



## Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Assessing Children's Social Emotional Learning to Guide Improvement Programs

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The Covid-19 pandemic has tremendously impacted young people's lives, especially those of the most vulnerable ones. Separated from their peers, prevented from participating in social life, and restrained to their homes for prolonged periods of time during lockdowns, many young Europeans have suffered from loneliness and isolation. This has brought significant threats to their general well-being and mental health... We must continue to support them with concrete interventions. Opportunities to re-engage and participate in the community, dedicated support services and inclusion of those most vulnerable must be at the core of our efforts.

- Mariya Gabriel in the foreword to the *European Education and Culture Executive Agency Report* (2022, p. 3) on the impact of COVID-19 on youth mental health and wellbeing.

Although the COVID-19 Pandemic began in 2020, it continues to exert a negative impact on the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic wellbeing of many children and youth across the globe (e.g., Bell et al., 2023; Panchal et al., 2023) and throughout Europe (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022). To address these significant needs, researchers, educators, and policymakers have continued to stress the importance of developing instructional and intervention programs that target children's social and emotional learning (SEL) and emotional behavior concerns (EBC). Many examples of such programs exist in countries

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throughout Europe (e.g., Cefai, et al., 2018). A particularly notable example is the Promoting Mental Health at Schools (PROMEHS) program (Cefai et al., 2022). Such developments are promising as children and youth continue to need enhanced supports and schools represent an excellent setting to provide it to them.

Yet, assessment of children's social emotional behavior, a foundational aspect of evidenced based practices in schools and communities is limited in many European countries. In contrast to other regions such as the United States, where there are many well-validated assessments available and adapted for SEL applications ranging from screening (e.g., Naglieri et al., 2011), to progress-monitoring (Chafouleas et al., 2010), to intervention planning (e.g., Gresham & Elliott, 2008), to diagnostic assessment (e.g., Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2015), there are limited options available for most European languages, countries, and cultures. Indeed, to rigorously evaluate the aforementioned PROMEHS program, the primary investigator (and editor of the *International Journal of Emotional Education*) Carmel Cefai reached out to two of the guest editors of the current issue (CA & SE) who are also co-authors of SEL and EBC measures in the U.S. This conversation began a fruitful collaboration including translation and validation of the SSIS SEL Brief Scales (SSIS SELb; Elliott et al., 2020) into six European languages for use on the PROMEHS project. This collaboration has culminated in several research publications (Anthony et al., 2022b; 2023; Cavioni et al., 2023), concurrent projects with other researchers in the European Network of Social Emotional Competence (ENSEC), and this current special issue.

Despite these promising initial developments, there is extensive progress to be made in meeting the SEL and EBC assessment needs in the European context. The current special issue advances evidence about social emotional and behavioral assessments, identifies foundational issues, and points to concrete steps for continued progress. The goal is that by identifying these themes and issues, we spur further developments that enhance availability, sophistication, and utility of assessments to better meet the SEL needs of all European children and youth.

### **Issues in Assessing Social Emotional Learning to Guide Improvement Programs**

Articles in this special issue are briefly introduced to elaborate on the two key themes.

#### *What is SEL Anyway? Foundational Issues in Conceptualizing SEL for Assessment in Europe*

One of the fundamental questions to ask of every educational assessment regards what specific content it covers. Beyond the overall question of content, assessments and interventions ideally cover consistent domains of SEL functioning. Without consistency in content coverage and alignment, growth in movements to address SEL and mental health needs can end up producing a hodgepodge of loosely related applied resources covering nominally similar but actually disparate skills and behaviors. Such a situation leads to research difficulties in building a scientific basis for SEL programming and applied difficulties in coordinating resources and communicating with relevant stakeholders.

Other countries have faced and continue to face similar problems. For example, in the United States one research group (the EASEL lab led by Stephanie Jones) has coded and synthesized over 40 prominent frameworks to better understand the content included in SEL programs and assessments (Jones et al., 2019).

Despite the wide proliferation of frameworks, some models such as the one produced by the Collaborative for Academic Social, and Emotional, Learning (CASEL, 2020) have emerged as highly prominent. Such models provide benefits for communication and coordination but continue to require empirical scrutiny and refinement (Anthony et al., 2022a).

Although some assessments (including the SSIS SEL*b*) that are being adapted for the European context are also aligned with the CASEL framework, the model is nowhere near as prominent in Europe as it is in the U.S., nor does its American prominence suggest that it is the most appropriate model for SEL practice in European schools. Cavioni et al.'s (this issue) article directly addresses this issue by summarizing and analyzing two prominent SEL frameworks used in Europe: the WHO Health Promoting Schools initiative and the OECD Study on Social and Emotional Skills. This article provides a strong and needed starting point for developing assessments systems that are content aligned with interventions. Avoiding the American situation marked by a large proliferation of frameworks which include similar content under disparate terms is very desirable. We hope the Cavioni et al. article contributes to and promotes greater consistency regarding the conceptualization of SEL assessments and interventions.

*Growth in SEL (and Mental Health) Assessment Options in Europe: Progress Made, Progress Yet to Come.*

Against this SEL conceptual backdrop, progress continues in extending existing assessments to better meet the needs of contemporary European schools. As mentioned earlier, the SSIS SEL*b* were translated into six European languages for the PROMEHS program evaluation project. Measurement invariance and validity analyses were promising (Anthony et al., 2022b, 2023; in press) providing a solid basis for further extending the SSIS SEL*b* to other countries, languages, and contexts. Two articles in this special issue specifically address this need for further evidence about the SSIS SEL*b*. First, Anthony et al., (this issue) examine a German translation of the SSIS SEL*b* with students in Austria and Germany. This investigation additionally examined the EBC scales of the SSIS SEL Brief + Mental Health Scales (SSIS SEL*b*+MH) an extension of the SSIS SEL*b* that has not been previously investigated in Europe. Next, Vorkapić et al., (this issue) evaluate a preschool version of the SSIS SEL*b* with Croatian students. These studies present informative expansions of the SSIS SEL*b* evidence base with European children.

Expanding beyond the social emotional well-being of children, the article by Grazzani and colleagues examined a new assessment of teachers' social and emotional competencies. Specifically, these investigators examined the content and psychometric characteristics of the Social-Emotional Competence Teacher Rating Scale (SECTRS) with a sample of teachers from Italy, Latvia, and Portugal. This assessment was developed in the United States, but the evidence reported supports a refined version that will likely function well with teachers in Europe.

These three studies of assessment instruments originally developed in the United States for use with children and educators performed similarly with children and educators in Austria, Germany, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, and Portugal. There is, however, much more research to be done with these and other social emotional health focused assessments that align with intervention programs in Europe. Specifically, additional

dimensions of assessment that should be considered include content (SEL and mental health, preferably with consistent underlying frameworks), informants (traditionally including teachers, parents, and students themselves), age ranges, languages, and cultures. Such considerations do not even bear on the need for assessments that are better adapted to varying applications in schools (i.e., the SSIS SELb functions best as a screener, but other assessments will be necessary for short term progress monitoring and diagnostic assessment). Clearly, covering the many assessment variations needed for a comprehensive SEL assessment across the continent and beyond is not likely to be successful with a piecemeal approach. Rather, comprehensive, collaborative efforts with clear and coordinated goals are necessary to meet this challenge. This special issue is a small but intentional beginning of such international collaboration. We hope you read each article and are stimulated to join the IJEE leadership in continuing to advance assessment and intervention research-to-practice efforts to positively impact the social emotional lives of children and the educators that support them.

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