

# Teachers' Perceptions of Sustainability of the Social Emotional Learning Program in Latvia: A Focus Group Study

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to provide an initial evaluation of the sustainability of the first Social Emotional Learning (hereafter SEL) program in Latvia, which to date is still the only SEL program in our country. Initiated during the 2012/13 academic year, this program has already been implemented in 41 Latvian schools. In order to address the teachers' perceptions of program effectiveness and sustainability seven focus groups were organized. Thematic analysis of the focus group discussions pointed to various benefits of the program, including a general dissemination of SEL principles, and teachers' reflections on the importance of their own active role in the process of social and emotional learning. The value of the support of the school administration for program sustainability was also noted. The views expressed by the teachers were aligned with previous studies, indicating the importance of external support, the teachers' own understanding of SEL principles, and the willingness to be actively engaged in facilitating quality maintenance of the program.

*Keywords:* social emotional learning, sustainability, teachers' perspective, focus groups

## Introduction

Social emotional learning (SEL) is a process through which learners develop several important competencies such as understanding and management of their own emotions, feeling and exhibition of empathy toward others, setting and achieving positive goals, establishing and maintaining positive interpersonal relationships, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2013). Social and emotional competences involve knowledge, attitudes and skills in all aforementioned areas. Children with well-developed social and emotional competencies, moreover, later in life experience benefits in various domains (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004), including better physical and mental health, greater moral reasoning and achievement motivation (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

To enhance children's social and emotional competencies, one of the approaches is the development of specific SEL programs, which provides systematic and structured

activities. There has been continuous development of new SEL programs, focusing on either the development of social and emotional competencies, in general, or on specific skills, often for children with specific aspects of difficulty, in particular.

During the past several decades, greater attention has been paid to the investigation of the effectiveness and sustainability of social and emotional learning programs (Durlak et al., 2011). Research has shown that both general and specific approaches are effective to develop the student's potential, and to engender immediate and long-term changes in children's behavior (Durlak et al., 2011; CASEL, 2012). Important aspects which have been identified as markers of successful SEL program implementation and maintenance include the following: sequential activities which build upon each other; lesson components which involve student active engagement; specific social skill development; and the targeting of specific skills (Durlak et al., 2011).

Although all of the SEL programs have a unified overall aim – to develop social and emotional competencies – nevertheless, there are variations in program design, process of implementation, methods of instruction and other technical aspects (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Sklad et al., 2012). At present, there is an ongoing discussion regarding the most effective ways in which an SEL program can be implemented so that the best outcomes can be achieved (Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2010; Elias, 2010; Elias et al., 2015). An implemented program can easily disappear in the long-term (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009); therefore, it is important to understand how to maintain program sustainability, because program continuity is an important component for facilitating changes in student behavior (Elias, 2010). Research on program effectiveness has shown the benefits of integrated intervention programs, which consist of multiple independent strategies or programs (Domitrovich et al., 2010). There is a greater chance that a SEL program will be sustainable and achieve the best possible outcome if it is organized on a schoolwide basis – connected with other school activities and embedded in daily curriculum activities (Greenberg et al., 2003). Within the framework of CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) a Theory of Action (ToA) has been developed. This approach helps schools to implement a schoolwide and sustainable SEL (Meyers, Gil, Cross, Keister, Domitrovich, & Weissberg, 2015). The authors of the ToA emphasize six key components: 1) every stakeholder (teachers, staff, students, parents) has a shared vision about which SEL aspects need to be developed, and a shared plan for achieving these outcomes; 2) the stakeholders assess existing strategies and resources which are already in use, and examine what is needed additionally; 3) there is ongoing professional development; 4) evidence-based SEL is practiced in the school; 5) SEL is integrated into daily practices in school; and 6) there is a continual monitoring of progress in order to ensure improvement in SEL practices (Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2016).

Furthermore, it is crucial to consider the individuals who are implementing and maintaining the program (including outside experts) as important components of the systemic context, contributing not only to the SEL program, but also to the school environment and school climate in general. For a successful maintenance of SEL program, it is necessary for the program to be in congruence with the school's system of values, and there need to be well-defined goals to elucidate the skills which a school hopes to develop in its students and staff with the help of the program (CASEL, 2012; Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2010; Elias et al., 2015). In the broader understanding of the dynamic ecosystem of a school, the SEL program causes changes in the school environ-

ment, and these changes, in turn, engender the necessity of alterations in the SEL program to facilitate its sustainability (Elias, 2010). These modifications are necessary to adapt the program for a specific school context; therefore, it is important to maintain the basic core principles of the SEL program (Elias et al., 2015).

