

Portugal

Country Overview

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Country name

Portugal

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Introduction

In the last decade, the interest in promoting children's early social and emotional skills (SES) through evidence-based programmes is spreading around the world, including in Portugal, (Cristóvão et al., 2017; Marques-Pinto & Raimundo, 2016). Although there is still a long way to go in order for SES of young children to be widely and consistently promoted across the educational system of Portugal, a significant investment was made in the last few years by different stakeholders supported by research, national policies, and funding for this type of intervention. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need to expand research on developmentally appropriate SEL programmes for preschool children, and its efficacy, as well as on supportive and challenging conditions regarding the implementation of evidence-based programmes in preschool centres, in order to inform future programme delivery (that must be sustainable and continuous to the elementary school), and evaluation. Despite these questions, by sharing what is being done to fulfil the mission of developing Portuguese young children's SES, we hope to validate, inspire and/or expand the knowledge of the SEL implementation efforts in Portugal.

Development

In the past few years, there has been a growing interest in Portugal regarding the social and emotional learning (SEL) in educational settings, (Bowles et al., 2017; Cristóvão et al., 2017; Marques-Pinto & Raimundo, 2016). This is visible through the increase of the number of scientific publications in the topic, the research and intervention projects that had been funded, as well as local/school level initiatives aiming the promotion of children and adolescents' social and emotional skills (SES). An example of this investment has been set by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation that has assumed, in 2018, the commitment to financially support around 100 local projects that aim to promote key SES in children and youth under 25 years of age, (<https://gulbenkian.pt/academias/>). These projects are called "Gulbenkian Academies for Knowledge".

Mental health and SES are also a priority area in some national policy documents, such as National programme for Mental Health, National programme for School Health, and Education for Health Referential. These documents underscore the schools as an important intervention setting, and were further supported by the publication of the Manual for the Promotion of Social and Emotional Learning in the Schools in 2016. This document is a product of a joint partnership between the Directorate-General for Health and the Directorate-General for Education published, and includes pedagogical resources (also for preschool aged-children) to support the practices of teachers and health school professionals. It is also worth to mention another key national policy document – "Student's Profile by the end of compulsory education"

(<https://cidadania.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/pdfs/students-profile.pdf>), as well as other institutions like the Portuguese Board of Psychologists (<http://escolasaudavelmente.pt/directores/prevencao-e-promocao-da-saude-psicologica-e-sucesso-educativo/aprendizagem-socio-emocional-ase>), have also been emphasising the pivotal role of SES for students' academic achievement and other important long-term life outcomes.

In Portugal, preschool education is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, a national level entity that provides general guidelines and specific regulation both for public, private non-profit and private for-profit institutions serving children between 3 and 6 years of age. As such, early childhood teachers have a set of key guidelines for supporting their actions, known as the National Curriculum Guidelines (Silva et al., 2016). Among others, SES is highlighted in the document as key for child development in early years, although no specific programme, activities or monitoring procedures are provided at the national level. The same specific guidelines are supposed to be applicable for institutions serving children under 3 years of age, although the Ministry of Social Welfare plays the role of managing crèche in Portugal.

Two recent studies (e.g., Peixoto & Machado, 2020; Neto et al., 2019) about SEL practices in Portuguese preschool settings showed that a significant number of preschool teachers value and cultivate daily children's SES. Specifically, the study of Peixoto and Machado (2020), which included 180 teachers serving children 3 to 6 years of age, showed that although the implementation of structured and systematic SEL programmes is not common (7.4%), most preschool teachers reported to develop other practices recommended in the literature such as embedding SEL throughout routines (e.g., snack time) and activities of different content areas (e.g., story book reading for teachable SEL moments), and adopting explicit teaching activities with the specific goal of promoting certain aspects of SES (e.g., emotions check-in). These findings are consistent with Neto and colleagues' study (2019; participated 182 preschool teachers serving children 3 to 6 years of age), where teachers reported to provide a variety of experiences to help children learn and practice SES on a regular basis (e.g., cooperative-learning games, teach children how to manage feelings and emotions, acknowledge children's positive behaviours throughout the day; teach children a problem-solving procedure).

Specifically, in what concerns universal SEL programmes, despite the growing interest in promoting children and adolescents' SES in Portugal during the last decade, there seems to be less investment in this kind of practice in early childhood years compared to the other education levels. From the 100 local projects supported by Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, only 25 are intended for children of preschool age (Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2020). In a recent bibliometric study, where the goal was to identify research on SEL programmes implemented in Portuguese schools and its effects in students' academic achievement, Cristóvão and colleagues (2017) only found one publication reporting a SEL programme for preschool aged-children (Preschool Giant's Leap from Correia, 2015). Another relevant publication reporting the panorama of universal and targeted programmes to promote children's and adolescents' mental health in Portugal (Canário & Cruz, 2016) has identified four programmes for preschool children: Incredible Years - Teacher Classroom Management programme (Maria Filomena Fonseca Gaspar and Maria João Rama Seabra Santos; Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Coimbra); Giant's Leap (Karla Sandy Correia and Alexandra Marques Pinto; Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, University of Lisbon); Zippy's Friends (Associação Escutar), and RESCUR (Celeste Simões, Paula Lebre, Anabela Santos and Margarida Gaspar de Matos; Faculty of Human Kinetics of the University of Lisbon).

