

Bulgaria

Country Overview

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Country name

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Introduction

There is a different management and different status of the education and care of children between 0 and 6 to 7 years of age in Bulgaria. This is due to a so-called “split system.” Respectively, there is a stronger focus on care in nurseries for children from 10 months until 3 years of age, and a stronger focus on education for children from 3 until 6 to 7 years of age, or entering first year, which are in preschool education. There are national standards for knowledge and competencies that children must cover during this period (Law on Preschool and School Education, 13.10.2015, last changes 18.09.2020; Preschool Education State Standards in Ordinance № 5, 3 of June 2016 on Preschool Education). Social skills are recognized and are included into one of the domains (3. The world around), however, they are a very small part and are mostly defined as knowledge rather than skills. However, the process for the promotion and recognition of social and emotional skills (SES) in Bulgaria has started. It is mostly a bottom-up process. In some kindergartens, implementation of SES activities can be initiated by the staff, within the framework of projects or other types of cooperation. There are private business organisations, child centres, educational centres, therapeutic centres, or individual professionals who offer various activities for social and/or emotional skill development for children. However, there is not much information regarding these approaches, the types of activities, necessary qualifications, proof of effectiveness, etc. Non-governmental sectors are also active in the field, mainly via finance projects for specific vulnerable target groups.

There is not a common practice for practitioners working with children in early and preschool years to assess only children's social and/or emotional skills. Officially, distributed measures that can be identified currently are mainly two groups: (1) developmental measures, which include social and emotional domains and measures, and (2) measures for children with developmental disorders.

There are no national or regionally recognized programs or interventions that target SES, but in the country, there are many initiatives: (1) initiatives within kindergartens, (2) initiatives by non-governmental organisations and (3) initiatives by private business organisations.

There are foreign programs adapted in Bulgaria (Zippy's Friends, Verhaltenstraining im Kindergarten), but they are not widely used. There is a newly developed Bulgarian program, “Play with Fori”, which is still in the process of approbation.

There is still a lot to be done regarding the promotion and development of children's SES in Bulgaria. There are various initiatives but they are rather patchy, not sustainable, and are with no clear capacity or effectiveness.

Development

There is a different management and different status of the education and care of children between 0 and 6 to 7 years of age in Bulgaria. This is due to the so-called “split system.” Between 10 months until 3 years of age, children can go to nurseries, institutions primarily considered for young children’s care. The nurseries are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health, and are managed by local authorities. According to the regulations, nurses are the main caregivers in the nurseries. Children between 3 to 6 or 7 years of age, or entering first class, are enrolled in kindergartens. In Bulgaria, kindergartens are considered educational institutions (preschool education) and are under the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education and Science. Many more children in Bulgaria attend kindergartens (215,666 for the academic year 2020/2021, data 26.04.2021, National Statistical Institute, 2021) than nurseries (29,238, data 31.12.2020, National Statistical Institute, 2020). It is much more common for most of the children to be raised at home until the age of three. Due to these differences regarding the institutions for young and preschool children’s education and care in the country, there are different national regulations and requirements.

Nurseries are not considered educational institutions. Due to this, there are no specific requirements for the development of children’s cognitive, language or social and emotional skills. In the period from 2008 to 2014, national standards for early childhood development for children between 0 to 3 years of age were developed (Атанасова-Трифенова et al., 2014). UNICEF Bulgaria supported the whole process. The standards cover the physical, cognitive, social, emotional and language development of the child. In 2017, these national standards were suggested to be accepted officially in a political document offered for public consultations and review by the Minister of Health and the Minister of Education - Ordinance on Standards for Early Childhood Development (Council of Ministers, Portal for Public Consultations, 2017). In the ordinance, four areas were defined: 1. health, physical and motor development; 2. cognitive development; 3. personal - emotional and social development; 4. linguistic and communicative development. These areas were aligned to the standards for education in preschool settings. The social and emotional area was aligned to the so-called “The world around” domain (for e.g. self-affirmation, communication with others, etc.).

