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Social inclusion and social justice

A resilience curriculum for early years and elementary schools in Europe

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present the development of a resilience curriculum in early years and primary schools to enhance social inclusion, equity and social justice amongst European communities, particularly amongst disadvantaged and vulnerable ones, through quality education. It defines educational resilience in terms of academic, social and emotional growth in the face of life challenges; discusses the conceptual framework and key principles underpinning the curriculum; and presents the six major content areas of the curriculum. Finally, it presents the preliminary findings of a pilot project on the implementation of the curriculum in more than 200 classrooms in about 80 early and primary schools in six European countries.

Design/methodology/approach – The curriculum was first drafted collaboratively amongst the six partners on the basis of the existing literature in the promotion of resilience in early years and primary schools, with a particular focus to European realities. Once it was internally reviewed, it was piloted in 200 early years and primary school classrooms in six European countries, with each of the six partners implementing one theme. Data collection included teacher reflective diaries, classroom checklists, semi-structured interviews with teachers and focus groups with students.

Findings – The preliminary results from the pilot evaluation of the curriculum in 199 classrooms totalling 1,935 students across six countries indicate that both the teachers and the learners overwhelmingly found the curriculum highly enjoyable, useful, relevant and easy to use. They looked forward to the possibility of having the programme on a full-time basis as part of the general curriculum in the future. The teachers reported a positive moderate change in learners' behaviour related to the theme implemented and argued that for the implementation to be effective, it needs to take place throughout the whole year. A number of modifications have been on the basis of the teachers' and learners' feedback.

Originality/value – This is the first resilience curriculum for early years and primary schools in Europe. While it seeks to address the needs of vulnerable children such as Roma children, immigrant

and refugee children and children with individual educational needs, it does so within an assets-based, developmental, inclusive and culturally responsive approach, thus avoiding potential labelling and stigmatising, while promoting positive development and growth. It puts the onus on the classroom teacher, in collaboration with parents and other stakeholders, in implementing the curriculum in the classroom.

Introduction

European society has long been a multicultural, diverse one, but recently, it is experiencing increasing mobility and migration of individuals from diverse cultures. The recent upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East, for instance, have resulted in an influx of immigrants crossing the Mediterranean to European shores, with the figure for 2014 being more than double than that of 2013. Cultural diversity is an opportunity to "congregate human capital", providing an enriching, added value experience if society seeks to capitalises on its worth and value (Salend, 2010). However, while having the potential for enhancing human experience at both individual and collective levels, diversity presents various challenges which may lead to injustices due to prejudice and discrimination as well as social conflicts. The highest rate of discrimination in Europe is indeed on the basis of ethnic origin (European Commission, 2012). Individuals from ethnic and cultural minorities, such as Roma, immigrants and refugees, are particularly in need of quality education and support to offset the socio-economic disadvantage prevalent in such communities (European Commission, 2009). Children and young people coming from such communities may be at risk of early school leaving, absenteeism, school failure, social exclusion and mental health problems. For instance, the average rate of early school leaving amongst young people with a migrant origin in Europe is double that of native youth, while the rate is even higher for Roma populations, who are amongst the most socially excluded members of society (European Commission, 2011).

Roma children are amongst the most vulnerable in Europe, coming from the largest, most impoverished and most vulnerable minority in Central and Eastern Europe. They face stereotypes and labels depicting them as inferior, criminal and dangerous; consequential social, political and economic discrimination; and limited access to health care services, high dependence on state welfare, limited education and high rates of absenteeism and early school leaving (UNICEF, 2005; Dimakos and Papakonstantinopoulou, 2012; OCSE, 2012). They suffer from weaker family support from their families, face discrimination within the education system and have more limited access to non-formal and in-formal learning opportunities outside compulsory schooling (European Commission, 2011). In a Croatian study with 60 parents of Roma children, Pahic *et al.* (2011) reported that, while parents have started to appreciate the importance of education for their children, when compared to other parents, they showed less interest in participating in activities and decision making at the school and had lower academic aspirations for their children. They believed that it is harder for their children to learn than non-Roma children, due to the language barrier, while mentioning also poverty and inadequate learning conditions at home. More than half of

the Roma parents believed schools could do more for their children, including additional educational support, financial help and protection from bullying.

