

AUSTRIAN NATIONAL REPORT ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Output 2.4 National round tables

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Round Tables/Focus Group

1 Introduction

For the output 2.4 National round tables in the Erasmus+ project “SEEVAL – Social and Emotional Education – Building Inclusive Schools and Ownership of Values”, three round tables/focus groups (further: focus groups or FG) were organised in Austria. WUS Austria and the Center for Social Competence invited teachers from middle and high schools as well as teacher trainers from universities and university colleges for teacher education. In total 21 persons accepted the invitation and participated in the focus groups. The FG took place through the online platform Big Blue Button, administered by the University of Graz, at three different days. The focus groups started with an introduction about the project and the definition of Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2017) used in the SEEVAL project. Also, the main aims of the focus group, the methodology and the procedure were explained. After that the participants were informed that the focus groups would be recorded and print screen photos made for the purpose of analysing the data and reporting to the European Commission and were asked if there were any objections to that. Since there were no objections voiced, the focus group discussions could start, moderated by DDr. Karin Sonnleitner, MA, from the University of Graz.

Since it was not foreseen in the project application to conduct the Educators’ and Students’ SEE needs inquiry in Austria, it was not possible to use the guiding questions outlined in the SEEVAL guidelines for round tables/focus groups as they were based on the national results from educators’ and students’ questionnaires. Therefore, the discussions in the Austrian focus groups were based on a set of 4 core questions relevant for the project and prepared by WUS Austria. These core questions were kept throughout the focus groups. The sub questions differed a bit among the three groups since after the discussions in the first group it became clear that questions had to be slightly adapted and focused to get an even better output of the groups.

Among the participants of all three focus groups were schoolteachers (13) and school psychologists (2) working with children aged 12 to 18 as well as teacher trainers from Universities (1) and University Colleges for Teacher Education (5). The focus group discussions lasted between 80 and 90 minutes each. Experience in Social and Emotional Learning was a precondition for participation.

In addition to the moderator and WUS Austria representatives, there were in total 21 participants in the three focus groups: 9 participants in the focus group held on 20th January, 7 in the focus group held on 25th January, and 5 in the focus group held on 26th January 2021. All teachers and psychologists, except for one, work momentarily in Graz, the second largest city in Austria. Teacher trainers came from three different regions in Austria (Styria, Burgenland, and Vienna).

2 Round Tables / Focus Groups discussion

2.1. Description of the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Context in Austria

The first set of questions aimed at receiving more detailed information about the Social and Emotional Learning Context in Austria, therefore the participants were asked the following questions: In which context have you heard about SEL? How is SEL integrated in your university / school curriculum or at your university / school? What does teaching SEL look like at your school / university?

Participants of the focus groups emphasised that they encountered SEL during their university studies, through further education at universities or trainings/workshops organised by different organisations (universities, NGOs etc.). It was mentioned that teachers were much interested in trainings/workshops on SEL at university level (offered for free) but that there were not always enough free places.

In teacher trainer curricula at university level, it can be noticed that there is not a standardised approach to teaching SEL. At some universities there is awareness about the relevance of SEL in teacher education and obligatory lectures are offered. Those lectures are not related to professional skills but to generic competences such as communication skills or stress management aiming at strengthening the social and personal competencies of prospective teachers: to deal with own attitudes and values with different focal points such as personality development and communication, coaching, self-leadership, diversity, multilingualism, human dignity, respect for people, mindfulness, reflection, coaching. At other universities, lectures that relate to social and emotional learning such as Human Rights Education, Global Learning or Social Competence are offered as elective courses. When asked why SEL was not an obligatory subject, one of the teacher trainers mentioned that there were many topics that the teacher trainers wanted to see in the curriculum and sometimes other topics were given a higher priority. This can change when the new curriculum will be designed. It was noted by a teacher that there were still some deficits in teacher training which they observe when young colleagues come to schools: communication competencies, dealing with their own emotions, coping with challenging situations, dealing with stress.