Notably, there are several stakeholders worth mentioning/to highlight due to the awareness they have brought to SEL programmes in Portugal. Some of these stakeholders include: NGOs, municipalities, schools, parents' associations, universities – public, private, and non-profit organisations – to increase the spread of SEL programmes in preschool settings, and some of them with the support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (within the scope of Gulbenkian Knowledge Academies). Several municipalities (e.g., Câmara Municipal de Famalicão; Câmara Municipal do Seixal; Câmara Municipal de Oeiras; Câmara Municipal de Lagoa; Câmara Municipal de Leiria), NGOs or non-profit associations (e.g., Prevenir, www.prevenir.eu; Unificar, <https://www.unificar.pt>; Escutar, www.escutar.pt; Arisco, <https://arisco-ipss.org/>), or other type of organisations (Acrescer - Associação de Animação Sócio-Educativa), sometimes in partnership,

have developed and promoted SEL programmes for preschool children. Some of these organisations provide training and support materials to facilitators (e.g., teachers, psychologists) so they can implement the programmes more effectively in school settings.

Assessment

Regarding SEL programmes' evaluation, usually, the organisations include some kind of evaluation strategy, such as process evaluation, programme effectiveness (pre-post design, most of the time without control group), and participants' satisfaction. Indeed, some NGOs report that programme's effectiveness and process evaluation measurement is part of their services. Although empirical works related to the efficacy of SEL programmes in Portugal are scarce (Marques Pinto & Raimundo, 2016), particularly in preschool (Cristóvão et al., 2017). The team of monitoring and evaluation of the Gulbenkian Academies for Knowledge, acting upon the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's concern with the issue of programme evaluation, has been providing assistance to the different academies in the planning and implementation of rigorous evaluation and monitoring processes of their programmes.

Intervention

Here are some universal SEL programmes that are currently running in preschool settings in Portugal (including adaptations of well-known international programmes and programmes originally developed in Portugal with data on their effectiveness):

The Incredible Years - Teacher Classroom Management programme (<https://www.incredibleyears.com>) is a well-known, evidence-based prevention programme, developed in the USA (Carolyn Webster-Stratton, 1994), that is being implemented in Portugal. It aims to promote teachers' classroom management competences and children's SES (e.g., self-management, prosocial behaviour, and problem-solving skills). The target audience is children from 3 to 8 years of age and their teachers, or other professionals who work directly with them (e.g., psychologists). The programme includes seven workshops of six hours each (a total of 42 hours) over six months that address key strategies for effective classroom management and that promote children's SES (previously mentioned). The organisation responsible for this programme in Portugal is the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Coimbra (Maria Filomena Fonseca Gaspar and Maria João Rama Seabra Santos), (Webster-Stratton, 2018). Findings from one quasi-experimental study, developed in the scope of a doctoral thesis (Vale, 2012), indicated that, compared to control groups, teachers who implemented the programme describe their children at the end of the intervention as having significantly less conduct problems and more pro-social skills. After 7 months of the intervention, the gains were maintained. Moreover, preschool teachers reported high satisfaction with the programme. This programme was identified as a reference methodology in "Gulbenkian Academies for Knowledge" (Webster-Stratton, 2018), and it has been implemented by several organisations around the country over the last decade.

Zippy's Friends (www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk), a recognized effective programme, has received a lot of attention around the world, including in Portugal, since 2016. Escutar is the Portuguese organisation responsible for the Amigos do Ziki (Portuguese translation and adaptation of Zippy's Friends; <http://amigosdoziki.pt/mundo/index.htm>). It is an universal evidence-based programme for children from 5 to 7 years of age (in Portugal for children who are attending the last year of preschool education, which are, normally, children from 5 to 6 years of age) that intends to help children cope better with everyday adversities through engaging activities, such as, listening stories, games, role-play, and drawing. Zippy's Friends is organised throughout 24 weekly sessions (6 modules about feelings, communication, friendship, conflict, change and loss, and moving forward; each module with 4 sessions) for about 50-60 minutes each. The programme is delivered by preschool teachers with training in the programme. It has been implemented in several Portuguese preschool settings in recent years and its impact is usually assessed through teachers' and families' perceptions about the changes they observe in children after their participation in the programme. This programme also includes alternative and

additional activities for children with special needs, as well as a set of sessions for parents (Zippy at Home; in Portuguese - Ziki em casa).