Refugee and migrant children are another increasing group of children in Europe facing risks in their development such as poor living conditions; lack of access to education; protection and health-care services; greater risk of abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, trafficking or forced military recruitment; absence of social networks; violence; and separation from their families (UNICEF, 2005; UNHRC, 2007). Such situations often give rise to feelings of powerlessness to deal with and overcome these high levels of adversity (UNHRC, 2007). Like Roma children, refugee and migrant children also experience difficulties in their education in a system governed by the dominant culture capital out of tune with their own minority culture. Such difficulties include placement in lower streams or special schools, retention in grade, culturally biased assessment, lack of bridging of school–home cultures and lack of home support with school and homework, with consequent high rates of school failure, absenteeism and early school leaving (OCSE, 2012, Nicaise, 2012, UNICEF, 2005). Other school barriers include language barriers that hinder communication, racism and discrimination that hinder the development of relationships and the inclusion process and labelling the trauma story and the person through negative stereotypes that prevents the focus on strengths and turns the attention to the deficits or problems (Hutchinson and Dorsett, 2012).

Education for growth and empowerment

Education provides a unique opportunity to promote the inclusion of marginalised communities, empowering the individual to make their own decisions and take responsibility for their own life (Freire, 1972). It can help to promote equity, social justice and social inclusion by providing inclusive, caring and culturally responsive learning communities (European Commission, 2012). In such communities, schools provide a nurturing, secure environment for all learners, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, reducing the stress of discrimination and rejection and providing opportunities for positive participation in learning and social activities and for social connectedness at school. A whole-school approach, which includes the school climate and ethos as well as the formalised curriculum in all its aspects, needs to reflect the experiences and cultures of the various cultural and ethnic groups and match with the learning, cultural and motivational styles of all the learners (Banks, 2003). A curriculum for learners coming from ethnic minorities, such as Roma, immigrants and refugees, also needs to address the challenges and obstacles likely to be faced by such learners, helping to build their psychological resources not only to survive in adverse circumstances but also to continue growing and thriving. Such resources include a sense of optimism and hope in the future, building on one's strengths, a positive attitude, adaptability and flexibility, determination and perseverance, belief in inner strength, sense of agency and belief in bringing about change, sense of coherence and purpose, high academic expectations and building and maintaining healthy relationships with peers and adults (Doll *et al.*, 2004; Førde, 2006; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Hutchinson and Dorsett, 2012; Seligman, 2011; Simões *et al.*, 2009).

This paper describes the development of a resilience curriculum in early and primary education to equip vulnerable children in Europe, such as those coming from ethnic minorities and refugees, with these psychological resources. The curriculum aims to

foster the cognitive, emotional and social learning of children who may be at risk of early school leaving, absenteeism, school failure, social exclusion and mental health problems, by providing them with the essential resources for resilience to overcome the disadvantages and obstacles in their development, such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination, social exclusion, mobility, urbanisation, weakening of social connectedness, violence, bullying and family stress. At the same time, it seeks to empower these children to make use of their strengths to overcome such challenges while continuing to grow and thrive.

Resilience refers to successful adaptation such as positive academic and social behaviour, absence of undesirable behaviour and good external and internal adaptation in the face of adversity (Masten, 2011). Rather than an extraordinary process, or a trait a child is born with, resilience is "more about ordinary responses which focus on strengths" (Masten, 2001, p. 228). It is a quality which can be nurtured and developed from a young age, and the systems impinging on the child's life, such as the school, have a crucial and determining role in directing the child's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development towards healthy trajectories even in the face of risk (Masten, 2001; Pianta and Walsh, 1998). Through the study of children who managed to thrive and succeed in the various facets of their development despite the negative circumstances in their lives (Rutter *et al.*, 1988; Werner and Smith, 1992), the resilience perspective has led to a reconsideration of the ways in which we can foster success and healthy development in children. It suggests that we may be more effective in supporting children's development and well-being by focusing on their strengths rather than on their weaknesses.

A resilience curriculum for vulnerable children in Europe

In seeking to build a resilience curriculum for early and primary schools in Europe, a framework was developed underpinning the key principles informing the curriculum, the content areas and the processes that enable a positive sense of being and becoming.

