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Details of the full report, its translations, a toolbox and other deliverables are available from website: www.positivementalhealth.eu

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Introduction

The introduction of digital learning programmes has received much attention within the educational sector over the last decennia. For instance, the European Commission has explicitly expressed its' vision for high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in their Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027).

The recent Covid19 pandemic has further challenged educators in both formal and non-formal educational settings around the world to implement digital solutions at a very high pace. But not all teachers felt they had enough competencies to use digital teaching yet (Jerrim & Sims, 2019). The Erasmus+ Project "Learn & Play" was introduced as a response to these challenges, for educators working with children of 6-11 years old.

Within the "Learn & Play" project, a total of 18 educational games were developed, with the aim to improve social and emotional competencies of school-aged children, through Social and Emotional Learning (Elias et al., 1997). A central aim of this approach is to teach children how to attain and maintain high levels of wellbeing. Wellbeing, in turn, refers both to feeling good and happy and to reaching your own full potential.

The 'Learn & Play' activities¹ were designed to enable both online and offline (with physical presence at school) participation, so that activities could also be performed from home, in response any potential circumstances that enforce schooling from home. All activities used a game-based approach.

This report presents the evaluation of the implementation of these game-based activities in three different countries: Spain, Latvia, and Slovenia.

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¹ Gudakovska, N., Albers, T., Milovs, A., Pereira Mota, S., Longu, L., Trunkl, A. (2022). Well-being of school children: An Education Toolkit for Teachers and Educators.. Aalten: Anatta Foundation. (available from www.positivementalhealth.eu)



The aim of the activities in the "Learn & Play" program is to improve social and emotional functioning of school-aged children. Schools often focus mostly on acquiring fundamental knowledge such as reading, writing, and mathematics. There is, however, one important skill that is often overlooked but that also could benefit from training, namely that of psychological resilience, often leading to more happiness and achieving better version of yourself. This is also often referred to as 'wellbeing' and child wellbeing appears to have been declining over the past decades, and especially in response to the Covid19 pandemic (Bosmans et al., 2022).

Child wellbeing can be improved through education and several programmes have been developed to teach wellbeing, focusing on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL; Elias et al., 1997). Programmes aimed at Social and Emotional Learning can improve school wellbeing and performance (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Dowling, Simpkin, & Barry, 2019; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Green, Ferrante, Boaz, Kutash, & Wheeldon-Reece, 2021; Humphrey, 2013; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). However, the programme needs to be of good enough quality to produce these benefits (Weissberg et al., 2015).

These SEL programmes have, however, mostly been developed for youth and adults, but school children are also expected to benefit from Social Emotional Learning. Before setting out to improve child wellbeing, though, one needs to know what child wellbeing exactly entails. Therefore, in an earlier part of the "Learn & Play" project², we first defined several competencies necessary for good child wellbeing. These competencies are categorized in seven different domains, namely: cognitive regulation, emotional processes, interpersonal processes, values, perspective / values, identity / self-image, and physical activity / playfulness.

Method

Teachers were presented with a toolkit in which all 18 games were introduced and were allowed to choose and implement their activity or activities of choice. Afterwards, they were asked to fill out an online survey to evaluate their experiences with the activities. Involved school came directly from the professional network of the partners of the Erasmus+ project. Some teachers of this study took part in a training course as part of the Erasmus+ project, held in October 2022 in Spain.

The piloting of activities took place from November 2022 until January 2023. The questionnaires were administered in February 2023, two weeks after the last pilot ended.

This survey contained both open and closed questions, to allow for numerical comparisons as well as to capture more in-depth and qualitative experiences. The survey consisted of 6 parts:

1. Demographics and general information

This section included the demographics (age, gender), but also the number of years of teaching experience.

2. Implementation of the Learn & Play activities

This section focused on the number of classes and students involved per respondent. They were also asked to indicate which activities they chose.