Kindergartens, as it was mentioned, are considered educational institutions. They can be municipal or private. The education in kindergartens (of all kinds) follows the requirements set in the Law on Preschool and School Education (effective from 13.10.2015, last changes 18.09.2020), and according to the Preschool Education State Standards in Ordinance № 5, 3 of June, 2016 on Preschool Education (effective from 01.08.2016). All the competencies that children must develop during their preschool education are defined in seven areas: 1. Bulgarian language and literature; 2. Mathematics; 3. The world around; 4. Fine arts; 5. Music; 6. Design and technology; 7. Physical culture. Social and emotional skills are partly defined by area 3. of The world around. Social skills are mentioned as a priority in this area, however, the educational content of the area covers specific ideas and skills about the world around, systematised in four educational cores: self-affirmation and communication with others, social and health environment, the world of nature and cultural, and national values. We must acknowledge that social skills are recognized as of utmost importance, and are included in such a basic document regulating the education of preschool children in Bulgaria. However, unfortunately, they are just a small part of one of the educational areas. On the other hand, the expected results are formulated in a very general manner (e.g. “Expresses attachment to members of the family.”, “Has a specific notions of trust and tolerance for others.”), or does not define core social skills (Has a specific idea of the “social role” student), (Ordinance № 5, 3 of June, 2016 on Preschool Education, p. 27). Rather than focusing on the skills children should develop, the defined results mainly focus on the knowledge the children have to/should acquire.

However, we must mention that a process of such promotion and recognition of SES in Bulgaria has started. It is on-going, and in the last few years, it has become stronger and stronger even though it is mostly a bottom-up process. On an organisational level, there are kindergartens that adapt and/or develop and experiment with such practises. Usually, those are initiatives undertaken by any of the following – the kindergarten’s pedagogical team, the kindergarten’s principal, kindergarten’s psychologist (if such specialist is employed), individual teachers, etc. Such

initiatives can also be initiated within the framework of projects in which the kindergarten is a partner. Another option, but rather rare according to the practice, are extracurricular activities that target the development of children's social and emotional skills that are offered by external companies. These activities are offered in the kindergartens, but they are optional. Parents can choose which kindergartens their children attend, paying additional fees for such options.

There are many private business organisations, child centres, educational centres, therapeutic centres or individual professionals (psychologists, kindergarten teachers, speech therapists, etc.), mostly in the capital and the big cities in the country, who also promote social and/or emotional intelligence, social skills and/or emotional skills development for children. They offer various activities and programmes that promote SES and emotional intelligence development. On one hand, these endeavours are good initiatives. They raise social and emotional skills development as an important topic, pointing out the various benefits to sensitise parents and increase their knowledge on the topic. On the other hand, however, these are private endeavours. These services are accessible only for children whose parents can afford to cover such costs and are convince of the worth of efforts. Obviously, they are in very different formats - from individual sessions to group sessions with various different durations. Their biggest shortcomings, however, are that usually all these offers are very general; are rarely clear in what exactly the skills are that children will develop; if it is a program, there is no clarity about its content; usually there is no information how the skills will be developed; what is the approach/techniques/methods that will be applied; what is the qualification of the people who will work with the children; no proof for effectiveness, standards of implementation, etc. They follow different approaches, and this is understandable, but rarely is clear which one is used.

In the last few years, there have been many initiatives regarding social and emotional skills development provided by non-governmental organisations working with children and/or parents, promoting children's wellbeing, and providing training and effective practises for parents. These organisations not only recognize SES as an important topic and promote it, but also try to implement various applied activities. Usually this happens within the framework of financed projects. More often, depending on the organization's profile, the implemented measures may target specific vulnerable groups – children from Roma minority (Health and Social Development Foundation (HESED), Trust for Social Achievement), children from poor families (Trust for Social Achievement), child abuse prevention and treatment (Animus association); children with disabilities (Karin Dom), etc. The initiatives targeting universal practises for typically developing children are much less common. Examples of some such projects are part of the ones recently financed by the Lachezar Tsotsorkov Foundation.

There is still a lot to be done regarding the promotion and development of social and emotional skills (SES) in children in Bulgaria, not just for young and preschool children, but also for children of all ages. There is still no systematic integration of social and emotional skills development on a national level, nor in the different levels of education. SES are still not recognized as key competences from policy stakeholders and decision makers. The topics for social and emotional skills are still not integrated within the educational programs for professionals who work with children in nurseries and kindergarten - preschool teachers, educators, nurseries, etc.), nor in schools. Such analyses are initiated and currently in progress by the private Foundation "Lachezar Tsotsorkov". There is still no shared understanding among professionals, no common framework and standards. In Bulgaria, there is still no program for social and emotional skills development for early and preschool children. As described above, all the initiatives and actions are rather patchy, not sustainable (they end when the project is over) with no clear capacity and effectiveness.