Curriculum framework principles

Programmes which are integrated in the mainstream curriculum and delivered by school teachers are more likely to be effective in terms of student outcomes in the long term than added, bolt-on activities delivered by outside experts (Greenberg *et al.*, 2003; Hoagwood *et al.*, 2007). For instance, the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) programme in the UK has been found to have had little impact on student behaviour largely due to its not being embedded directly in the formal curriculum and the teaching staff not being involved in its delivery and reinforcement (Cooper and Jacobs, 2011). The resilience curriculum framework is thus presented as an inclusive, universal intervention programme targeting all children in the classroom and delivered by the classroom teacher, but with activities reflecting the diversity of learners, particularly vulnerable children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as Roma children, migrant children, refugee children and children living in poverty. This universal approach avoids the potential risks of labelling and stigmatisation resulting from targeting, specifically the difficulties of children from such backgrounds while still addressing their needs. It must also be mentioned that not all children coming from such backgrounds experience academic or social and emotional difficulties or end up as

school failures or socially excluded; many are able to overcome the odds and achieve successful and adjusted lives (Benard, 2004).

Each topic contains at least one activity focused on addressing difference in relation to that topic, such as bullying, prejudice, discrimination, lack of friends, language barriers, difficulty in accessing learning, exclusion and culture mismatch. The story in that activity reflects the challenges and difficulties of such children, while the questions and activities following the story encourage children to work out solutions to overcome such difficulties. Learners are also asked to reflect on their own challenges which are more related to their own context and reality. The activity includes also one or more questions on what other children can do to help the character in difficulty so as to encourage a culture of understanding, solidarity and support.

The curriculum seeks to promote educational equality and resilience assets for positive development and active citizenship of such children by fostering both their internal and external resources. These resources include self-awareness, problem solving, positive attitudes, optimism, adaptability, perseverance, belief in inner strength, self-efficacy, sense of coherence and purpose, high academic expectations, empathy and collaboration, as well as external resources such as caring relationships and meaningful participation at home, at school and in their peer group (Benard, 2004; Cefai, 2008; Dimakos and Papakonstantinopoulou, 2012; Førde, 2006; Hutchinson and Dorsett, 2012; Matsopoulos, 2011; Simões *et al.*, 2009).

The curriculum is based on a European perspective, reflecting the strengths and needs of European society. It is responsive to the needs of individual learner differences, underlining the right of all learners for a quality resilience education and a commitment towards social justice with awareness of the risks of discriminatory practices due to individual differences such as minority status. While based on a European identity, it also reflects European diversity, with activities addressing cultural differences across Europe. Although there will be a standard international version, there will six other editions in different languages, adapted according to the cultures of the regions and countries where they are being implemented. Moreover, the activities are presented at varying levels of difficulty, namely, basic, intermediate and advanced, making it possible for the classroom teacher to adapt the activity to the readiness and developmental level of the learners. The experiential nature of the curriculum also makes it easier for the teacher to engage in individualisation, as the content is brought up by the learners themselves. Any adaptation, however, such as changes in examples, stories, resources and activity steps, needs to take place without compromising the integrity, and consequently the effectiveness, of the curriculum (Greenberg, 2010; Humphrey *et al.*, 2010).An implementation index provided in the manual is intended to help teachers with the implementation process and ensure fidelity in this respect.

A structured, experiential and competence-based approach
The curriculum has both taught and caught components. The taught component includes explicit and regular teaching of resilience education as a core commitment by the classroom teacher, making use of direct teaching of evidence-based and developmentally and culturally appropriate resilience competencies with application to real-life situations. It meets the key criteria for programme effectiveness through the provision of a set curriculum and available resources, including a teacher's manual to support consistency of delivery (Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Collaborative for Academic, Social

and Emotional Learning, 2008). The curriculum is provided for three age levels, namely 4-5, 6-8 and 9-11 years. However, it takes a spiral approach, building the key skills from one year to the other, while matching the needs arising from increasing complexity of behaviour and social contexts at each developmental level (Weissberg and Greenberg, 1998). A developmental approach strengthens and builds on basic skills from one year to the next, building on what students have already learned and equipping them with skills needed for different stages in their development. The curriculum is also infused in the other academic subjects in a structured way to facilitate the generalisation and internalisation of the competencies being learnt (Diekstra, 2008; Elias and Synder, 2008). Another effective strategy in curriculum implementation is working in partnership with students' parents, and the curriculum thus also includes home activities, where the students and the parents work together on tasks related to the skills being learnt at school. (Downey and Williams, 2010). A learner portfolio which includes these handouts and other learners' work, as well as a parents manual, also serves to facilitate the home–school collaboration in resilience building.

