

# Malta

## Country Overview

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## Country name

Malta

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## Introduction

In the last decade, Maltese policymakers have increased their awareness on the importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for prospective (lifelong) learning. In this respect, their awareness for social and emotional skills (SES) development during early childhood has also been growing. The Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health of the University of Malta plays an important role in both research and (educational) projects on SES development in educational settings. With respect to early childhood education, RESCUR is a good practice.

The Early Years Cycle established by the Maltese Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) covers the educational cycle from 0 to 7 years of age: non-compulsory childcare (0-3 years), non-compulsory Kindergarten (3-5 years) and the first two years of compulsory primary education (5-7 years). The regulation of Early Childhood Education and Care is the responsibility of the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, which is part of the Ministry for Education and Employment (Sollars, 2017).

## Development

From 0 to 3 years of age, children in Malta are welcomed to enrol in non-compulsory childcare. Since 2014, childcare services are provided for free (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014) to parents/guardians who are 'in work' or 'in education'. (<https://education.gov.mt>). Currently, childcare in Maltese is focusing on child development in a broad sense, "including social, emotional, physical, intellectual, communication and creativity", (<https://education.gov.mt>). From 3 to 5 years of age, children can attend two years of non-compulsory Kindergarten (KG1 and KG2), and from 5 years of age, primary education becomes compulsory.

In 2012, the 'National Curriculum Framework for All' identified five learning outcomes for the Early Years Cycle. In 2015, the Ministry for Employment and Education published a 'Toolkit for the Early Years Cycle (0-7 years)', elaborating on those five learning outcomes. The Toolkit serves as an educator's guide for pedagogy and assessment through the use of a learning outcomes approach. The Learning Outcomes Framework provided in the document does indeed relate to SES development through learning outcome 3 'Children are socially adept' and its related achievements:

Children who are capable of establishing relationships with others (Level 1, 2, 3, 4);

Children who develop empathy, respect and acceptance of different points of view (Level 1, 2, 3, 4);

Children who learn to collaborate with peers and adults with diverse backgrounds and needs (Level 1, 2, 3, 4);

Children who develop an awareness of the notions of fairness, a sense of justice and non-preferential treatment (Level 3 & 4).

Both pedagogy and assessment strategies are described for children from 0 to 3 years of age (childcare), as well as for children from 3 to 7 year of age. Regarding the latter group, the guide clarifies that "educators working in the Early Years, are responsible to document the cognitive, social and emotional development, the progress of learning, attainment, and behaviour of the children in their care" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015, p. 32). In the appendix, the

guide explicitly refers to several authors and key concepts regarding SES development and implications for practice. Examples are Maria Montessori and Loris Malaguzzi (Reggio Emilia).

In 2006, the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, together with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, published the 'National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities'. The standards were considered to be essential in order to stimulate and strengthen children's "emotional, social and educational developments" (Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity and Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2006, p. 1). The fifth standard 'Care, Learning and Playing' clarified that the caregiver responds to both the physical and intellectual needs of the children, as well as their social and emotional needs. In 2021, the Ministry for Education published the 'National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Services (0-3 years)', referring to the abovementioned Learning Outcomes Framework, including learning outcome 3: 'Children are socially adept' (Ministry for Education, 2021).

In 2019, a 'National Inclusive Education Framework' was introduced by the Ministry of Education and Employment, which is applicable to educational settings in childcare centres, kindergartens and primary education. The Framework consists of 10 themes, of which 'Positive Behaviour Management' explicitly refers to guidelines for social and emotional skills development. For example, "Positive behaviour and social and emotional literacy are promoted at school"; "Prioritising social and emotional education"; "Awareness of emotions, caring, empathy, concern for others, positive relationships, making responsible decisions, impulse control, resolving conflict constructively are embedded in school curriculum". (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2019, p. 40)

Finally, in 2021, the Ministry of Education published a 'National Policy Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care'. According to the Policy Framework the curriculum should enhance both physical, social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual language and creative development. Moreover, children should be able to talk about their thoughts and feelings, and they should be acknowledged and valued by their caregiver/educator (learning experience). The learning environment has to stimulate the social competencies and general well-being of children, and provide a coherent learning atmosphere should promote positive behaviour towards each other and their caregivers/educators. (Ministry for Education, 2021).

The University of Malta is involved in several (research) projects aiming to develop/improve social and emotional skills in an educational context. Moreover, its Centre for Resilience & Socio-Emotional Health (CRES) is the publisher of the International Journal of Emotional Education in collaboration with the European Network for Social and Emotional Competence (ENSEC).

From 2012 to 2015, the Centre for Resilience & Socio-Emotional Health coordinated a LLP Comenius Project (2012-2015), resulting in RESCUR: a resilience curriculum for early years and primary schools through intercultural and transnational collaboration. For more information: see Good Practice RESCUR (Cefai, et al. 2015).

## Assessment

The Learning Outcome Framework ('Toolkit for the Early Years Cycle (0-7 years)') underlines that authentic assessment is preferred to effective assessment: "authentic assessment provides a broader, more holistic and genuine picture of the children's learning." (Department of Education and Employment, 2015, p. 30). The guide refers to the following examples of authentic assessment: observing individual children, or groups of children, journals (depending on the children's age), drawings, photos, artwork, portfolios, learning stories, audio and/or video tapes of children's learning and work samples showing ongoing growth and progress (Department of Education and Employment, 2015).

RESCUR adopts a "developmental and formative rather than normative and standardised assessment format" (Cefai et al., 2015, p. 29). With this, the creators of the project aim to reduce the risks of traditional achievement assessment, which typically results in a labelling process: 'resilient' or 'non-resilient'. Each theme (i. developing communication skills, ii. building healthy relationships, iii. developing a growth mindset, iv. developing self-determination, v. building on strengths and vi.

turning challenges into opportunities), has its own checklist for teacher assessment and self-assessment (early primary and late primary education only). “The teacher assessment checklist has to be completed at the end of the specific theme” in order to assess whether the learning goals are adequately attained or still need some support (Cefai et al., 2015, p. 7).

## Intervention

The RESCUR curriculum is “an inclusive, universal intervention programme targeting all learners in the classroom, but with activities reflecting the diversity of learners, particularly vulnerable children such as Roma children, migrant and refugee children, children living in poverty, and children with individual educational needs.” (Cefai et al., 2015 p. 14). It is a resilience curriculum for early years and primary schools that “proportionate universalism perspective” allows for all children to be engaged in the activities, and at the same to address the needs of those children with (potential) difficulties, without paying too much attention to their ‘difference’ (Cefai et al., 2018, p. 192).

The activities follow the SAFE approach: “a sequenced step-by-step approach (Sequenced), experiential and participative learning (Active), a focus on skills development (Focused), and explicit learning goals (Explicit)” (Cefai et al. 2018, p. 192). All activities share a common set-up: explicit learning goals and learning outcomes, a mindfulness activity, storytelling and processing, practical, multisensory activities, and a take home activity, which parents and children complete together (Cefai et al. 2018).

For more information on the specifics of the RESCUR programme, see ‘Good Practices RESCUR’.

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### **Citation**

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