The sustainability of a program is often influenced by various external aspects, for example, teacher turnover or continuation vs. discontinuation of financial support (Elias, 2010). An important aspect of successful program implementation and sustainability is the engagement and support of the school administration, and the support of one or more influential teachers who are opinion leaders in the school environment (Merrel & Guelder, 2010). Moreover, it is important that the support from SEL program experts will be available. It should be noted that whether or not the teachers implementing the program are able to receive supervision and consultations and whether they are able to discuss and clarify aspects of the program are among the forepart of the program. Furthermore, the positive feedback both from colleagues, parents, students and media about the benefits of the program serves to facilitate program sustainability (CASEL, 2012; Elias, 2010).

Teachers' attitudes, their level of motivation, and their involvement and willingness to participate in additional training and supervision sessions may significantly influence the effective maintenance of a SEL program. Similarly, previous studies have shown that program effectiveness and sustainability are influenced by the extent to which the SEL principles are disseminated outside of the SEL classroom context. It is essential that the social and emotional competencies be practiced during break time, in the school cafeteria, school playground, and elsewhere. This requires a significant amount of motivation on the part of the teacher (CASEL, 2012; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

The teacher's ability of self-reflection and evaluation of their own role in the program outcome is an important aspect of program implementation and sustainability (Odabasi, Cimer & Palic, 2012). Teachers with more developed social and emotional skills have greater self-awareness and ability to understand how a student's emotional reactions affect the teacher, and how the teacher's emotional reactions affect the student (Richardson & Shupe, 2003). At the end of the initial implementation phase of the SEL program in Latvia, a total of 630 teachers who had been involved in conducting the SEL class lessons were asked to reflect (in written form) upon their own strengths and weaknesses regarding program implementation. The results of the qualitative assessment of the teachers' perceptions (Martinson & Damberg, 2016) revealed their difficulty in reflecting upon their own strengths and weaknesses. It was revealed that the teachers focused mostly upon the students' performance and/or their own professional competencies. Some of the teachers in their remarks focused upon an evaluation of the program itself, emphasizing the advantages of the teacher's handbook and supplementary materials. Less than a quarter of the teachers wrote about changes in interpersonal relationships among the students or changes in the class climate, and only 15% of the teachers addressed their own social and emotional competencies as contributing factors in regard to successful program implementation. The authors of the study concluded that in the future the SEL program implementation process should include training specifically focused upon the development of the social and emotional competencies of the teachers, including their ability to be aware of the effect of their behavior and emotions upon others, to adapt their behavior to the needs of the specific class context, and to be aware of how their teaching affects dynamic changes in the ecological system of the school as a whole.

The aim of the present study was to gain a greater in-depth understanding of the teachers' perceptions of the Latvia SEL program potential for sustainability. The written responses from the teachers at the end of the first year of the program implementation provided some insight into those aspects of SEL program teaching which they considered important enough to present in written form. Consequently, the focus group discussion format was chosen for the present study in order to allow for a greater probing of the teachers' opinions, and for the ability to refocus the teachers' train of thought upon aspects of how they perceive their own investment in the process.

The focus group interview questions were based on the issues which have been approved as facilitative of program effectiveness and sustainability in previous research (e.g., CASEL, 2015; Elias, 2010). The initial question was focused upon the dissemination of the SEL principles in different environments of the school, whereas the following questions addressed various internal (e.g., teachers' own competencies) and external (e.g., need of support) aspects of program sustainability.

To address the aim of the current study the following research questions were posed:

RQ1. In the opinion of the teachers, how is the SEL program being maintained in the school at different levels, and in the school as a whole?

RQ2. What kind of support do the teachers need for successful maintenance of the SEL program at their school?

RQ3. What do the teachers consider as facilitative and risk factors in regard to the sustainability of the SEL program in their school?