3. Perceived quality of the manual

This section focused on the quality of the manual and how the manual potentially could be improved.

4. Teacher skills and appreciation of the learning activities

This section looked at whether the teachers felt they had the competencies necessary to perform these activities, and which competencies they would potentially like to receive training in.

5. Experienced effects on the pupils

The experienced observed effects on the pupils were measured in terms of the seven domains of child wellbeing.

6. Other comments

In this section, the respondents could optionally provide general comments.

All respondents provided informed consent before starting the questionnaire. They could answer to the open questions in English, or in their own language.

Learn & play activities

This section will provide a short description of the 18 activities within the "Learn & Play" project:

1. A story about emotions

This activity boosts creativity and improves emotional literacy. Children are asked to throw two dices. One with animals and one with emotions. After that, they create a story combining the animal and the emotion.

2. Chain of strengths

This activity helps children to recognize their strengths and to realize how collaboration strengthens a group. In this activity, children create one big chain of strengths of strips of paper. These strips are made of different colours (i.e., different groups of strengths) and contain the strengths the children feel they possess. They can write the strengths on the strips of paper themselves, or there are pre-existing strips available.

3. Cultivating compassion

This activity helps children to cultivate compassion for themselves and others. Some examples of activities that can be done are: practice loving-kindness meditation, practice acts of compassion for neutral ones, practice acts of compassion for familiar ones (e.g., people, animals, plants), or practice acts of compassion for oneself.

4. Dancing through emotions

This objective of this activity is to warm up the body and to connect with it, to express emotions through movement and non-verbal communication, and to increase emotional literacy. Different types of music are played and the children are asked to dance as if they have a certain emotion (e.g., as if they are angry).

5. I am / You are

In this activity, the children will get to know each other better. In addition, the activity aims to facilitate the development of healthy relationships with peers and adults and to help gain understanding how self-perception and the perception of others can differ. Children are asked to pick cards with different characteristics that they feel represent themselves best, and the peers are also asked to pick cards that they feel fits this pupil best.

6. Optimism and a positive mindset

This activity aims to foster thoughts of optimism, feelings of gratitude, and a positive mindset. Over a longer period of time, the pupils are asked to write down three highlights of the day and three things they are grateful for.

7. The Gratitude Trees and the Magical World of Gratitude

This activity helps children to learn how to easily focus on positive things in their life and it supports children in wiring their brain for gratitude. Over a period of time, the children build up a tree by adding three leaves every day, containing something they are grateful for 1) about themselves, 2) in others, and 3) in their life in general.

8. Values: What is important for me?

The objectives of this activity are to raise children's awareness of what values are; to gain insight into which values are important to a child; to understand how values are a compass in decision-making in life; and for parents and teachers to understand what values a child has. Children are introduced to the concept of values and then to fill in a questionnaire about their own values. They can also do this for a peer, or ask an adult (e.g., parent) to fill it out for themselves.

9. What am I good at?

In this activity, children (and their parents and teachers) gain awareness of what talents are, which talents and strengths they have. They are also learned how strengths are like a superpower. First, children are introduced to the concept of talents. After that, they are encouraged to find their own talents and make a drawing of this. They can also do this for a classmate, or ask an adult (e.g., parent) to do this for them.

10. A Different Story

This activity helps children to develop critical thinking, it raises awareness on stereotypes and how they influence our perception of other people, and it provokes discussion about the topic "are things/people the same as we perceive them?" Children are shown one half of a picture, for example from a magazine, and they are asked to develop a story about this picture. They are then shown the other half of the picture and are asked whether they want to revise their story.

11. Discover the importance of Communication

In this activity awareness is given to the importance of communication, communication and cooperation skills are developed, and theoretical and practical information is given on communication (processes). Pupils work in pairs and they sit back-to-back. One pupil describes a photo or picture, while the other pupil draws based on the other pupils' instruction.

