

Latvia

Country Overview

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Country name

Latvia

Author of this description

- Kaat Verhaeghe, Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences & Arts

Reviewer

Mart Achten, Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences & Arts

Introduction

In September 2020, schools in Latvia started to gradually implement the new national curriculum for all ages, which takes a competence approach to curriculum (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). Social and emotional learning (SEL) are considered to be important to gain certain transversal skills like critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and entrepreneurship, self-regulated learning, collaboration, civic participation and digital competence (SEED Project Consortium, 2018). More specifically, in recent years Latvia started with the implementation of The Latvia SEL program. Theoretical insights from current SEL programs in other countries were used as the foundation of this program (Martinsone, 2016). Latvia takes an integrated approach to the implementation of SEL into the curriculum. SEL is implemented into everyday teaching practices in every subject (Ferreira, Martinsone & Talic, 2020). The Latvia SEL program is a preventive, universal school-wide program from 1st to 12th grade, including pre-school. Well-developed and structured SEL sessions of 40 minutes are implemented by the classroom teacher. It was concluded that a program persistently facilitating the development of social and emotional skills would be very important for all children, but perhaps even more so for children with learning difficulties, because the behavioural and emotional problems could be both contributing factors as well as sequel of the learning difficulties (Martinsone, 2016, p. 59). There was no literature found about an assessment tool for social and emotional skills of the SEL programme in Latvia. Generally, to assess the quality of education in Latvia, observation based on a checklist is one of the methods recommended by educational guidelines for ECEC in Latvia. The programme itself has been evaluated on different levels with a focus on how the programme is implemented, what teachers need to implement in practice and how they perceive the programme.

Development

Children can enter pre-school education (ECEC) in Latvia at 18 months of age as a preparation for primary school. Different types of preschool educational institutions offer pre-school education, like kindergartens or special pre-primary classes at general education institutions such as primary schools. For children 5 to 6 years of age, and who do not attend pre-school education institutions, it is compulsory to participate in pre-primary education programmes. About 85 % of children attend preschool educational institutions in Latvia. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019) According to the Educational Guidelines, play is the most important pedagogical activity in the preschool. There should be a balance between play, which should be purposefully organised or indirectly directed by the teacher and children's free play, both indoors and outdoors (SEED Project Consortium, 2018, p. 23).

Latvia guarantees a free public ECEC place for every child from as early as 1 year and 6 months of age, which is when the universal legal entitlement to publicly subsidised ECEC starts. However, maternity leave with an allowance of 80% of previous earnings is granted for only 16 weeks. Afterwards, a parental allowance with two options is available: until the child is 1 year of age (32

weeks) with 60% of the previous salary allowance; or until the child is 18 months of age (58 weeks) with 44% of the previous salary allowance. Most parents choose to take care of their child at home or turn to informal childcare solutions (relatives, nannies) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

As a member of the international community, Latvia has made the commitment to achieve collective goals and participate in shared actions in the areas of education and skills. In this regard, the development of social and emotional skills, also known as non-cognitive skills, soft skills or character skills, are crucial (OECD, 2020). Social and emotional learning are considered to be important to gain certain transversal skills like critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and entrepreneurship, self-regulated learning, collaboration, civic participation and digital competence (SEED Project Consortium, 2018). In September 2020, schools in Latvia started to gradually implement the new national curriculum for all ages, which takes a competence approach to curriculum. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020).

Before the development of the SEL programme, Rascevska, Razeva, Martinsone, Tubele, Vucenlazdars, & Vazne conducted an initial research study in 2012 on social exclusion risks in 25 Latvian schools. In this study, teachers addressed the problem of a large number of pupils with low academic achievement level and/or emotional and behaviour problems. One of the conclusions of the research study was that a programme supporting the development of social and emotional skills would be beneficial for all children, but even to a greater extent for children with learning difficulties (Martinsone, 2016).

The Latvian SEL programme, called “Social-emotional learning. Lesson plans for grades 1–12” (Martinsone et al., 2021), was developed as a universal and preventive school-wide programme from 1st to 12th grade. The programme used theoretical insights and elements from existing SEL programmes in other countries. However, the programme has been designed and adapted to meet the needs of the specific sociocultural context of Latvia. (Martinsone, 2016). The goal of the Sociali emocionala audzināsana (SEA) programme is to “develop pupils’ social and emotional competencies so that the pupils may effectively self-regulate their own emotions, communicate positively, set realistic goals and solve problems responsibly.” (Martinsone, 2016, p. 61). The programme is built around four major themes that correspond to core competencies of social and emotional learning: emotional self-regulation, positive social interaction, setting realistic and positive goals, and problem solving (Martinsone, 2016). The programme is aimed at all pupils and is implemented in the entire school simultaneously. Well-developed and structured SEL sessions of 40 minutes are implemented by the classroom teacher. (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017).

