

United States

Country Overview

Generated: 2024-12-01 10:46:24



Country name

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Introduction

Although the provision and support for early childhood education and care (ECEC) may vary considerably, the United States of America (USA) is home to many of the pioneering efforts regarding social and emotional learning (SEL). There are various initiatives driving the development of SEL, with CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) being a prominent organisation in this field. The Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning Laboratory (EASEL lab) EASEL has also developed several noteworthy projects in this scope. There are also many other organisations working with specific SEL interventions. A majority of SEL interventions in the world seem to have their origins in the USA, at least when looking at experimentally evaluated interventions. Several repositories are available in the US for aiding stakeholders in choosing appropriate tools for assessment and interventions regarding SEL.

Development

The USA has a large population, yet fairly low participation rates for ECEC. Federally, the responsibility for ECEC lies with the Department of Health and Human Services, while the responsibility for schooling lies with the Department of Education. Provision of ECEC is mainly conducted on a state-wide or regional level, though federal grants may fund programmes, such as Head Start, that are aimed at disadvantaged children. This may lead to considerable heterogeneity in the provision, quality and affordability in ECEC around the states (OECD, 2020). Individual states also tend to vary in their preschool standards or guidelines in relation to SEL (Dusenbury, 2015).

Despite variability in provisions, and relatively low participation rates in ECEC, much of the pioneering work regarding SEL has been conducted in the United States. Though this development may be weighted towards school-aged children, several American initiatives, that influence modern SEL, started as early as the 1960's (Bowles et al., 2017).

One of the most prominent initiatives is the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a non-profit organisation working towards the betterment of SEL in education. CASEL has its roots in the previously mentioned pioneering work of the 60's, drawing on the results from Dr. James Comer and colleagues who saw improvements in behaviour and academic performance using principles now acknowledged as SEL. The work was expanded on by others, leading to CASEL (and SEL as a term) being founded in 1994 (CASEL, n.d.).

There have been many SEL initiatives since then, made possible by various organisations and sources of funding, such as federal grants, charitable grants, universities, non-profit organisations and private organisations. Another example is the Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory that drives several projects related to SEL in ECEC, such as the Zaentz Early Childhood initiative, which seeks to conduct research in the field in order to inform ECEC policy and practice (Saul Zaentz Early Education Initiative, n.d.). The EASEL lab is funded by various organisations, both federal grants and private foundations (EASEL lab, n.d.).

Assessment

Social and emotional competencies can be assessed in various ways for various purposes. While some countries may have some form of nationwide assessment of social and emotional competencies in ECEC, the previously mentioned variability in provision and support of ECEC might prove a hindrance for such initiatives. Even statewide initiatives regarding this topic can be hard to find. There are, however, a myriad of tools for assessing child-level outcomes, or for screening or diagnostic purposes, as evidenced by compendiums and reviews on the subject (Denham, Ji & Hamre, 2010; National Center for Systemic Improvement, 2018). There are also resources for assessing the process and implementation of SEL in preschool settings, even on a district level. Many of these resources can be found through the SEL Assessment Guide and related features. The project was headed by CASEL, and besides listing tools for assessment, it provides a guide for choosing and using said tools (Measuring SEL, n.d.). Their collaborator, RAND Corporation, also offers the RAND Education Assessment Finder, which acts as a repository for assessment measures in education, including social and emotional competencies in ECEC (RAND, n.d.).

In a collaborative effort to advance SEL assessment, many stakeholders worked to prioritise the following five areas (Cipriano et al., 2020):

- 1) Leverage existing resources and expertise;
- 2) Promote SEL data literacy;
- 3) Enable equity;
- 4) Engage youth voice;
- 5) Integrate SEL assessment at the system level.

Intervention

Many SEL interventions originate from the USA. A systematic review on classroom-wide social-emotional interventions for preschool children reported that 72% of the studies included were located in the United States (Luo et al., 2020). A similar review reported 67% of the included studies being in North America (Blewitt et al., 2018).

As with tools for assessment, many interventions can be found through repositories that list and assess interventions. Again, CASEL provides guidance in choosing a programme, along with providing a list of programmes, and providing a rating and summary of research evidence for the programmes (CASEL Program Guide, n.d.). There are repositories with similar interventions and functionality, but slightly different focus. For example, Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development lists programmes for health promotion and reducing problem behaviours, along with a rating to denote the level of evidence (Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development, n.d.). To name a few examples; Positive Action (PA) and Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) are two programmes that feature a lesson-based curriculum of explicit SEL. While they started out as school programmes, they have since developed adapted versions for preschool (Domitrovich, Cortes & Greenberg, 2007; Schmitt, Flay & Lewis, 2014). Another example of a lesson-based approach developed specifically for preschool is called AI's Pals (Lynch, Geller & Schmidt, 2004). These programs often feature imagery, stories, songs, puppets and tangibles to engage early learners.

A different approach, based on workshops for teachers, is offered by The Incredible Years series. Here, teachers learn practices for promoting positive behaviours, social skills training and building relationships, and how to integrate them in the classroom (Carlson, Tiet, Bender & Benson, 2011).

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Citation

This document was generated from the database used to create the Country Overviews Compendium:

Koltcheva, N., V. Coelho, (2022). Social and Emotional Development for Children aged 0 to 7 years old: European Countries Overviews Compendium. EU-SELF Project. ISBN 978-619-233-213-6 (can be downloaded from <https://euself.nbu.bg>)