12. Emotional Museum

This activity aims at improve pupils' emotional literacy, to help them connect with themselves and their emotions, and to support them in understanding what they are feeling at a given moment. Six cards with emotions (fear, sadness, disgust, joy, surprise, anger) are placed on the floor, with the text facing down.

The pupils walk in rounds while music is played. When the music stops, one pupil will pick up a card and tell a personal experience with the emotional on this card.

13. Find Your Treasure

This activity helps children to identify what they are passionate about, to explore what dreams motivate them and make their heart sing, and to discover and establish together the sense of core purpose or life theme. Children are asked to draw a treasure map that represents their dream, starting at where they are now and ending up at what they want to be when they grow up.

14. Talents & Values into action

This activity helps children to develop conflict resolution skills. It also helps them to understand how values are a life compass in decision making; how strengths are like superpowers, and using them gives you joy and energy; and how to apply strengths and talents in day-to-day situations. Before doing this activity, children first need to do activities 8 and 9. In this activity, children use the output of these activities and learn how to apply them in everyday life by integrating talents and values, by creating their own superhero, by identifying what situation makes them lose control. In the final activity, all these pieces of information are combined in a theatre (pieces of paper with the output are randomly drawn and combined).

15. You Cannot Eat an Entire Pie All At Once

This activity helps children to understand that their current limitations (problems) are not set in stone, and with time and perseverance, they can and will overcome the obstacles they may be facing. It also helps them to view obstacles as challenges and it supports a growth mindset development in children, helping them divide a big problem into small manageable segments for which they can find solutions. Children think of a problem they have (the 'pie') and then they are asked to slice the pie into different pieces, with each piece being a segment or cause of the problem. Then, the children are asked -for each piece- whether this segment is permanent of temporarily.

16. Your Task is my Task

The aim of this activity is to develop empathy among primary school students, to enhance the ability to manage emotions, and to work through classroom conflicts. All pupils sit in a circle, hold hands, and do a breathing exercise. After that, everyone has to write down an action that the person next to them needs to do (e.g., give a hug, or put something in the garbage). Then, all actions are read out loud and the pupils are told that not the person next to them needs to do it, but they have to do it themselves.

17. LEGO Tower

In this activity, the cooperation and initiative skills of pupils are developed, ways of suggesting and implementing creative ideas and of dealing with problems are explored, and communication skills in a group and the sharing of responsibilities is practiced. Pupils are asked to build a tower of lego or another building material in teams (it is not a competition), after twenty minutes the building period is over and they are asked to develop a story about the tower, and a name of the tower and the team.

18. The Orange Game

In this activity, the pupils develop conflict management skills, discuss ways communicating in conflict situations, explore conflict resolution ways/strategies (what it means to be aware of your own needs and respect the needs of others), and practice expressing thoughts and opinions. The group is divided into two teams (A and B). Team A is told to get the orange to make juice, team B is told to get the orange to peel it. They then sit opposite of they get three minutes to get what they need (without violence).

Activity 1-9 are 'easy' activities, activity 10-16 are 'intermediately difficult', and 17 and 18 are 'difficult' activities.

Table 1 further summarizes the activities in terms of their expected contribution to child wellbeing within seven domains: cognitive regulation, emotional processes, interpersonal processes, values, perspective / values, identity / self-image, and physical.

