A formative, inclusive, whole-school approach to the assessment of social and emotional education in the EU

Executive summary

NESET

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ABOUT NESET

NESET is an advisory network of experts working on the social dimension of education and training.

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture initiated the establishment of the network as the successor to NESSE (2007-2010), NESET (2011-2014) and NESET II (2015-2018).

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Aims

The inclusion of "Personal, Social and Learning to Learn" (PSLL) as a Key Competence in Lifelong Learning (EU Council, 2018) has underlined social and emotional education (SEE) as a key priority area in education and provided a roadmap on how Member States can integrate and strengthen SEE in their respective curricula. One of the current challenges facing this process is how it can be implemented and assessed. In view of the diverse and fragmented approaches to SEE and its assessment in the Member States, this report aims to provide a more integrated framework for the formative and inclusive assessment of SEE across the EU. In doing so, it aims to bring greater consistency to the practices used to assess this key competence at regional, national and European levels. Aside from the assessment of learners' social and emotional competences, the report also aims to extend assessment beyond the level of the individual to assess the contexts of the classroom and of the whole system of a school. This will help to create a more social, collaborative and inclusive European identity for the assessment of SEE – in contrast to other individualistic, personality and character-based modes of assessment.

Methodology

A review of international research on formative assessment and the assessment of SEE was carried out, focusing on both the formative assessment of individual students, as well as the assessment of classroom and whole-school contexts. Reference has also been made to EU policy documents, including the 'Personal, Social and Learning to Learn' Key Competence Framework developed by the Joint Research Centre at the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture (Sala et al., 2020), as well as previous NESET reports in this area. These include *Assessment Practices for 21st century learning* (Siarova et al., 2017); *Structural Indicators for Inclusive Systems in and around Schools* (Downes et al., 2017); and *Strengthening Social and Emotional Education as a core curricular area across the EU* (Cefai et al., 2018). In addition, EU-funded projects on SEE assessment such as *Learning to Be* and *Assessment of Transversal Skills 2020* have also been examined. This report is also based on data from a questionnaire sent to various stakeholders including the representatives of Member States' national education ministries in the European Commission's Working Groups. The School Educational Gateway platform was also examined to identify examples of good practices in the formative assessment of SEE at whole-school level.

Formative assessment of social and emotional education

Formative assessment (assessment for learning) is crucially interlinked with the teaching and learning processes, providing useful feedback to improve learning and instruction. It is easy to use by teachers and students, and puts the students at the centre of the evaluation process (Black & William, 1998). It is particularly suited to SEE, where students are actively involved in the learning process and where competences inherent in formative assessment, such as collaboration, self-regulation, and responsible decision making, are crucial components of the SEE curriculum. Formative assessment is also particularly suited to the assessment of social and emotional competences (e.g. observing and evaluating "Personal, Social and Learning to Learn" competences in meaningful contexts) that may not be easily measurable using traditional assessment practice. Formative assessment is a relatively new field, however, and various challenges and limitations need to be addressed for it to be used by teachers across Europe as a practical tool to improve the teaching and learning processes in SEE. These challenges include (among others) a lack of effective implementation and documentation, a lack of teacher training and preparation, a lack of clear guidelines and criteria, and inaccurate student assessment (Siarova et al., 2017).

Framework of guiding principles for the formative assessment of learners in social and emotional education in the EU

On the basis of a review of the literature on the assessment of social and emotional education and on formative assessment in general, this report presents a framework of guiding principles for the formative assessment of learners in SEE within the European context. The framework of guiding principles consists of various layers that resonate with the complexity of the teaching and learning processes. It construes formative assessment as a collaborative activity that involves teachers, learners and peers (and staff and parents, in the context of whole-school assessment), and goes beyond a focus on the assessment of individuals or groups of students. Although it is targeted primarily at the assessment of learners, the framework also informs the assessment of the classroom and whole-school contexts. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, which respectively cover the assessment of the classroom and whole-school contexts, refer to some of the framework's guiding principles, while extending some of them to the assessment of contexts. The framework is underpinned by a guiding set of key principles enshrined in EU communications, policy documents and reports on SEE and related areas, as well as in reviews of formative assessment and of the assessment of SEE. According to the framework's nine key guiding principles, assessment should be:

- **Respectful of the rights of the child:** assessment of SEE should not violate or impinge on the rights of the child to self-expression, privacy, quality education, wellbeing and mental health;
- **Ipsative,** with progress measured according to the learner's own learning over time;
- **Inclusive and equity-driven:** the forms and tools of assessment used should provide equal opportunities to all learners to demonstrate their learning and progress;
- **Universal**, for all learners in the classroom;
- **Strengths based**: assessment is not about the identification and diagnosis of social and emotional deficits or personality problems, but a formative evaluation of social and emotional learning;
- **Collaborative,** with learners (self-assessment) and peers (peer assessment) being active agents in the assessment process;
- **Systemic and ecological:** the classroom and whole-school contexts are also formatively evaluated in relation to their enhancement of social and emotional competences. This report recognises not only the importance of the whole system of a school for the assessment of SEE, but also the centrality of an inclusive systems framework in providing key supporting conditions for SEE in schools. School and classroom climates are not only central to SEE assessment, but are affected by national policy background conditions;
- **Developmentally appropriate,** reflecting the developmental shifts taking place from early childhood to middle childhood to adolescence;
- **Culturally relevant,** taking into consideration and effectively addressing the social and cultural diversity of learners so that all students, irrespective of their individual or cultural characteristics, have equal opportunities to demonstrate their learning proficiency.

The framework also identifies four enabling factors that will help the implementation and maintenance of effective formative assessment of learners in SEE:

- **The alignment of assessment with the 'Personal, Social and Learning to Learn' Key Competence.** This entails systemic coordination between social and emotional competences, the development of these competences through

instruction, and the assessment of students' development of the competences at different ages;

- **Use of multiple sources and various modes of assessment,** including technology-enhanced formative assessment;
- **Feasible and practical** modes of assessment;
- **Teacher education**, mentoring and support in the implementation and formative assessment of SEE, both during pre-service education and through continuing professional learning.

Tools for the formative assessment of SEE

The review of the existing literature on the assessment of social and emotional education indicates that there is no single tool that would provide a comprehensive formative assessment of learners in SEE, but that a combination of different tools is needed to assess social and emotional competences. Analysis suggests that a combination of tools may be used for the formative assessment of learners in SEE. These include tools that tap into various sources such as teacher, self and peer assessment, as well as use of multiple instruments such as formative rubrics and checklists, portfolios and technology-enhanced formative tools. Various examples can be found in EU-funded projects and practices in schools in the EU and other countries. These illustrate how some of these tools may be used by schools and teachers in the classroom. This report also proposes ways in which the developing LifeComp Framework for PSLL Key Competence (Sala et al., 2020) can make use of formative rubrics and progression levels to guide assessment for learning. Schools and teachers can be flexible about their choice of the specific tools to be employed in the formative assessment of learners in SEE – as long as the tools used inform the learning process, guide assessment within an inclusive, collaborative and strengths-based approach, and follow the framework of guiding principles proposed by the authors of this report.

It is not only necessary to assess students in the classroom, but also the classroom and whole-school contexts and how these contribute to the promotion of social and emotional education. Classroom climate is one of the primary drivers of SEE, and is crucial for the effective development of social and emotional learning. This report provides a formative assessment tool that may be used to assess classroom climate on the basis of teachers' and students' evaluations. It includes nine indicators for the evaluation of classroom climate, namely cultural responsiveness and inclusion, sense of safety, positive classroom management, teacher-student and peer relationships, collaboration, active engagement, challenge and high expectations, and student voice. The report provides also structural indicators for the systemic evaluation of the whole school in the promotion of SEE. Structural indicators can distinguish efforts at state, municipality and/or school level, as well as guiding action and being policy- and practice-relevant. Because these indicators focus on systems and not simply on individuals, they offer a simple and flexible approach to understanding policy, strategy and implementation. They address whether or not key structures, mechanisms or principles are in place in a system. The indicators go beyond the distinction between quantitative and qualitative, because they are factual, generally being framed as potentially verifiable yes/no answers; they can work at the level of a national strategic framework and at an institutional project level, both for external evaluation and self-evaluation. They offer strategic direction as to what issues are addressed at system level, while also providing flexibility at local or national level as to how to address these issues.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerging from the report are aimed at providing a more integrated and structured approach to the formative assessment of SEE, and address existing gaps in the formative assessment of SEE in the European Union.