## Method

### Latvia SEL Program

The Latvia SEL program (Martinsone & Niedre, 2013) was developed as an original program to address the needs of students within the specific sociocultural context of Latvia. It was based on the principles and theoretical insights from already existing SEL programs in other countries (Martinsone, 2016). The Latvia SEL program is a preventive, universal school-wide program, which is based on well-developed 40 minute-long SEL class sessions implemented by the classroom teacher. During the SEL lessons, students learn skills of emotional self-regulation, positive social interaction models, problem solving, and goal-setting strategies. Each SEL lesson includes the following structure: setting lesson objectives which are meaningful for the students; student engagement; understanding of major concepts; and a reflection at the end of the hour. A description of the SEL program's theoretical framework, structured lesson plans, glossary of primary concepts, and a CD with supplementary teaching materials (video clips, work sheets, PowerPoint presentations, illustrations, texts for reading and discussion), is included in the teacher's handbook. From the first to tenth grade the SEL lessons are conducted within the classroom, whereas the eleventh and twelfth grade students engage in outside-of-classroom prosocial activity projects, within which they apply the basic SEL principles learned in the previous grades.

During the Latvian SEL program initial implementation in the school years 2013/2014, the schools' administration agreed that all of their homeroom teachers would participate in a day-long training seminar on the content and implementation of the

SEL program. During the training seminar, the teachers received instruction on the SEL principles, the overall content of the program and the specifics of the class lessons. Each teacher received the handbook and the supplementary materials for conducting the class lessons. The teachers were familiarized with the potential benefits of the program, and that these would be increased if the SEL principles were also incorporated in other aspects of the academic curriculum. For example, teachers were encouraged to apply the SEL lesson practices in the teaching of other academic subjects (i.e. setting lesson objectives which are meaningful for the students; planning multi-faceted activities; and a moment of assessment and reflection at the end of the lesson). Also, parents were regularly informed about the SEL program implementation. An important aspect of the SEL program implementation was that the teachers were required to participate in a group supervision sessions in order to share their experience in conducting the SEL lessons, to gain additional knowledge, to receive support and to gain experience in reflecting upon their own strengths and aspects in need of further development. The school administration was also involved in the implementation plan, in that they were asked to commit to a continuation of the program for at least three years after the initial implementation phase. In addition, supervisors were trained in each region, in order to facilitate program sustainability and fidelity of program implementation.

### **Research Participants**

The teachers participating in the focus groups were from seven schools involved in a continuous implementation of the SEL program since the initiation of the program. The schools were chosen so as to be representative of the various regions of Latvia: two schools from the capital city Riga and five schools from the various regions of Latvia. Teachers who continued active implementation of the SEL program were invited to participate in the focus groups, and 58 teachers agreed to participate. The mean age of the participating teachers was 46.43 ( $SD = 8.51$ ), with years of teaching experience ranging from 3 to 42 years ( $M = 22.83$ ,  $SD = 9.40$ ). Their experience in implementation of the SEL program ranged from 2 to 4.5 years ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = .46$ ). Within this focus group study all 58 teachers were women.

### **Procedure**

Within each focus group (on the average eight to nine teachers) there were teachers both from the younger and older grade levels.

The length of each focus group discussion was from 45 to 80 minutes. To the extent that almost all of the teachers participating in the groups had been implementing the SEL program since the initial implementation stage, the groups were homogeneous, thereby facilitating the group dynamics (Krueger & Casey, 2015). At the beginning of the discussion all of the group participants shared basic information regarding their age, years of teaching experience, and years of implementing the SEL program.

The focus group discussion questions were developed upon the basis of conclusions from previous research on SEL program fidelity and sustainability (CASEL, 2012). The specific open-ended questions developed for the focus group discussions were as follows:

1. How are the students' competences, developed during the SEL program, maintained on a school-wide level (in various school settings)?
2. As a teacher what kind of external support would you need to maintain the SEL program more successfully?
3. Which factors in particular have helped you as a teacher to sustain the SEL program from year to year?
4. Which factors in particular make it difficult for you as a teacher to sustain the SEL program from year to year?

During the interviews, more questions were asked; therefore, in this article the issues associated with different aspects of the program's sustainability were analyzed. The focus group moderator assured that all of the questions were answered, if necessary with additional questions for clarification. Due to practical reasons the focus groups were led by only one moderator, who was responsible of taking detailed notes, making observations and preparing a transcript of whole discussion. At the end of each interview, the moderator provided a summary and feedback on the answers received from the respondents. Then respondents reflected, confirmed or added to the content of their answers. After each focus group discussion, the moderator prepared a detailed interview transcript.