No. Exercise nam																													1
	e & link to competence/skill domain	Critical thinking	Problem solving	Goal setting and attainment	Decision making	Able to express thoughts and opinions	Creativity	Agency	Emotional literacy	Emotion regulation	Empathy and compassion	Communication skills	Social problem-solving skills	Relationship building and maintaining	Cooperative behaviour	Being respectful of the needs of others	Being forgiving	Interest in community	Family values	Respecting social values and rules	Being open-minded and curious	Being optimistic	Self-awareness	Growth mindset	Self-worth	Self-compassion	Being active	Playfulness	LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY
1 A Story Abo	out Emotions						√		✓																				Е
2 Chain of Str	rengths														✓								✓		✓				Е
3 Cultivating	compassion										✓															✓			Е
4 Dancing Th	rough Emotions								✓	✓																			E
5 I am / You a	are										✓			✓															Е
6 Optimism a	and positive mindset																				✓	1							Е
The Gratitu	de Trees and the Magical																												
7 World of Gr																					✓	✓					✓	✓	Е
8 Values: Wh	at is important to me				1													1											Е
9 What am I g																		\neg		\neg			✓		✓				Е
10 A Different		1																\neg		\neg									М
	e Importance of											١.			١.			\neg		\neg									
11 Communica												✓			✓														М
12 Emotional M									1									\neg		\neg			1			П			М
13 Find Your To	reasure																	\neg		\neg			1	1					М
14 Talents & V	alues into Action																						1		√				М
15 You Cannot	Eat an Entire Pie All at Once		1															\neg		\neg		1		1	1				М
16 Your Task Is										V	1		1																М
17 LEGO Towe								√				1	1		√					\neg							1	√	н
18 The Orange			1		1	1		1				1	1			V													н

Table 1. Overview of the 18 "Learn & Play" activities and their contribution to child wellbeing

Findings

1. Respondents

A total of 9 teachers filled out the questionnaire (4 from Spain, 3 from Latvia, and 2 from Slovenia). All teachers were female, with an age ranging between 34 and 50 years old (Mean age of 41.6 years, SD = 5.5). Their teaching experience ranged between 1 and 19 years (Mean = 10.6 years, SD = 6.4 years). The amount of previous experience with wellbeing education differed also between the teachers. One teacher indicated to have no previous experience (11 %), three teachers indicated to have a bit of previous experience (33 %) and five teachers had a lot of previous experience (55 %). See also Table 2 for an overview.

	%	Range	Mean (SD)
Gender:			
 Female 	100		
• Male	0		
Age		34-50	41.6 (5.5)
Teaching experience (in years)		1 - 19	10.6 (6.4)
Wellbeing teaching experience:			
 Nothing 	11		
• A bit	33		
• A lot	56		
• Expert	0		

Table 2. Overview of the 18 "Learn & Play" activities and their contribution to child wellbeing

2. Implementation of the Learn & Play activities

Most teachers applied the learning activities in 1 class (5/9, 56 %). Others applied it in 2 classes (1/9, 11 %), 5 classes (1/9, 11 %), 7 classes (1/9, 11 %), or 19 classes (1/9, 11 %), see also Figure 1.

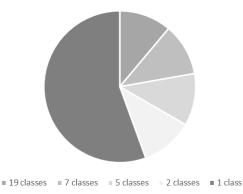


Figure 1. The number of classes in which the activities were implemented per teacher.

In this questions, the respondents may have misunderstood the word 'classes' (referring to groups of children) with lessons.

There was also some variation in the number of pupils that took part in the activities, this ranged from 7 to 120, with a mean of 36.8 pupils (SD = 36.1), see also Figure 2.

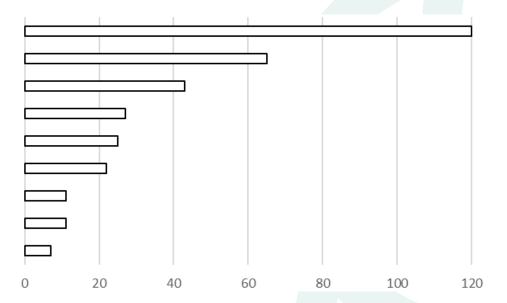


Figure 2. Number of pupils in the activities per teacher.

The number of hours that the classes worked on the activities differed between 1.5 hours and 25 hours, with a mean of 12.7 hours (SD = 9.6 hours), see also Figure 3.