The curriculum follows the SAFE approach, that is, it is sequenced, active, focused and explicit. Research on the effectiveness of resilience and social-emotional learning programmes provides consistent evidence that effective programmes adopt a sequenced step-by-step approach, make use of experiential and participative learning, focus on skills development and have explicit learning goals (Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2005). Each activity follows a sequenced structure, with explicit learning goals and learning outcomes; a mindfulness activity; storytelling; processing of the story; and practical, interactive activities such as role play, drawing and play. There is a focus on skills development through experiential and participative learning, with learners highly engaged in the learning process and with the practice and application of the skill learnt in the post-story activities, other academic subjects and take home activities. Teachers are also encouraged to make use of learner-led strategies, such as collaborative group work and peer tutoring and mentoring, during the activities.

Story telling is one of the main mediums of instruction adopted by the curriculum, providing learners with opportunities to experience stories related to the six major themes of the curriculum and explore their thoughts and feelings on the topic while reflecting and gaining insights on their own behaviours (Hankin *et al.*, 2012). Sherlock the squirrel and Zelda the hedgehog are the two protagonists of the early years and early primary stories (Figure 1), while fables, traditional stories and real-life stories are found in the later primary school curriculum. Sherlock is bespectacled and of an unusual colour for squirrels, representing difference and diversity, while Zelda has some broken spikes, signifying disability. The use of puppets is strongly recommended in the early years and early primary school activities, and the manual also provides puppets of the two mascots.

In line with the inclusive and developmental approach of the curriculum, assessment is developmental and formative rather than normative, thus avoiding the danger of labelling children into resilient and non-resilient. Teachers' and learners' checklists have been developed for each of the six themes. The teacher completes the checklist on each learner at the end of each theme to evaluate whether the learning goals have been adequately developed or still need support in developing. The learner self-assessment checklist for the early primary and late primary years follows the same format as the

Figure 1.
Sherlock and Zelda,
the two curriculum
mascots

teacher's checklist, but the response items evaluate first whether the learner is able to perform that skill (whether the skill has been grasped), and second whether he/she likes to practice that skill (whether the skill has been internalised and included in the child's behaviour repertoire). Both checklists include also a qualitative component focused on strengths, needs and targets for improvement. With the younger children, the teacher may devise more visual, practical activities to help the learners engage in self-reflection and evaluation, such as drawings, role play and circle time discussions.

The curriculum themes
The curriculum consists of six major themes spiralling from one year to the other at higher levels of complexity, as students move from the early years to the early primary years and then the junior primary years. The six themes have been identified following a review of the resilience literature and an analysis of the current socio-economic, educational and cultural needs of children and young people in Europe.

Developing communication skills. The development of effective interpersonal communication skills is possible in the balanced relation between the skills of listening to and understanding others and the skills of expressing and standing up for oneself. The first theme takes this dual approach, first focusing on expressing and standing up for oneself, and then on listening to and understanding others. The first sub-theme focuses on three topics, namely, expressing feelings and needs, standing up for oneself and assertive conflict resolution. The second sub-theme on listening to and understanding others consists of another three topics, namely, effective listening, understanding others and communicating ideas effectively. Communication does not finish when we send a message and receive a response, rather it starts at this moment

and leads towards the learning of how to communicate ideas effectively, including an understanding of what the participants in the conversation think, feel and intend (Schulz von Thun, 2002).