1. Need for integrated, competence-based formative assessment of social and emotional education across the EU

In view of the differences between Member States in the implementation and assessment of social and emotional education, there is a need to clearly identify the key social and emotional competences so as to enable schools and teachers to plan and assess learning accordingly. The inclusion of "Personal, Social and Learning to Learn" Key Competence for Lifelong Learning, followed by the LifeComp conceptual framework (Sala et al., 2020), has begun an ongoing process for the effective integration and implementation of SEE in curricula across the Member States through a dialogic, collaborative approach. Formative assessment methods need to be developed and adapted to the "Personal, Social and Learning to Learn" competences. Assessment will make use of a combination of different formative tools tapping into various sources – namely, teacher assessment, self-assessment, and peer assessment. It will also make use of various tools such as formative rubrics and checklists, portfolios, and technology enhanced formative tools. This will help to promote a more common and integrated approach to the assessment of SEE in the EU.

2. Need for developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive and inclusive assessment methods

Many existing SEE assessment tools do not capture the developmental changes that take place at different ages from preschool to late adolescence, and there is a clear need for the development of instruments that can do so. There is also a particular need for universal assessment tools for social and emotional competences in preschool and young children, making use of creative and flexible techniques. As the European Union becomes more socially and culturally diverse, the need for culturally responsive assessment that makes use of flexible and multiple forms of assessment, becomes more salient. Formative assessment of learners, combined with the assessment of classroom and whole school climates, helps not only to avoid culturally biased assessment, but also to enhance equity in assessment and prevent the replication of social inequalities.

3. Need for self and collaborative assessment

Formative assessment needs to place the learners themselves at the centre of the learning and assessment processes, taking a more active and central role both as individual, self-regulated learners and as critical peers. Students need to be trained by teachers on how to assess themselves and their peers, and be provided with clear and child-friendly assessment criteria and mentoring. This will help assessment to be more accurate and meaningful. To achieve this effectively, teachers will require training.

4. Need for practical, feasible and technology enhanced assessment tools

Formative assessment tools need to be practical and meaningful for teachers and students, both in their administration and their interpretation. Including teachers and students in the design of such tools helps to ensure that the resulting tools are both usable and feasible. The use of technology-enhanced assessment has also been found very useful in formative assessment, providing immediate feedback for both students and teachers while facilitating students' active participation. In order for technology-based assessment to work, however, both teachers and students need to be able to use it effectively. This requires continuous training and technical

support. Schools themselves need to be provided with the resources needed to further integrate technology into the curriculum, and to make more effective use of it in formative assessment.

5. Need for assessment of the classroom context

The assessment framework proposed in this report underlines that social and emotional learning is more likely to occur in contexts promoting attitudes, relationships, behaviours and practices that resonate with social and emotional competences. It is thus necessary to assess not only the students in the classroom, but also the classroom and whole-school climates and how these may contribute more effectively to the development of social and emotional competences. In order to thrive, social and emotional education requires a classroom climate that is safe and secure, democratic, culturally responsive and inclusive, collaborative, challenging and engaging, and which promotes learner agency and autonomy. This study provides a formative assessment tool consisting of nine indicators that teachers, together with their students, can adapt and use to assess and improve the classroom climate. There is a clear need, however, for teacher education and support in developing their own social and emotional competences and maintaining their social and emotional health and wellbeing, as these are inextricably linked with the effective implementation and assessment of social and emotional education.