### **Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis of Discussion Transcripts**

In the analysis of the results of this qualitative research the principles of thematic analysis were applied (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Initially each of the two authors of this study independently read and reviewed several times each focus group transcript in order to get a general view of the content of the responses. Through an inductive approach the units of meaning were grouped according to themes, and the themes were finally grouped as categories. After the identification of the themes by each author independently, these groupings were discussed, and in case of disagreement the discussion continued until consensus agreement was reached.

## **Results**

The thematic analysis conducted for each of the questions presented as topics of focus group discussion resulted in the following series of identified themes and categories, which are presented in each table, and also include specific examples or illustrations of the expressed responses.

The following categories and themes were identified with respect to the responses to the first interview question: How are the students' competences, developed during the SEL program, maintained on a school-wide level (in various school settings)? (see Table 1).

The responses were grouped in two main categories – organization at the administrative level (includes e.g. support from the school's administrator, assessment of the program's effectiveness, simultaneous implementation of other support program) and various aspects of the school environment (for example, organization of special events supporting acquired social and emotional skills of the students).

Table 1  
*Themes, Subthemes and Illustrative Examples of Opinions Expressed in Response to the First Discussion Question: How are the students' competencies which are developed during the SEL program maintained on a school-wide level (in various school settings)?*

Themes	Subthemes	Examples
Organization at the administrative level	Incorporation in the homeroom class curriculum	“The SEL themes have been incorporated in the homeroom class agenda”, “In the entire school SEL is a priority”, “There is cooperation with the social pedagogue, psychologist, school nurse, everyone keeps up the expectations”, “On the cover of the student daily planner are the school rules, and this helps to maintain the SEL competencies”, “At the beginning of each school year we review the SEL material in the pedagogical meeting”, “The director suggested and we agreed to conduct open SEL class sessions for colleagues to observe”, “Through positive comments to parents electronically, previously there were more negative comments”, “At the end of the school year a general survey for teachers, parents and students on the effectiveness of the SEL”.
	Cooperation with the “Support Positive Behavior” program	
	Support from other school professionals	
	Methodological support	
	Regular positive feedback	
	Program effectiveness surveys	
Various aspects of the school environment	Special events	“The organization of special theme days – <i>friendship day, friendly expression day</i> ”, “In physical education class we speak a lot about emotions”, “At the end of other class sessions – how do you feel, how do you rate yourself”, “We try to uphold the SEL principles in our own daily activities”
	Incorporation in other lessons	
	Daily situations	

One teacher mentioned a series of events, supported by the school administration, facilitated positive social interaction skills, emotion regulation, goal-setting and problem-solving strategies.

*“During the ‘Prosocial Activities Week the 12th grade students taught the first-grade students about traffic safety rules; each class prepared a special song to sing to the other classes; teachers wrote letters to their students; there were presentations about the emotions of well-known people – how they have felt in certain situations. There was a special Students’ Day where the teachers made some entertainment for the students. All of this helped to strengthen the ability to see situations from the other’s perspective.”*

The responses to the second discussion question: As a teacher, what kind of external support would you need to maintain the SEL program more successfully? were grouped into three main categories (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Themes, Subthemes and Illustrative Examples of Opinions Expressed in Response to the Second Discussion Question: As a teacher what kind of external support would you need to maintain the SEL program more successfully?*

Themes	Subthemes	Examples
Supplementing the program content	New topics	“The program should include examples from the internet and social networks”, “The 11 <sup>th</sup> and 12 <sup>th</sup> grade should also include class lessons, not only prosocial activities”, “SEL games for the younger grades”, “Additional work sheets”
	Updating of the content	
	Additional materials	
Direct support to the teachers	Continual training	“There should be a continuation of teacher training after the initial SEL introductory course”, “Supervisions”, “Discussion of methodological issues”
	Consultations from specialists	
	Methodological support	
Other solutions	Technical solutions	“To include materials in the e-environment”, “To have the video materials available on YouTube”, “To have material for working with parents”, “Visiting lecturers on the SEL topics”
	To expand the audience	
	To include other specialists	

In their responses to this question the teachers focused specifically on the SEL program materials, and on issues related directly to the implementation of the lesson plans. However, there were also opinions in regard to the sustainability of the SEL program.