Establishing and maintaining healthy relationships. Healthy relationships are a crucial foundation for both academic and socio-emotional development, fostering warmth and intimacy, and providing safety and protection. The first sub-theme focuses on establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships, and the activities are designed to support the development of social and pro-social skills to create a strong network of positive relationships, such as making friends, seeking and providing support and developing nurturing relationships. Peer relationships are a very important source of well-being and resilience for children, and they can help reduce, mediate and prevent the effects of stress and adversity (Doll *et al.*, 2004). The first topic encourages learners to reflect on the value of friendship and to develop strategies to build and maintain positive relationships with friends, and deal successfully with situations which may put friendship at risk. The second topic deals with the skills to seek and provide support to others, while in the third topic, learners have the opportunity to appreciate and practice reciprocal trust and care. The second sub-theme is composed of activities to enhance cooperative skills, empathy and moral reasoning. The first set topic aims to develop skills ranging from the ability to take turns and sharing to cooperation and teambuilding. The second topic seeks to develop the skill to recognise and appreciate the motives, behaviours, desires and feelings of others. Empathy is an essential building block for successful interpersonal relationships (Reid *et al.*, 2013), impacting also the individual's acceptance by peers and contributing to the development of morality (Belacchi and Farina, 2012; Braza *et al.*, 2009). The third topic encourages learners to critically reflect on solutions to moral and ethical dilemmas and to practice ethical and responsible behaviours (Gasser and Malti, 2012).

Developing a growth mindset. Developing a growth mindset is essential not only to manage challenges successfully but also to turn them into opportunities for growth and development (Peterson *et al.*, 2007; Seligman *et al.*, 2004). The activities within this theme draw from positive psychology which values positive subjective approaches towards the past, present and future and seeks to build positive qualities to prevent and deal effectively with psychological problems (Seligman *et al.*, 2004). This theme focuses on both cognitive processes, such as optimistic thinking, positive self talk and the disputation of negative thoughts, and emotional processes, such as the awareness, expression and regulation of positive emotions. The first sub-theme on the development of positive and optimistic thinking, particularly during setbacks, provides learners with opportunities to engage in optimistic thinking, to reflect on and challenge unhelpful thoughts and, consequently, to overcome challenges with a positive attitude (Noble and McGrath, 2008; Seligman, 2011).The second sub-theme, *hope, happiness and humour*, gives learners the opportunity to become aware of, identify and regulate positive emotions, focusing on these three "Hs". Positive emotions broaden children's awareness, build their personal and social resources and buffer against psychological problems (Fredrickson, 2001; Seligman, 2011).

Developing self-determination. Problem solving is identified as one of the essential skills for dealing with adversity, as it moderates the impact of negative life events on well-being (Simões *et al.*, 2009). It plays a key role in risk assessment, resources evaluation, the establishment of realistic plans and the search for healthier

relationships, essential requirements for adaptation and resilience (Werner and Smith, 1992). The second sub-theme focuses on developing empowerment and a sense of autonomy in the learner. The first topic focuses on a sense of purpose and meaning in life, giving learners the opportunity to think about global and situational meaning and to reflect on their purposes in life. The search for the meaning and goals of life is a main concern in an individual's life and, when accomplished, has a protective effect (Noble and McGrath, 2008). The second topic aims to foster agency and self-efficacy, helping learners to recognise that they can make things happen, such as achieving their goals and overcoming obstacles. Amongst the mechanisms of human agency, none is more central than a sense of self-efficacy, as unless individuals believe they can bring desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties (Bandura, 1997). The third topic highlights the promotion of self-advocacy in learners. Standing for what we want and need is an important component of self-determination and acts as a moderator of the impact of adversity on the child's psychological well-being or as a mediator, promoting self-esteem, self-awareness and a greater connection to the community (Goodley, 2005; Grover, 2005).

Building on strengths. Building on strengths rather than just seeking to address deficit and disadvantage is a strategic element in promoting resilience in children facing stress and disadvantage (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). This theme covers two areas, namely, building a positive self-concept and self-esteem and using strengths in academic and social engagement. In the first sub-theme, activities focus on helping learners to develop a positive self-concept, namely, a positive view of their nature, unique qualities and behaviour (Weiten *et al.*, 2012). The level and congruence of self-concept and self-esteem are particularly related to well-being and resilience. The activities focus on understanding who I am, becoming aware and being proud, of my strengths, and understanding how the past and present are part of who I am, while identifying my dreams for the future. The activities focus also on social engagement in the classroom. By promoting social participation and social engagement, a sense of value, belonging and attachment can be fostered (Berkman *et al.*, 2000). In this sub-theme, the topics focus on valuing oneself and others, understanding and appreciating one's strengths and assets and using such strengths in academic learning and social interactions.