The non-profit organisation Prevenir, a reference association in the prevention and promotion of health in Portugal (currently operating also in Spain), develops since 2002 several programmes for the school population, including Nino and Nina (<https://prevenir.eu/wp-site/index.php/pt/pre/>). This programme is delivered to preschool-aged children (4-6 years) by preschool teachers after appropriate training and intends to promote key SES for children's healthy development, namely self-control, emotion differentiation, self-esteem, and social skills. Nino and Nina is a 2-year longitudinal programme with 21 weekly sessions in year 1 and 20 weekly sessions in year 2. The programme contains a guide about the sessions (e.g., goals, activities, materials), the game Nina and Nino - Deck of feelings, as well as three videos of cartoons by Nino and Nina with stories of the topics covered. It also includes workshops for families in order to expand the intervention developed by teachers in the preschool settings. According to the association, more than 15,000 children have already benefited from the programme. Findings from impact evaluation showed that, compared to a control group of children, participation in the programme for 2 years related to better SES (self-control, emotion differentiation, self-esteem, and social skills). These results were consistent with teachers' perceptions regarding children's SES work in the scope of the programme. For example, they observed a significant decrease of the following children's behaviours: "has difficulties in maintaining attention"; "hits in peers"; "don't usually show what he/she feels" (Crusellas et al., 2013).

We also highlight the programme Salto de Gigante (Giant's Leap; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016), which was also originally developed in Portugal and includes two versions, one targeting preschool children ("Salto de Gigante – Pre") and another targeting first graders ("Salto de Gigante 1"). From the empirical point of view, the outline of the two versions of the programme took into account the perspectives of children, parents, educators, and teachers on adaptation in the transition to formal school, collected in a previous study developed by the research team in the Portuguese context (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2011; 2016), and follows the framework and recommendations for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2012). This universal intervention aims to develop SES skills, as well as to improve the school adaptation of children in transition from preschool education to elementary school. The preschool programme can be used with children aged between 4 and 6 years of age, is carried out in the classroom throughout the school year, and contains 15 weekly sessions of 45 to 60 minutes. The curriculum includes six components: the first introduces the programme and provides guidance for the transition to the first year of school, and the remaining five involve the SEL components: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The programme is described in a manual that contains the general goals, the programme structure, and the session plans, with specific objectives, strategies, and a description of the activities and materials. The sessions are organised so that new competencies are constructed based on previously learned ones, thus providing an integrated view of social and emotional competencies. The programme's activities include the presentation of didactic videos designed specifically for the programme through storytelling, group educational games, role playing and artistic expression activities. Strategies such as brainstorming, modelling, constructive feedback, individual positive reinforcement, and reflection/group discussion are used. The effectiveness of the program was assessed through a quasi-experimental study (four preschool centres; 67 children), which showed an improvement regarding children's interpersonal strengths, emotional knowledge, school functioning, and broadening the perception of the social support network in the school context (Correia, 2019; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016). This programme was also identified as a reference methodology in "Gulbenkian Academies for Knowledge" and is currently running in several preschool settings around the country.

A program also worth mentioning is the RESCUR – European Resilience Curriculum (www.rescur.eu; Currículo Europeu para a Resiliência na Educação Pré-escolar, 1.º e 2.º ciclo), developed by Cefai and colleagues (2012-2015) under the Lifelong Learning programme (funding from European Commission), which has a Portuguese version developed by Simões and colleagues. This is a multi-grade programme (preschool, 1st – 4th grade, and 5th – 6th grade) that aims to promote children's resilience and develop socio-emotional skills and it is led by teachers in the classroom over the school year. Six main topics are addressed in this programme: (1)

communication skills; (2) healthy relationships; (3) positive mind; (4) self-determination; (5) resources (self-concept, self-esteem); (6) Turn challenges into opportunities. The programme contains a guide for teachers (where the goals, theoretical framework, structure of the curriculum, main topics covered, evaluation, and main guidelines for implementation are described), and a guide for parents with strategies that can help parents promote resilience in their children. In addition, for each grade level, there is a manual that includes information about the activities, its learning goals, and strategies, as well as other digital resources to use in the intervention sessions. In the scope of a pilot study, each country involved in the RESCUR development (Malta, Croatia, Greece, Portugal, Italy, and Sweden) assessed the implementation of one specific topic addressed in the programme. In Portugal, after teacher training, and the self-determination topic implementation over six sessions, intervention impact was evaluated. In general, findings revealed improvement in children's cooperative behaviours, problem-solving skills, and more appropriate behaviours in school (Simões et al., 2016). Moreover, preliminary quantitative and qualitative findings from an impact study of the RESCUR in Portugal (Simões et al., 2018), specifically with migrant and/or refugee students, also documented a positive effect on the intervention group behaviours (e.g., decreased emotional, conduct and peer problems, increased prosocial behaviours).

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