The SEL programme has two main goals: 1) to directly develop social emotional skills and 2) to promote a holistic approach to lesson management, setting an important goal for students by providing positive, growth-oriented feedback during lessons, reflecting on what knowledge and skills have been acquired, and ensuring students’ self-assessment of what they have learned (Berzina & Martinsone, 2021, p.47).

Assessment

To our knowledge, no literature was found about an assessment tool for social and emotional skills of the SEL programme in Latvia. Generally, to assess the quality of education in Latvia, observation based on a checklist is one of the methods recommended by educational guidelines for ECEC in Latvia (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019, p.104). The external evaluation of ECEC settings for younger children operates according to a cyclical model in which all settings are evaluated at regular intervals specified top-level authorities. Educational guidelines from top-level authorities apply to centre-based settings across the whole ECEC phase. The guidelines are binding. Educational guidelines from top-level authorities for centre-based settings also apply to home-based provisions (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). There is also use of the national assessment tool to track students’ physical health, social and emotional needs and other special needs. This would help identify ECEC institutions that may have a disproportionately larger share of at-risk children who may need additional support (OECD, 2020)

At programme-level: Two studies were found where the programme is already evaluated on how the programme is implemented, what teachers need to implement in practice and how they perceive the programme. In a study of Martinsone (2016) and Martinsone & Vilcina (2017), the sustainability of the SEA programme was measured. Belows quotation shows how Martinsone describes the process:

“Assessment

An initial research in 25 schools in Latvia revealed insufficient social and emotional competences as one of the risk factors of social exclusion and school drop-out. Those findings approved the necessity of a targeted Social emotional learning program. (Martinsone, 2016, p.66);

Development

The SEA program has been developed. The SEA program included a whole-school approach with the emphasis on 1) proactivity (aimed at all pupils, not only those struggling with different problems) and 2) sustainability (continuous implementation for more than several years). (Martinsone, 2016, p.66);

Implementation

The SEA program was introduced and implemented in 39 schools at each grade level. Teachers completed the continuous education course ‘social emotional learning in schools’. Regular group supervisions (led by program developers) for all 630 teachers were implemented. Afterwards the best SEA teachers from every region of Latvia were invited and prepared as SEA supervisors. Simultaneously, there was a cooperation with the program coordinators in local municipalities to create the network for maintaining achieved practice in subsequent years. (Martinsone, 2016, p.66);

Evaluation

Statistically significant differences were found between the teachers' ratings in the schools, which implemented the SEA and other programs, and the control group. The teachers considered relationship quality, cooperation between teachers and pupils, and understanding of positive behaviour habits. (Martinsone, 2016, p.66), and;

Reassessment/modification

In order to address the Teachers' perceptions of program effectiveness and sustainability seven focus groups were organised. Thematic analysis of the focus group discussions pointed to various benefits of the program, including a general dissemination of SEL principles, and teachers' reflections on the importance of their own active role in the process of social and emotional learning” (Martinsone, 2016, p.66).

The SEA programme is based on these findings respecting the importance of teachers' education, assistance during implementation, organising regular supervisions (provided by programme developers), strong cooperation with school principals/administration and the preparation of programme's consultants in local municipalities. Thus, the support network for the SEA programme sustainability was created with the hope that after the European funding expires, the involved schools will be able to sustain the practice at a similar standard (level of quality) (Martinsone, 2016; Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017).

At content level: the research of Berzina & Martinsone (2021) researched the link between the school climate and the SEL programme. The hypothesis was confirmed, finding that teachers who implemented the SEL programme would show a higher perceived school climate.

Intervention

Mostly, teachers implement specific programs, but they have difficulties in incorporating SEL into the regular curriculum (including kindergarten). Latvia has focused on the conceptual model of sustainable integration of SEL into everyday teaching practices in every subject (Ferreira, Martinsone & Talic, 2020). Some key principles are highlighted in the literature in order to promote successful and sustainable practice of SEL at schools. SEL practices tend to occur within supportive contexts, acknowledging features of a broader community; to extend SEL beyond the classroom, finding time to implement SEL activities sufficiently and efficiently throughout the school; to ensure enough staff support and training; and finally, to use data to inform decision making, calling upon tools to assess students' outcomes, and tools to assess and support SEL implementation practices. (Ferreira, Martinsone & Talic, 2020, p.24).

A set of well-defined lesson plans together with additional materials relevant to all SEA topics are offered to the teachers. The Teacher's Handbook includes a theoretical framework of the SEA programme; detailed and structured lesson plans; CD with additional materials and a glossary of core concepts. (Martinsone, 2016, p. 61).

Social and emotional learning is implemented through practical skill-learning activities and participation in discussions, group work, role-plays, behaviour modelling, research, projects, actions and the prosocial activity projects. Each activity has a detailed plan with a clear goal and common structure.

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Citation

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