Turning challenges into opportunities. The final theme seeks to enable children to develop the competence of re-framing and turning developmental challenges or life's stressors into opportunities for growth, facing such challenges with optimism, courage and persistence (Newman, 2004; Seligman, 2011). The first sub-theme provides various activities where children can learn how to adopt a positive attitude of courage and persistence in the face of adversity and failure. Showing courage in the face of adversity, maintaining an optimistic mindset despite setbacks or unfair situations and exhibiting persistence are some of the key building blocks of resilience in children. Dealing with rejection by teachers, peers and family members and consequent negative emotions is the second sub-theme. Participants will learn how to handle effectively rejection by others such as peers, teachers or parents, including consequent negative emotions such as anger, disappointment, frustration, sadness and sense of helplessness. Loss is another major setback children's lives and a set of activities seek to enable the learners to understand and deal with such losses as losing a pet, a friend or a loved one. Family-related stressors, such as family conflict, unrealistic parental expectations,

divorce and poverty, can be a significant source of stress for children (Levendosky *et al.*, 2002); this sub-theme seeks to equip such children with the necessary strategies to deal effectively with such adversities (Pedro-Caroll, 2010). Bullying is a common occurrence in many schools, particularly amongst vulnerable students, such as those with learning difficulties or from ethnic minorities (De Monchy *et al.*, 2004; Norwich and Kelly, 2004). Students will learn how to resolve conflicts while being assertive in bullying situations (Andreou *et al.*, 2008; Dill *et al.*, 2004). The final sub-theme focuses on dealing with change and transitions, and the activities seek to enable the learners to understand and deal effectively with changes and transitions in children's lives at school, home and the community.

A whole-school approach
The curriculum also makes provision for the resilience skills to be "caught" through the classroom ecology and the whole school contexts. The caught component aims to bring multiple changes in the whole school culture, changing the way teachers and administrative staff think about children's resilience and well-being, underlining the importance of students' mental health, well-being and resilience in both the academic and social domains (Johnson, 2008; Pianta and Stuhlman, 2004). The teaching of resilience skills by the classroom teacher at both curricular and cross-curricular levels also impacts teachers' overall practice and leads to a paradigm shift in teaching and learning in the classroom with resilience education embedded with the whole classroom climate (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). The classroom relationships, pedagogy, activities, resources and management thus provide a context where pupils can practice and apply the skills learned both in the classroom and outside. For instance, authentic relationships built on a daily basis with the students with the teacher's initiative, characterised by a warm affect and genuine interest for the learning and well-being of the students, serve as a compensating mechanism to the stressors experienced by the children (Luthar, 2006; Pianta and Stuhlman, 2004).

A whole-school approach where the school community, together with parents and the local community, engages in resilience building in all aspects of school life and, where the skills learnt in the classroom are promoted and reinforced at the whole-school level in a structured and complementary way, will help to create a supportive whole-school context and ethos conducive to more effective resilience outcomes (Cefai and Cavioni, 2014; Greenberg *et al.*, 2003;Weare and Nind, 2011). The curriculum includes a parents' manual to encourage parents to reinforce the skills learnt at school and to adopt the resilience philosophy in parenting their children. Empowering parents and communities not only to engage collaboratively with the school but also to address their own well-being and resilience is another important component in a whole-school approach to resilience building (Downey and Williams, 2010; Weare and Nind, 2011). Finally, student resilience is symbiotic with the teachers' own resilience, as tired and burnt-out teachers are unlikely to be in a position to foster students' resilience. School staff thus needs to take active steps to maintain their own health, well-being and resilience in their efforts to promote students' resilience (Beltman *et al.*, 2011; Howard and Johnson, 2004). The curriculum framework thus construes the whole school operating as a resilient community formed of interconnected and interdependent systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1989).

Preliminary findings of pilot implementation

Participants

A number of trained early years and primary school teachers in each partner country implemented one specific theme of the curriculum in their classrooms over a six week period. The six themes of the curriculum were thus all piloted. In all, 79 early and primary schools, 205 classrooms and 2,895 students from six European countries (Croatia, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Sweden) participated in the implementation of the curriculum. In total, 199 teachers and 1,935 students participated in the evaluation of the implementation.