Assessment

On one hand, it is not a common practice for practitioners to work with children in early and preschool years to assess only children's social and/or emotional skills. On the other hand, in Bulgaria, there are not many adapted and standardised measures for practitioners. So far, there are two companies, Guinty Psychometric, Bulgaria (Guinty Psychometrics Bulgaria website, n.d.) and Hestia/Prometrics (Hestia Foundation website, n.d.), who officially distribute assessment measures. Their children assessment measures portfolios' are increasing in the last years but still a lot to be done. Part of the measures are developmental test batteries for assessment of children's overall development split into different developmental domains, including social and emotional development. Such measures are DP-3: Developmental Profile (Guinty Psychometric Bulgaria), Denver II Developmental Screening Test (Hestia), DESK 3-6: Dortmund Developmental Screening for Preschools (Hestia). There is another developmental measure called the Screening Test for 3-years-old. It measures children's development in 5 domains – physical, social, emotional, cognitive, language. Social and emotional development are two separate domains. It is distributed by the Ministry of Education only for use in kindergartens for assessing the level of development of children starting at the preschool educational level. It is for a very limited age-range from 3 years until 3 years and 6 months (Атанасова-Трифонова et al., 2014).

Another big part of the measures used in Bulgaria are the ones containing partly social and or emotional skills, but in measures for children with developmental disorders. Guinty Psychometrics, Bulgaria offers Achenbach System for Empirically Based Assessment (ASEBA) - Preschool version (CBCL/1½-5, C-TRF), Achenbach System for Empirically Based Assessment (ASEBA) - School Version (CBCL/6-18, TRF, YSR), CONNERS 3: Conners' Rating Scale of assessment of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), CARS-2: Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS). They also offer a projective measure for assessment of emotional and behavioural problems TEMAS: Tell-Me-A-Story, designed for children and adolescents from 5 to 18 years of age. In Hestia's portfolio is CAB: Clinical Assessment of Behaviour. They also distribute ERQ-CA: Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents, but it is for children who are older than 10 years of age.

There are some instruments that are adapted by university academics and students of theirs (Challenging situation task, author S. Denham, adaptation for Bulgaria N.Koltcheva; Affect Knowledge Test, author S.Denham, adaptation for Bulgaria L.Sedloeva-Kirilova (Седлоева-Кирилова, 2018) but they are not in use by practitioners.

Intervention

As it was mentioned in part I. Development, there are no national standards nor national programmes still in Bulgaria. However, there are many initiatives going on regarding social and emotional skills interventions. We can sum-up those initiatives like:

Initiatives within kindergartens

It can be an initiative of the kindergarten's pedagogical team, the kindergarten's principal, or the kindergarten's psychologist and/or individual teachers. It can be an initiative within the framework of a project, implementation of separate activity or technique (mostly by individual teachers) or for implementing a specific educational approach, for example, there are business educational centres that promote Lego Education with focus on social and emotional skills.

Extracurricular activities targeting the development of children's social and emotional skills offered by external business companies.

Initiatives by non-governmental organisations – they try to implement various applied activities, experiment with new approaches, adapt foreign techniques, and improve children's skills and wellbeing. These initiatives usually target specific vulnerable groups. Organisations mentioned above - Health and Social Development Foundation (HESED), Trust for Social Achievement, Animus association, Karin Dom, etc. For e.g. Trust for Social Achievement financed organisations for implementing activities and programs for improvement of language and social and emotional skills like – CinEd: Cinema ateliers for developing socioemotional skills, Educational Program "Design Champions", Forming language and socioemotional skills through fairy-tales. Here we can

also mention the Lachezar Tsotsorkov Foundation's Social and Emotional Education Program. In 2020, the foundation financed 14 non-governmental organisations who must apply various activities and approaches targeting children's social and emotional skills.

Initiative by private business organisations, child centres, educational centres, therapeutic centres or individual professionals - they usually offer various activities and/or sessions for improving children's social and emotional skills.

There are foreign programs adapted in Bulgaria. Zippy's Friends is such a program. It was adapted by Animus association within the framework of a project but it is not distributed and in mass use in the country (Приятелите на Зипи, n.d.). Another try is the German program Verhaltenstraining im Kindergarten (Stoyanova-Shyrayeu, 2021). This is a national program in Germany but also not in wide use in Bulgaria.

A very interesting endeavour is the development of a Bulgarian program by Sevdzhihan Eyubova (2021) "Play with Fori". The programme was designed in 2020 and is still in the process of approbation. However, it focuses mostly on the emotional domain rather than a wider spectrum of social and emotional skills. It targets improving children's vocabulary for emotions and how they can manage various difficult emotional states and behaviours.

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