*“In our school, there should be a renewal of methodological discussions. In the past once a month we would have methodological discussions. The teachers would share their experience, and discuss how the class had responded. Then future teachers could plan for the continuation of SEL on a long-term basis. There might also be a class session for students together with their parents. Once I had such a class session – we watched together an animated film and discussed the merits of it. Certain values were brought out, such as curiosity and friendship, and the parents were able to support this at home.”*

The responses to the third discussion question: Which factors in particular have helped you as a teacher to sustain the SEL program from year to year? were grouped into three main categories (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Themes, Subthemes and Illustrative Examples of Opinions Expressed in Response to the Third Discussion Question: Which factors in particular have helped you as a teacher to sustain the SEL program from year to year?*

Themes	Subthemes	Examples
Organizational/ administrative support	Administration support	“The support of the school administration”, “The SEL values have been incorporated in the school directives”, “The exchange of best practices between schools and also among ourselves”, “The school values the benefits from the program”, “Support from the support staff in the implementation of the program”
	The school presents itself as an SEL school	
	Methodological support	
	Recognition of benefits	
SEL program content	School personnel inclusion	“That the teaching materials are completely ready to use, with supplementary materials”; “That there is flexibility in the lesson plans, I was able to conduct a fifth’s grade lesson for my seventh grade, and it was very successful”, “The principle of thematic blocks which are strengthened at each next grade level”, “The topics do not lose their relevance”
	Teacher’s handbook	
	Lesson flexibility	
	Succession of topics	
Teacher’s understanding of SEL importance and activity	Relevance of topics	“As a teacher, I understand that it is important, and therefore I am glad to implement the program each year”, “Since I was able to conduct a lesson for children together with their parents, the parents now also support the program”
	Teacher’s perspective	
	Parental involvement	
	Outside of class opportunities	

The teachers emphasized both the facilitative role of administrative support and teacher’s own positive attitude toward SEL, and the program’s content itself (successive lessons on relevant topics, well-developed teacher’s handbook, etc.)

In all of the focus groups, the opinion was expressed that it is easier to maintain the SEL principles in outside of the class situations in the lower grades because the teachers have greater direct contact with the students during break time, in the cafeteria, in the school yard and in other contexts.

*“It is important to note that we are together also during break time, and in afterschool events where there is a more informal atmosphere, so we are able to observe how the SEL principles are used in daily situations. For some period of time after the SEL lesson we can help the students to practice a certain new skill, such as stress management strategies, etc.”*

However, the teachers of the higher grades expressed their motivation to maintain the SEL principles in daily life situations, with collaboration between colleagues.

*“Other teachers also help to resolve situations involving social and emotional aspects – for example, belittling among students. Someone is always watching during break time, and I believe that situations of intolerance are becoming less and less frequent.”*

The responses to the fourth discussion question: Which factors in particular make it difficult for you as a teacher to sustain the SEL program from year to year? were grouped into two main categories (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Themes, Subthemes and Illustrative Examples of Opinions Expressed in Response to the Fourth Discussion Question: Which factors in particular make it difficult for you as a teacher to sustain the SEL program from year to year?*

Themes	Subthemes	Examples
External factors	Work load	“I receive financial compensation for only one hour of homeroom time per week, but I must accomplish everything”, “During the homeroom period we must discuss various issues, so there is little time left for SEL”, “Parents have various opinions and stereotypes, they do not provide enough support for our attempts at helping their child to develop”, “The SEL values are not maintained outside of the school context”, “The themes should be expanded to include the digital environment, for example, why you shouldn’t spend so much time there”
	Lack of support from parents	
	Outside of school context	
	Program content	
Factors related to the teachers	No obstacles	“I haven’t encountered any obstacles”, “Upon occasion it is necessary to leave out some material, just from looking at it”
	Teacher’s attitude	

In all of the focus groups there was an unanimously endorsed opinion that a significant obstacle is the heavy work load of the teachers, and that as a result of educational reforms there is now even less time allotted for homeroom periods.

*“Previously a teacher received financial compensation for four hours of homeroom time per week – then it was enough time to plan special events, to organize routine activity, and time for the thematic SEL lessons. Now only one hour of homeroom time per week (for some two hours) is reimbursed – during this one hour it is necessary to organize special school events, to prepare student performances... therefore there is rarely time for a complete SEL thematic lesson. The alternative is that preparations for the concert would have to take place after school, but the children do not want to remain after school, and the school bus leaves at a certain time.”*

In several of the focus groups the teachers admitted that since the initial implementation of the SEL program, they do not always have time to complete all eight lessons according to the plan. This points to the issue of how to assure that the SEL ideas become established in the school’s culture outside of the SEL class lesson, and brings to the forefront the role of the school administration in integrating the SEL as a crucial part of the school’s identity.

