

Social and Emotional Skills Development in Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe

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A survey for European Psychologists on assessment tools of social and emotional skills in children from birth through age 7: Results from Portugal

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Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) can be defined as a process by which children acquire knowledge and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop positive identities, manage emotions and behaviors, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy in their interaction with others, develop supportive relationships and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2021). Worldwide, SEL has been largely studied, with several authors interested in understanding the developmental processes of socioemotional skills in childhood and adolescence across educational settings (e.g., Halle et al., 2016; Humphrey et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2017). Thus, both nationally, in Portugal, and internationally, the pivotal role of formal and informal educational contexts (such as family context and early childhood educational settings such as preschools) in supporting the development of socioemotional skills (SES) is underlined, with growing interest on the implementation of SEL practices in educational contexts aiming at fostering children's success and well-being (e.g., Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016; Mendes et al., 2017).

Although the number of studies on the positive effects of SEL interventions in preschool-age children SES is growing, little is known about the assessment practices and interventions used in preschool children attending educational settings such as childcare centers and preschools (e.g., Djamnezhad et al., 2021). According to Jones and colleagues (2016), it is urgent to develop SES assessment measures that can map and outline the needs and factors to be monitored since birth. In the same line, Denham et al. (2009) underline that assessing to intervene and promote the development of SES in children and adolescents is crucial for promoting their well-being. By improving the assessment practices of children's SES development, we will also be gathering



relevant information to guide intervention practices and enhancing its adjustments to children's and contexts needs (Matthews et al., 2004; Zeidner et al., 2002).

The assessment of children's development has been a classic area within the work of psychologists, so it is also stressed here that these professionals seem to have a relevant role when we refer to the need to be able to map and assess the development of children, from early ages, also in the development of SES. Therefore, considering the lack of information on how psychologists and educational professionals can assess and monitor SES, it is important to better understand psychologists' assessment practices and knowledge of SES measure for children aged between 0 and 6 years old. More specifically, this exploratory descriptive study aims to: examine how often psychologists assess SES in children aged 0 to 7 years; understand which measures of socioemotional skills do Portuguese psychologists know for children aged between 0 and 7 years old; and explore the challenges psychologists face in the assessment of SES of children aged 0 to 7 years.

Method

Participants

Participants include 89 psychologists, mostly Portuguese (98.9%), from different regions of the country, aged between 25 and 63 years ($M = 38.57$, $SD = 9.11$). The majority (97.8%, $n = 87$) were female, and two were male (2.2%). Regarding their educational level, 15.7% hold a PhD degree in psychology, 69.6% had a master's degree in psychology, and 14.5% had a bachelor's degree in psychology. Participants have specialization in Clinical and Health Psychology (32.6%), School and Educational Psychology (25.8%), and School and Educational Psychology cumulatively with Others (41.6%). Professional experience (years of work) ranged between 0 and 38 years ($M = 13.6$, $SD = 9.09$); experience with children between 0 and 7 years old ranged between 0 and 33 years ($M = 10.85$, $SD = 8.44$). Sixty two percent of participants worked in schools, 23.6% worked in clinics, 10.1% in associations, and 4.5% in other types of organizations.

Measures

A specific questionnaire was developed by the EU-SELF team to collect data. The "Assessment Tools of Social and Emotional Skills in children from birth through age 7: A survey for European Psychologists", is composed of two parts, namely: (i) sociodemographic characterization; (ii) characterization of assessment practices. Sociodemographic characterization consists of 13 closed questions that address from age, gender, academic qualifications, to the type of organization in which the psychologist is working. Part 2 - characterization of the assessment practices – is composed by 12 questions, including closed-ended and open-ended questions addressing the frequency with which the psychologist assesses the SES of children aged 0 to 7 years, as well as



the purpose for conducting the such assessments. The questions regarding the frequency of assessment practices are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Never" to "Very Often".

Procedures

Data were collected in the scope of the international project "EU-SELF Social and Emotional Skills Development in Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe" [reference number 2019-1-BG01-KA201-062593]. In Portugal, data were collected through an online self-report questionnaire. The protocol included an informed consent, where it was emphasized that the anonymity and confidentiality of participants was ensured, following the standards of data protection of the RGPD and the deontological code of the Portuguese Psychologists' Association. Data were collected between March and September 2020.

Results

Goal 1. How often do psychologists assess socioemotional skills in children aged 0 to 7 years?