Regarding the practical application of SEL in schools, it can be observed that teaching SEL is much dependent on the overall commitment/interest of the school management (but also teaching staff at school) and the agreed school strategy, whether it is going to be integrated in the school curriculum. If there is such a commitment, teachers are supported to attend additional trainings/workshops to further develop their skills, in some cases trainings/workshops are organised at the schools as well. It can be noticed that in most cases SEL is integrated selectively into the school curriculum, usually 1-2 teaching units per week, very often in lessons by their class teacher. In the schools represented in the FG, these teaching units take place during the first two, less often three, years of secondary education. (Note: In Austria there are nine years of compulsory education in school. The first four years of compulsory education are

completed in primary schools; from age 10 children can choose different school types of secondary education which all comprise four educational levels. After that, all young persons must either continue school education, or go into professional training until the age of 18). In addition, at the beginning of secondary education, some schools offer the first one or two weeks so-called Get-to-know days where pupils get to know each other better and have excursions in form of project days to weld the pupils of the same class together.

One of the participants mentioned that interdisciplinary and professional competences were to be equivalent in the school curricula and the question was how interdisciplinary competences could be taught in the classroom. Usually, only selective aspects of SEL were represented in the curricula and that the curricula were mostly competence-oriented in the meaning of subject-specific.

The topics covered during SEL classes at school that were most frequently mentioned were conflicts/problems in the school class, incidents of bullying, accepting diversity, teamwork, personality development, getting to know strengths and weaknesses, at some schools peers and buddies are being educated, sometimes with the help of pedagogical advisors / school mediators.

Starting from the 7th grade (around age 12/13) there are in most cases no official hours foreseen for SEL, but nevertheless many class teachers still implement SEL.

In most of the cases a whole-school approach is missing, implementation of SEL is mainly left to individual class teachers and other committed teachers (who often teach religion, music, sport, English). Some teachers whose subject is part of the school-leaving examination at the end of 12th/13th grade, argue that there is not enough time to teach SEL in their subjects since they must prepare students for the school-leaving examinations (Note: in Austria students must take compulsory written exams in German, Mathematics and a Foreign Language).

2.2 Good practices, methods, books / materials on SEL

The teachers and teacher trainers participating in the focus group agree that over the time they gathered a diverse and big pool of methodologies and tools. A lot of material they use is acquired from further education and trainings/workshops they attended. At some schools there is a central place where all SEL materials (literature, guidelines, handbooks, ready-made lessons) are gathered and shared among the teachers and best practices identified. Sometimes there is a SEL teacher group where colleagues exchange tools, methodologies, and opinions and work together on the implementation of SEL in the school.

When asked whether a central place for materials was needed, it was mentioned that strengthening networking in general and networking of different school systems would be more important. There is already enough good literature and materials which are easily accessible, further education, and trainings/workshops available to develop skills and draw inspiration from.

Depending on the situation in the classroom, on what is needed by the pupils and the class in this moment, and on what the teacher wants to train with the children, different SEL methodologies are used and adapted to the situation. All teachers have methodologies they use more often according to their own preferences and where they feel most comfortable in applying the techniques. This also has to do with what they can convey authentically (e.g. not everyone feels comfortable doing theatre methodologies).

Some of the methodologies/tools to be used in school: role playing games, group work, theatre methodologies, emotion cards, taking positions in the room, cooperation games, addiction prevention –portfolio of strengths (strengths of my own personality and skills), changing perspectives, fostering empathy, peer mediation. Further, topics such as anti-racism, climate change, hate speech, COVID-19 are also covered during SEL classes.

Some of the methodologies/tools used at university level are self-reflective learning, dialogue with students, coaching discussions, problem-based learning, reflection, transaction analysis, conflict resolution and mediation, use of digital media such as Apps.