## Discussion

The teachers' answers to the four focus group interview questions were thematically analyzed to identify their opinions regarding various aspects of the Latvia SEL program dissemination and specific factors which facilitate or debilitate the program's sustainability. The thematic analysis then provides answers to the three main research questions. Other questions addressed during the focus group interviews were analyzed separately with a focus on relationships (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017).

In answer to the first research question as to how the SEL program was integrated within other aspects of the school environment, the respondents were unanimous in agreeing that an important contributing factor is the organizational support provided by the school administration. This includes administrative actions such as positioning the school as a SEL school, developing a unified system for the program implementation (i.e. including the SEL lessons as a part of the homeroom teacher's responsibility, involving other members of the school support staff, and organizing evaluation of the program's effectiveness). In two of the seven schools where the focus group discussions were organized, the teachers admitted that since the initiation of the program implementation almost five years ago, during the past several years the SEL lessons are no longer included in the homeroom teacher's obligations, and it is each teacher's own choice and initiative to conduct the SEL lessons, or not.

The integration of the SEL program in the school system may provoke systemic resistance, because of changes in the daily routines and necessity to alter accustomed activities. This may be a challenge, especially in situations of a tight daily schedules (Elias, 2010; Elias et al., 2015). The school administration's initiative in creating a positive school climate and maintaining parallel programs, which supports positive behavior, has shown to be a promoting factor in previous studies on SEL effective and successful maintenance (Merrell & Guelder, 2010). During the focus group discussions of this study the teachers also commented upon the positive effects of the positive behavior program, which had helped to develop a clear norms and values in the school.

The views expressed in the focus groups were consistent in that the SEL ideas are best maintained when there is dissemination within other aspects of the school environment. The teachers mentioned that during other subject lessons they often make use of the SEL lesson structure (initially setting lesson objectives which are meaningful for the students and a moment of reflection at the end of the lesson), and that they more often discuss emotional and social issues in other contexts as well. On a daily basis, the SEL competencies are maintained through modelling and positive support of positive behavior, as well as through daily engagement in problem solving, for example, during break time. The teachers placed importance on the meaning of various outside-of-classroom school activities, for example, thematic days and campaigns (*Prosocial Activities Week; Politeness Day; From Class-to-Class*, etc.). The Latvia SEL program is based upon the principle that the teachers are teaching social and emotional skills within the confines of the program, but then simultaneously supporting and providing opportunities for these skills to be used outside of the classroom, so that they become a part of the daily routine.

In response to the question about the necessary external support for effective maintenance of the SEL program, the focus group respondents indicated various suggestions for expansion and improvement of the program. For example, to include the relevant

program content such as the electronic social media, to develop additional supplementary materials, and to develop some in-class lessons for the 11th and 12th grade students are some of the suggestions. Another suggestion was to broaden the SEL program audience, for example, by including the parents. The teachers stated that they needed additional direct support, such as additional training on SEL principles, supervision sessions, and in-service sessions organized by the school administration on SEL implementation of lesson plans. These suggestions from the teachers are essential, because due to the financial constraints of the national and local school budgets, the teachers have not been able to receive the above mentioned SEL support services. Other supportive services have been initiated, for example, the training of supervisors for each region of Latvia, however, again due to financial limitations regular supervision sessions have been enacted only during the first years of program implementation. A continuous means of support is that each year the University of Latvia organizes a conference on topics of SEL and positive behavior management, providing additional information, as well as providing an opportunity for teachers from all regions of Latvia to meet and to share their experience. Nevertheless, apparently there is a need for a more systematic and structured system of providing direct support based on which SEL teachers can benefit the most.

The teachers continued to address the issue of need for administrative support in response to the third research question concerning the resources and risks which hinder or facilitate SEL sustainability. The teachers emphasized that maintenance of the SEL program is positively engendered by the school director's interest and initiative, for example, in public presentation of the school as a SEL school, and organizing program assessment, which provides positive feedback about program effectiveness. The teacher involvement in the initial program planning might be very important for involving teachers further along in the long-term evolution of the program, when it becomes necessary to make adaptations to adjust to the changing school environment. An important facilitative aspect is methodological support for the teachers, including regular sharing of experience, exchange of teaching materials and methods, as well as the possibility to observe each other's lessons. They also mentioned the benefits of working as a team with other members of the school staff, including the social pedagogue, school psychologist and speech therapist. Previous research has also shown that for the maintenance of the SEL program it is useful to have a multi-layered support system, whereby other school professionals can work with individuals or small groups to strengthen the social and emotional competencies which have been addressed during the SEL lessons, especially in situations of developing behavioral problems (Mart et al., 2015).