Results show that, overall, most participants assess children up to 7 years old sometimes (44.9%), with 27% of psychologists in this study mentioning that rarely (i.e., less than once a month) assess children in this age range and 16.9% assessing children often (weekly). A lower percentage of participants refers never to assess children under 7 years old (9.00%), and 2.2% mentioning to assess preschool aged children very often (several times per week). When taking a close look at the assessment frequency by age groups (namely 0-1 year, 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 3-4 years, 4-5 years, 5-6 years, and 6-7 years) it was possible to understand that 75.3% participants never assess children in the 0-1 year age group. Similarly, for the 1-2 years age group, 66.3% of psychologist participating in this study mentioned never to assess children within this age range. The percentage of participants never assessing children for the age group 2-3 years old slowly decreases to 53.9%; with 13.5% reporting to evaluating these children sometimes, and 5.6% mentioning to often assess children aged 2-3 years. For older children, namely for 3-4-year-old children psychologists seem to report more assessment practices, with 31.5% participants mention to rarely assess children within this age group, 25.8% assessing sometimes, and 12.4% often. For this age group 30.3% mentioned never to assess children. For the age group 4-5, 31.5% participants sometimes assess children SES and 20.2% refer often assessments. For the age group 5-6, 39.3% participants sometimes assess children; 33.7% mention often assessments; and 11.2% never or rarely assess children in this age group. For the age group 6-7, 38.2% of participants sometimes assess children, 31.5% mention to assess this age group often, 12.4% assess them

rarely, and 9.0% never assess children aged 6-7. Detailed information can be consulted in Table 1.

When analyzing the questions about the frequency of assessment of children's SES it is possible to understand that 36.0% of participants assess SES sometimes, 28.1% assess SES rarely, 16.9% never assess SES of children under 7 years old, 14.6% assess SES often and 4.5% assess SES very often. Still in the scope of assessment practices of children under 7 years old SES, 77.7% of participants consider useful or very useful the measures/instruments they have access and use in SES assessment; on the other hand, 15.9% of participants consider useless or very useless the social and emotional assessment measures/instruments available.

Participants were also asked to explain "What criteria do they use when choosing measures/instruments for assessing social and emotional skills in children up to 7 years old?". This was an open-ended question that was answered only by 53 participants. The criterion most often mentioned (by 31 participants) was related to the instruments' characteristics, such as psychometric properties, measures validated for the Portuguese population, time of application, efficacy, coding and interpretation procedures, reliability, availability, cost of the measure, suitability, and the content of the dimensions included in the measure(s). The second most frequently mentioned criterion, by 26 of the participants was related to the goal of the assessment and on how useful the information that the measure provides was in relation to the purpose of the assessment; the appropriateness of the assessment measure for the child being assessed was also mentioned.

Table 1. Summary of frequency of assessment of children aged under 7 years old.

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	<i>f (%)</i>				
Under 7 years	2 (2.2)	15 (16.9)	40 (44.9)	24 (27.0)	8 (9.0)
<i>Age group</i>					
0-1	0 (0)	1 (1.1)	5 (5.6)	16 (18.0)	67 (75.3)
1-2	0 (0)	2 (2.2)	4 (4.5)	24 (27.0)	59 (66.3)
2-3	0 (0)	5 (5.6)	12 (13.5)	24 (27.0)	48 (53.9)
3-4	0 (0)	11 (12.4)	23 (25.8)	28 (31.5)	27 (30.3)
4-5	1 (1.1)	18 (20.2)	28 (31.5)	21 (23.6)	21 (23.6)
5-6	4 (4.5)	30 (33.7)	35 (39.3)	10 (11.2)	10 (11.2)
6-7	8 (9.0)	28 (31.5)	34 (38.2)	11 (12.4)	8 (9.0)
SES under 7 years	4 (4.5)	13 (14.6)	32 (36.0)	25(28.1)	15 (16.9)



Goal 2. Which measures of socioemotional skills do Portuguese psychologists for children aged between 0 and 7 years old?

Several measures were listed by the Portuguese psychologist participating in this study, including specific measures for assessing children's SES and overall developmental measures which included a SES related dimension. Moreover, participants also listed measures that did not focused on SES and those were excluded from the results listed in Table 2.

Direct assessment measures, parent and/or teacher report measures, and observation measures were identified by participants. Curiously, several participants identified overall assessment method, such as interviews and observation – not specifying any measure when asked to list the measures they used/knew; as well as several books and intervention SEL programs in the scope of this question.

Table 2. Summary of the assessment measures mentioned by professionals.

Measure	Frequency
ACES: Assessment of Children's Emotion Skills	2
ASEBA – Preschool version: Achenbach System for Empirically Based Assessment (CBCL/1 ½ - 5, C-TRF)	18
AVE	1
BAR-ILAN: Picture Test for Children	9
BAS 1 and 2: Socialization Battery (<i>Bateria de socialización 1 y 2</i>)	1
Bayley-III: Bayley Scales of Infant and Toddler Development, Third edition (Socio-emocional scale)	1
BERS-2 – TRS: Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale – Teacher Rating Scale, Second edition	X
CAT: Children's Apperception Test	3
CAB: Clinical Assessment of Behavior	1
CDI: The Children's Depression Inventory	2
CMAS/ RCMAS: Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale/ Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale	2
Conners CBRS : Conners Comprehensive Behavior Rating Scale (parents, teachers and self-report forms)	2
CST: Challenging Situations Task	1
Carolina Curriculum	2
EACE- Escala de Avaliação do Conhecimento Emocional	1
EADS	1
EAQ: Emotion Awareness Questionnaire for Children	1
SSRS: Social Skills Rating System (SSRS)	2
Griffiths / Griffiths III: Griffiths Scale of Child Development, Third Edition	1
Goodenough Draw-a-Person Test	1
IIES: Inventário de Identificação de Emoções e Sentimentos	1
Raven's Progressive Matrices	1