Some of the literature and online materials mentioned and used by the participants: [ÖZEPS](#), [ePOP: Print](#), [D. Kessler, D. Strohmeier - Gewaltprävention an der Schule](#), [Ch. Leimer - Vereinbarungskultur an Schulen](#), [F. Wallner - Mobbingprävention im Lebensraum Schule](#), [VIVID](#)-folder, [D. Hergovitch, R. Mitschka, M. Valtingoer - MACHT leben - Ein Begleiter für demokratische Lernprozesse durch das Schuljahr – Arbeiterkammer](#), [SCHILF](#), [Lions Quest](#) programmes, [Heroes](#) workshops, SEL literature/specific literature from Germany, universities' own didactical materials, K. Faller: Konflikte selber lösen, Berlin-Brandenburg Anti-Mobbing-Fibel, J. Walker – Der gewaltfreie Umgang mit Konflikten, J. Walker - Mediation in der Schule [Zentrum Polis](#), D. Diamond: Theatre for Living.

2.3 SEL competencies of the students

Conclusion from the SEEVAL project on the survey on SEL competencies of students

The following PPT slide was shown to the FG participants:

From the perspective of the teachers / school psychologists and educational advisors:

According to my opinion, students I work with...

Lowest results

- are able to regulate emotions like anger, fear, disappointment, etc.
- are able to make responsible decisions
- are able to understand and empathize with others
- are able to resolve conflicts constructively
- are able to be persistent and believe in yourself
- are able to manage stress

From the perspective of the students:

I am able to...

Lowest results

- cope with tension and stress
- control my emotions (such as anger or disappointment)
- deal with negative emotions such as sadness and anxiety
- set goals and try to achieve them
- resolve conflicts constructively

The FG participants were asked the following two questions:

What could be the reason that pupils master the above mentioned SEL competencies the least?

Do you think that teachers as role models master the competencies from the left column?

Not all participants could agree with the question as posed above and did not want to use these parameters to assess/ whether children had these competencies or not. It was mentioned that the students' opinion, on how they assess themselves, keeps changing. However, a high need from the children to be guided and to become sensitive about this topic can be observed. Teachers do act as role models and children copy behaviour patterns from the adults, teachers and parents as well. There is already a lot that children experience, even before they go to school.

Some teachers emphasised that they have made different experiences from those in the findings of the presented SEEVAL survey above. Some children have already very good social and emotional competencies, but many pupils still need some kind of guidance. The role of the teacher is to guide, to assist and to encourage them to learn these competencies and that is why it is important to include SEL into lessons.

Participants of the focus groups have further noted that it is not easy to deal with emotions like fear, anger, and sadness and to solve conflicts. If one is not aware of those topics it will be difficult to regulate them. It is a challenge for teachers and for children to deal with these emotions. Therefore, SEL should not only be included in individual subjects but a whole-school approach should be implemented. The importance of SEL must be clear to teachers and parents as well. SEL needs to be learned a whole lifetime.

It was also mentioned that young teachers were often overwhelmed. It takes time to grow into implementing all the methodologies and techniques they have learned at the university. Therefore, is important to include these topics also into teacher training and not only into further education and trainings/workshops so that prospective teachers already learn at the university how to transfer these competencies to children. University staff mentioned that at some universities it was already included, covering topics like handling conflicts, violence, conflict transformation, dealing with feelings, coping strategies. This way university students are learning to deal with their own feelings and emotions to think about them, to discuss in a group, to change perspective, and to try to understand them. At other universities these are just elective courses.

Many participants mentioned the importance of acting as a role model when teaching pre-service teachers and children at school. This way learners can see how teachers themselves react to different situations and deal with emotions to guide children in the process of adapting these competencies. The children will be able to learn how to deal with their emotions when the adults around them, teachers and parents, convey that they can control their emotions, deal with tensions and stress, and accept sadness. In the school context the school climate in general is important. Children are better capable of dealing with their emotions if there are role models to look up to.

Additionally, it was mentioned that in “Brennpunktschulen” (schools with many children from socially and economically vulnerable, often migrant, background) teachers spend a lot of time trying to teach them the German language or “low basics” so that little space is left to teach the children social and emotional competencies. The teachers also need to understand the different cultural backgrounds and thus the reactions of children to be able to support them accordingly.