Within the focus group discussions, the teachers acknowledged the importance of the Latvia SEL program as a significant resource for the maintenance of social and emotional competencies within the student body. In particular, the teachers commented on the value of the sequential aspect of the SEL program, the detailed lesson plans including topics of interest to the students, and the easily usable supplementary materials. Teachers differed to the extent that they evaluated their own engagement in the SEL process, with some teachers expressing a great deal of initiative, for example, in proposing to invite parents to some of the SEL lessons. Such a practice could be very useful for dissemination of the importance of SEL, and for expanding the school administration's and larger community's interest in supporting the program. By expanding an understanding of the SEL principles, there is greater opportunity for these principles to become embedded in the community (Catalano et al., 2004; Elias et al., 2015). It is positive that

the teachers are aware of their own investment in the development of social and emotional competencies in their students. This aligns with the conclusions of other researchers who have found that the teacher is able to promote the students' development through positive interactions and expectations, the modelling of socioemotional competencies, and the engagement of students in positive interaction (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1998; Murray & Greenberg, 2000; Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003; Williford & Wolcott, 2015). The opinions expressed by the teachers indicate that they value the importance of being open to change and self-development. Therefore, if a teacher is doubtful about the necessity of SEL, or doubtful of his or her ability to implement the program, then this may seriously impede the implementation of the SEL program, and can foster discontent among the teachers (Collie, Shapka, Perry, & Martin, 2015; Kress & Elias, 2006). The focus group participants also mentioned a lack of support from parents and the community, and teachers' workload as significant risk factors in regard to SEL sustainability.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. Due to financial constraints, the schools were included in the study on a voluntary basis so the sample was not randomized. Therefore, it is not possible to conclude that the results of the current study represent an opinion of all schools, which have implemented the Latvia SEL program. Moreover, the authors of the current study were aware of the limitation that the first author of this research was also the first author and implementer of the Latvia SEL program. Efforts were made to maintain neutrality in researcher's role and to be aware of possible tendency to researcher's bias. Due to financial constraints, each focus group was led by only one moderator, who then was responsible also for observations and note-taking. Hence it was not possible for the moderators to compare the transcripts at the end of each focus group discussion. Therefore, a great theme congruence across the different focus groups was found after the analysis of discussion transcripts.

### **Conclusions**

The focus groups were organized inviting teachers who had been active in maintaining the SEL program in their schools since the initial program implementation. The focus group interview questions provided opportunity for the teachers to express their views on the Latvia SEL program effective maintenance and various aspects, which they identified as resources or risk factors for SEL program sustainability. The focus group discussion analysis allowed for an opportunity of greater in-depth understanding of the perspective of the teachers involved in the program implementation.

First, the teachers mentioned that the SEL principles are maintained within the school as the result of the following: 1) administrative support, for example, SEL being included in the obligatory school curriculum, the simultaneous maintenance of the "Support of Positive Behavior" program, methodological support for the teachers, and program evaluation at the school-wide level; 2) the opportunity for students to practice their SEL competencies also within the context of other classes, outside of the classroom and at various school events.

Second, for the sustainability of the SEL program it is necessary to renew and expand the SEL program, including lesson plans and supplementary materials, to provide new

technical approaches, and to expand the SEL audience to include parents. The teachers were unified in their call for the necessity of direct support – supervisions, additional training seminars on SEL principles, and in-service discussions on methodological issues.

Third, the focus group participants mentioned the following as the major facilitating factors for SEL sustainability: 1) the organization of the infrastructure (i.e. support from the school administration, SEL program integrated in the school curriculum and statement of purpose, regular methodological meetings, program evaluation at a school-wide level); 2) teacher understanding of SEL significance and willingness to be actively engaged; 3) the content and organization of the Latvia SEL program. The major risk factors include teacher overload and lack of enough time, as well as lack of sufficient external support, especially from students' families and the local community.

Aspects, which need improvement in the future, include the necessity of greater integration of the SEL principles in the school system as a whole, need for greater support from the school administration, and the necessity of additional teacher training seminars. Also, to be considered are future opportunities for teachers to become partners in the further development of the Latvia SEL program so that they would experience a greater sense of belonging and motivation for further engagement.

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