PANAS: Positive and Negative Affect Schedule	1
Teste de Pata Negra	2
PKBS-2: Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales	1
Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children	3
Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale	1
Qwol	1
R.A.T.C: Roberts Apperception Test For Children	13
SDQ: Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire	3
QACSE: Social and Emotional Competencies Evaluation Questionnaire	2
SIS	1
SSBS-2: School Social Behavior Scales	2
SSIS: Social Skills Improvement System - Rating Scale	7
STAI: State-Trait Anxiety Inventory	1
The Family Drawing	7
Karl Koch's Tree Test	1
PAT: Psychosocial Assessment Tool	1
MSCS: Multidimensional Self Concept Scale	1
Vineland-II: Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales Second Edition – Survey Interview Form	1
WISC III: Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children	2

Goal 3. What are the challenges in the assessment of socioemotional skills of children aged 0 to 7 years?

Table 3 summarizes the main challenges and needs identified by Portuguese psychologists regarding the assessment practices of SES of children aged between 0 and 7 years old. Overall participants mentioned the challenges related to the existing measure characteristics, as for instance the few measures available, according to their knowledge, to assess young children SES, as well as the fact that existing measures are not translated and validated to the Portuguese population making it difficult to access, use and interpret them with a considerable level of trust. Participants also mentioned that the measures they knew were often very time consuming, with long application times and complex coding and interpretation procedures. Thus, Portuguese psychologists referred as needs more information about the available measures, more training courses for technicians in this area and more affordable assessment materials.

Table 3. Summary of challenges and needs identified by Portuguese Psychologists.

What kind of challenges do you encounter in assessing socioemotional skills in children up to age 7?	What are the main needs regarding measures to assess socioemotional skills in children up to 7 years old?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of SES assessment materials/tools - Difficulties in finding SES assessment materials/tools - Instruments not validated for Portuguese Population - Existing tests are long and very time consuming to analyze - Difficulties in accessing direct assessment and observation measures, for children aged < 2 years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need for the development and diversification of assessment measures/tools - Need for greater dissemination and information about the materials/instruments available in Portugal, - Need for more training courses for technicians in this area - Need for more affordable or even free evaluation materials and training courses - - Need of systematization of the studies carried out in Portugal, concerning the instruments studied and validated for Portuguese population.

Conclusions

Assessing practices are fundamental for monitoring not only children’s development of SES but also for planning and monitoring intervention practices in educational settings regarding SEL. Regardless, and according to the present study results it seems that there is a shortage of resources and knowledge from Portuguese psychologists regarding measures to assess SES. More specifically, our results show that most participants in this study do not assess children’s under 3-years old and, when analyzing practices regarding the assessment of SES of children under 7 years old, we found that 16.9% never assess children withing this age range, and 28.1% rarely engage in such assessments also. When assessing children SES, 36.0% participants mention to assess it sometimes, with only 4.5% assessing these skills very often. Considering the pivotal role of educational contexts in fostering children’s SES, as well as the recommendation of universal intervention and assessment practices since preschool years for promoting children’s SES, these results may point to the need of further studies to better understand how educational settings and psychologists are approaching children’s socioemotional development. We note that not all the participant psychologists were working in educational settings, although 61. 8% worked in schools, plus 10.1% worked in educational organizations. This needs to be taken into consideration when interpreting these results, as psychologist working for instance in clinics (23%) may only have the opportunity to assess children when signs of difficulties emerge.

Regarding the measures that Portuguese Psychologists know and use for assessing children under 7 years SES, we note that both specific SES measures and generalist development measures were identified. Participants often identified assessment techniques, suc as interviews



and observation, and not specific assessment measures in the scope of the identification of the measured used. Most of the measures mentioned by participants were of North American origin and have not been translated and adapted to Portuguese, which explains the challenges identified by Portuguese psychologists in this study.

Overall, results from this study show that main challenges of psychologists when aiming at assessing children under 7 years SES related to the scarcity of instruments validated for the Portuguese population and adequate for such young children as infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Additionally, is important to highlight that professionals reinforced the need of greater dissemination and information on the materials/instruments available in Portugal and validated for the Portuguese population, making it relevant to have more training for psychologist in the scope of SES assessment in early years. The price of assessment materials and training courses was also mentioned, with the need of more affordable materials being stress.

Regardless of some limitations (e.g., low number of participants, not all participants were working in educational setting, missing data on open ended question), this study provides some overview of frequent of assessment practices of SES in children under 7 years old in the Portuguese context, bringing into light the lack of training, the little number of appropriate measures for younger children in Portugal, and the need of further development and adaptation of development measures for fostering universal assessment and intervention SEL practices in early childhood education settings.

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