saw favourable results for the intervention regarding disruptive behaviours (girls only) and decreasing diurnal cortisol secretion compared to controls (Larose et al., 2019; Larose et al., 2020).

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