Tools

During the implementation, the classroom teachers kept a reflective diary which they completed every week, recording their thoughts and feelings on the implementation process. At the end of the implementation, each teacher also completed a classroom assessment checklist indicating whether they had observed any change in the group's behaviour related to the theme's learning goals since the beginning of the implementation. A number of representative teachers were also asked to sit for a semi-structured interview or a focus group to express their views on the curriculum and the implementation process; in some cases, all participating teachers were invited to take part. Five of the six partners held learner focus groups, one from each age group (early years, early primary and late primary), exploring the learners' thoughts and feelings on the curriculum, including what they liked and did not like. They were also asked to make drawings of the mascots in the story and other aspects of the activity. In some instances, all learners participating in the programme were invited to participate in the focus groups. Finally, some partners carried out also observations in class during the implementation.

Findings

The classroom assessment checklists indicate that in most cases, the teachers observed a moderate positive change in the learners' behaviour related to the theme implemented. However, they argued that the implementation was rather short, and that for it to be effective, the curriculum needs to take place on a regular basis throughout the whole year. The change was also more apparent in the older learners, rather than in the early years. These issues underline the need for consolidation of learning over a longer period of time and for the curriculum to be embedded in the daily life of the classroom. Some of the teachers also observed a change in the classroom climate, with closer relationships and more collaborative, supportive and pro-social behaviours. Some teachers also mentioned that some of the programme language was starting being used by the learners in the daily classroom practices.

The data from the teachers' reflective diaries and interviews/focus groups suggest that in their vast majority, the teachers, both in the primary and in the early years, found the curriculum useful, relevant and practical. They appreciated the well-structured and stepped activities, making it easy for them to implement the activities as planned without too much hassle and preparation. They found the activities meaningful and highly motivating for the learners, particularly the stories, the mascots, the mindfulness activities, the take home activities and the other resources such as the learner worksheets. They also mentioned the experiential and interactive approach,

including role plays, discussions, games and drawings, as another positive aspect of the programme. The great majority of the teachers reported that the learners were very excited, highly engaged and participated actively in the activities; they also observed that in general, the parents as well found the programme relevant for their children. Many teachers also appreciated the focus on the social and emotional aspects in education and the opportunity to engage with the learners and their parents to develop their resilience and social and emotional well-being. The curriculum also represented a useful source of personal and professional development for the teachers, helping them to connect with, and better understand their, learners.

The main issues mentioned by most teachers across schools and countries was that the implementation time was rather short. They needed more time to do the activities, and the programme needed to be spread over a longer period of time. Teachers need also to be well-trained and mentored in the implementation. Another common issue was that it was difficult to engage three-year old children in structured activities, and many teachers recommended that activities at this age need to be shorter, less structured and more practical and multisensory. The teachers appreciated the involvement of the parents in the activities through the take home activities, but underlined that more planning and effort are needed to ensure higher parental engagement:

> After the initial training session I realised that my classroom management philosophy needed to change. Therefore the change of the program started with me. Following the training and the activities, it was significantly easier for me to realise that I am part of the ecology of the classroom and my behavior affects children in a significant way.

> I learned a lot from my students while implementing this resilience program […] I realised how much emphasis children give to their friends in order to gain strength and overcome obstacles.

> As soon as I had made it "my own", it (the curriculum) worked. Often, the lessons went down very well. Fun and exciting. Interesting to see how the pupils "grew".

> Most of them (students) were active. Very active and engaged. They liked the lessons. Great interest in talking about themselves. It got better as we went along.

The great majority of learners were very enthusiastic about the activities and greatly enjoyed the activities. They particularly liked the stories, mascots, role plays, mindfulness, hands on activities, group work and the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings on personal, emotional and social issues: "we talked about issues that matter to us and we had a chance to discuss them openly" and "we learned to express how we feel". They greatly appreciated the opportunity to work and learn together in "new" and enjoyable ways on "unusual" topics. The stories and the mascots in particular were repeatedly mentioned by learners as the things they liked and that helped them to learn. Younger children found the stories, mascots, use of puppets, pictures and drawings particularly engaging, while the older primary school learners suggested more use of games, group work, role plays, video clips, poetry and drawings. The learners also appreciated learning about themselves and their behaviours, and found such topics as knowing oneself, self-confidence, problem solving, goal setting, believing in oneself, standing up for oneself, making friends, understanding, sharing with and helping others, positive thinking, developing and making use of their

strengths, hope, being strong in the face of difficulties, determination and sense of autonomy very relevant to their own lives:

> I learned to put myself in someone else's shoes, to be useful and help others.