6. Need to assess the whole system of a school

In a study involving representatives of the ministries of education in eight Member States, as well as the national ministries in charge of ECEC in 17 Member States, it was found that most had a strong, consistent focus on school climate in the external inspection and self-evaluation of schools, both in early child education and at primary and post primary levels. While feedback from both children and parents is a strong feature of self-evaluation in most Member States, their participation in external evaluations is less conspicuous. National policies are also required that promote whole-school, inclusive systems approaches, aligned with schools in a common purpose as part of a commitment to implement the "Personal, Social and Learning to Learn" Key Competence. It would therefore be useful for Member States to develop coherent national strategies that cover the following aspects:

- Developing alternatives to the segregation of migrants, Roma or other ethnic minority groups, whether between schools or within a school;
- Providing alternatives to suspension and expulsion through provision of on-site multidisciplinary support teams in schools;
- Prevention of bullying, acknowledging that this is not yet in place in a number of Member States;
- Prevention of homophobic bullying, acknowledging that this is not yet in place in a number of Member States;
- Prevention of xenophobic bullying;
- Promoting conflict resolution skills, as well as cultural and relational competences, among teachers and ECEC practitioners across all forms of initial teacher education. This will help to avoid authoritarian communication approaches based on fear and anger, which lead to distrust and alienation among children;
- Embedding students' voices and feedback into schools, including school policies. A strong focus should be given to such feedback being part of external inspections and school self-evaluation processes, as part of a rights-based approach that builds on Art. 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;

- Embedding parents' voices and feedback into schools, including school policies. A strong focus should be given to such feedback being part of external inspections and school self-evaluation processes;
- Promoting equality and non-discriminative schools and ECEC settings. A strong focus should be given to this in external inspections and school self-evaluation processes, including direct consultation with minority groups (ethnic, including Roma and Traveller, migrant, LGBTI) and socio-economically marginalised groups.

The Key Principles for Whole-School Inclusive System Approaches to the Formative Assessment of SEE, and the Structural Indicators Matrix Tools for National Policy Makers and Schools included in this report provide a useful framework and set of tools for national policymakers, external inspectorates, school principals and ECEC management to formatively evaluate the whole school, in order to identify strengths and areas for improvement in social and emotional education.

7. Need for professional learning, mentoring, support and empowerment

Teachers require training and mentoring, both during initial teacher training and as part of continuing education, in how to integrate the formative assessment of social and emotional education within their classroom practice. This includes making sense of social and emotional competences, learning standards and progression levels; developing, adapting and/or making use of a range of formative assessment tools; and training, guiding and supporting students in self- and peer-assessment. Teachers would also benefit from training and support in making effective use of technology-enhanced formative assessment. In addition, teachers require training and mentoring in developing their *own* social and emotional competences, and making effective use of them in their daily practice. With schools struggling to find time and space to accommodate the many competing areas of teachers' professional development, there is a clear need for SEE to be prioritised at national level, while identifying creative ways to organise such professional development. Professional networks, collaboration platforms and teacher learning communities provide collaborative learning environments in which teachers can share, discuss and improve their SEE assessment practices. Support needs to be available at school, regional and national levels to assist teachers in their implementation of the formative assessment of SEE. Teachers also need to be actively involved in the design of formative assessment instruments through a bottom-up approach at school, regional and national levels. Lastly, there is a need for structures and resources that actively promote the health and wellbeing of teachers, which has a direct impact on the quality of SEE delivered in the classrooms.

8. Need for the development of new, useful, and effective tools

This report identifies a number of areas in which there is a need for further research and development. These include the need for more robust research demonstrating the effectiveness of formative assessment in enhancing the learning and development of social and emotional competences. There is also a need for research projects to create developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive SEE assessment tools for use in diverse classrooms across Europe, and to further develop technology-enhanced formative assessment tools for SEE. The dissemination and sharing of good practices among Member States through publications, research and networking is also recommended. To help schools overcome the difficulties they may encounter in effectively implementing the formative assessment of SEE, networking is recommended both within and between Member States, connecting those who are already actively engaged in the formative assessment of SEE with those who are just starting out.