Finally, it was noted that we live in an eventful time with many upheavals and insecurity, everything is going extremely fast, the digital revolution is in full swing. It needs to be considered what do children ultimately need. In fact, they still have the same needs, children want to feel accepted, to have a place in society, to be seen, to be perceived, and to have social interaction. Many colleagues are overwhelmed with the time frame given at schools to teach both professional as well as social and emotional competencies to the children.

2.4 Changes needed for better implementation of SEL in School

FG participants were asked the following question:

What changes are needed to enable better implementation of SEL in school?

At university level: Some of the suggestions mentioned by the focus group participants were to include obligatory SEL courses in the teacher training at all universities. The example was mentioned that feedback from students’ internships at schools showed that they did not lack professional competencies, but that they struggled with stress and the inability to resolve conflicts. It was further mentioned that pre-service teachers should use every opportunity to gain as much practical experience (teaching in the classroom) as possible while still studying at the university (e.g. working during the summer holidays with pupils). Teachers mentioned that this helped them implement what they had learned during the university courses. It was also suggested to provide free trainings/workshops on Supervision and Coaching for teachers. Most teachers have their know-how from further education and trainings/workshops they attended. The value of SEL should also be recognised by the system and that it should have a fixed place in teacher education. It was suggested that teacher education should be based more on self-awareness and practical experience. The teachers must be prepared for the future that will change a lot. It takes more different approaches, self-efficacy, and more courage.

At school level: Some teachers think that SEL should be anchored in school development policies and regulated by the local authorities for education. In that way a whole-school approach could be possible and not only committed teachers would implement SEL. On the other side some teachers mentioned that changes were sometimes dreams that could not be realized so quickly. They further elaborated that the current framework gave more flexibility than one would expect. The school management is especially important to create space for the implementation of SEL in addition to the professional curriculum, but teachers can also bring in their own learning content and design it themselves.

Conclusions and recommendations

In teacher education at universities, generic skills like social and emotional learning are not always offered as obligatory courses, sometimes only as elective courses. It can be observed that young teachers do not lack professional competencies but that they are often unprepared to deal with stress and conflict situations in classroom. It is recommended to offer SEL as obligatory courses in curricula of teacher education at university level to strengthen the social and personal competencies of prospective teachers so that they act as role models for children and can better support and guide them in acquiring those skills.

At school level it can be observed that teaching SEL very much depends on the overall commitment of the management/head teacher and some committed teachers. It can be noticed that in most cases SEL is selectively integrated into the school curriculum, but that a whole-school approach is missing. In the short/medium term it would be important to strengthen the awareness of the school management about the value of SEL in the classroom and the positive impact it has on children and on the overall atmosphere in the classroom, so that they can plan more school hours for SEL and define SEL learning objectives to be reached. In the long term and more difficult to achieve, more advocacy towards educational authorities and policy makers is needed. SEL should be anchored in school development policies and regulated by the regional authorities for education which would give SEL a high significance and oblige management to implement it in school.

Overall, it can be observed that teachers in Austria have enough opportunities for further education and trainings/workshops in the field of SEL and that there is a respectable amount of teaching materials and guidelines available to be used in the classroom. What seems to be missing are more networking opportunities among teachers, also from different school systems, to share practical experiences and situations from classroom, and to provide personal guidance and exchange.

Finally, it was mentioned that both at university and in school education, teaching should be based more on an esteeming atmosphere (role model), appreciative interaction, and collaboration. At school level it was stated that it was important that the possibilities of personal participation of pupils were enhanced, meaning that they could help shape lessons and togetherness in the classroom. This way self-responsibility and independent organisation could be strengthened. Young people need the social contact to their peers and teachers, and they need an appropriate space for these social encounters. More time and more space for social and emotional learning should arrive more deeply in the school culture and be supported by all – pupils, teachers, and parents.