> I learned that all obstacles and adversity can become an opportunity.

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> I learned how to behave in a calm manner without anger toward others.

> I Liked this program because we learned how to think in a positive way.

Some learners said that the activities gave them also the opportunity to work together and know more each other: "I liked that we worked together with the activities and learned together about being strong". Some learners also said that their parents enjoyed the take-home activities, while they themselves liked spending more time with their parents working on the tasks. As in the case of the teachers, not having enough time to do the activities was the main issue raised by many of the learners in the focus groups: "the lessons need to last longer so that we can talk more about our feelings". In some instances, the learners found some of the activities rather complex and not always easy to follow and grasp, particularly in the early years (Figure 2).

Preliminary analysis suggests that overall both teachers and learners across the six countries overwhelmingly found the curriculum highly enjoyable, useful, relevant and easy to use. Program strengths included the stories and the mascots, the experiential nature of the activities, the resources used, the mindfulness exercises, the collaborative approach to learning and the focus on social and emotional issues. The participants made various recommendations on how the programme could be more effective, such as avoiding short, bolt on implementation, providing adequate teacher education and ensuring active parental collaboration. On the basis of their feedback, the curriculum has been revised to make it more simple and practical in the early years and to include more tangible examples, more guided worksheets and more use of movement and audio visual aids, including multimedia, music, banners, power point presentations, role play, music, colours and pictures. A teacher-friendly introduction to the manual will guide the teachers on how to implement the curriculum in the classroom, including issues related
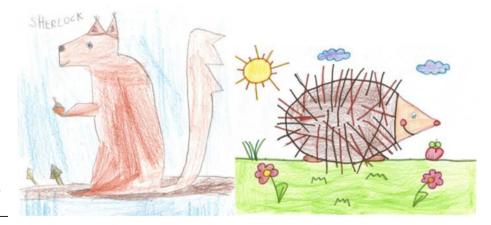

Figure 2.
Young children's drawings of the two curriculum mascots

to adaptation and fidelity, teacher training, how to engage all learners in the classroom and how to recruit the parents' active collaboration.

Conclusion

The resilience curriculum described in this paper seeks to promote equity, social inclusion and social justice within a multicultural European society currently facing various challenges in this regard. It aims to address this by equipping young children at risk with the key psychological resources necessary to overcome the obstacles and disadvantage in their lives and to thrive cognitively, socially and emotionally, thus reducing absenteeism, early school leaving, school failure, social exclusion and mental health problems. It seeks to do so from the early nursery and primary school years, to give such children an early healthy start. The curriculum avoids the trappings of performance-oriented academic subjects, steering away from summative, normative assessment to developmental, inclusive and formative learning and assessment. It also recognises the diversity of European society and the identified needs of children at risk in Europe. However, it adopts a universal, inclusive approach while at the same time allowing for the curriculum to be adapted according to the needs of the cultures and contexts where it is being implemented, as long as one follows the implementation guidelines so as to preserve the integrity of the curriculum. The curriculum has been drawn on the basis of the extant literature on what works in resilience education, as well as the diversity of needs in European schools. It has now been piloted in more than 50 schools and over 200 classrooms in six European countries, and the feedback from school both staff and learners on their experience of the curriculum has been an overwhelmingly positive one, highly relevant, meaningful and exciting for both teachers and learners. A randomised controlled study, however, is recommended to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum in building and enhancing the academic and social and emotional resilience of young children experiencing social and economic disadvantage. Following this, an extension of the curriculum to secondary school would ensure that young people would also have the opportunity to continue building and enhancing their resilience, as they face new demands and challenges in their adolescence. Resilience is context-specific and involves developmental change, rather than a trait that a child automatically keeps once achieved (Zimmerman and Arunkumar, 1994). As Rutter (1987) put it, "if circumstances change, resilience alters".

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