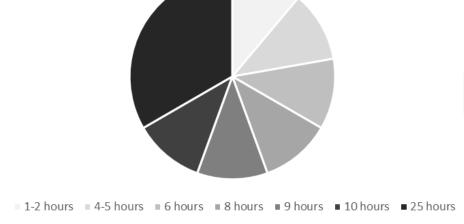


Figure 3. Number of classroom hours per class.

The number of activities that were implemented ranged between 4 and 14 per site, with a mean of 6.6 activities (SD = 3.2 activities). All learning activities were chosen at least once, and also all difficulty levels were chosen (easy, intermediate, difficult), see also Figure 4. The activity "Optimism/a positive mindset" was chosen most often (6 times), followed by "What am I good at?" (5 times). Three activities were implemented only once: "You Cannot Eat an Entire Pie All At Once", "Talents & Values into action", and "Values: What is important for me?". All activities were organized in the classroom.

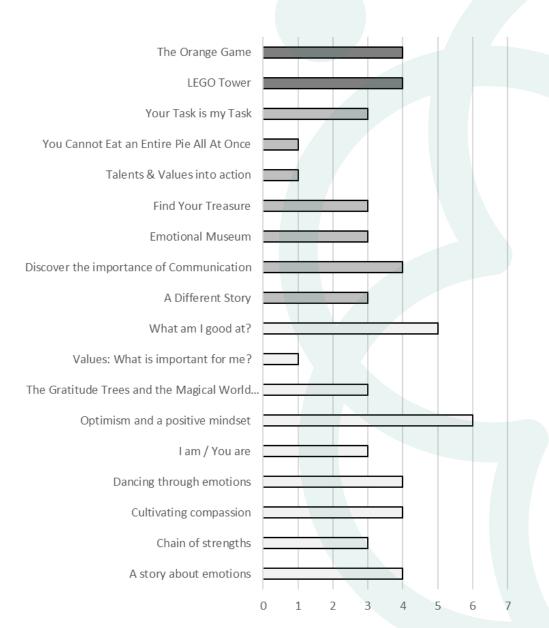


Figure 4. Overview of the learning activities that were implemented

3. Perceived quality of the manual

Two items of the survey looked at the manual. The overall quality of the manual as well as the user-friendliness of the manual was considered to be good. Five teachers (56 %) rated the general quality and user-friendliness as 'very good', and four teachers rated them as 'good' (44 %). See also Figure 5 for an overview of the ratings for the manual and learning activities.

In the open questions, respondents were asked what they liked about the manual and which improvements they would propose. The respondents were generally positive about the manual in the open questions as well. They liked the detailed descriptions of the activities, as well as the overview table and the graphics of the manual. Respondents mostly expressed that they would like to have the manual and activities translated in their own language as a point of improvement. In the pilot the manual was provided in English and later on it was translated into Latvian, Slovenian, Spanish and Dutch.

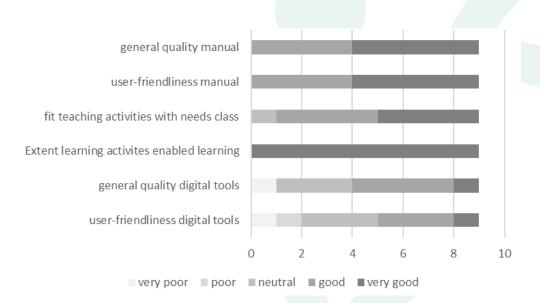


Figure 5. Evaluation of the manual and learning activities.

4. Evaluation of the learning activities

Three items asked the respondents to rate the teaching activities. The fit of the teaching activities with the needs of the classes was considered to be good, with 4 teachers rating the fit as 'very good' (44 %), 4 teachers as 'good' (44 %), and 1 teacher scored the fit as 'neutral' (11 %). The extent to which the activities enabled learning was rated as 'very good' by all teachers (100 %). The digital tools were not rated as well by all teachers. The general quality of the digital tools were rated as 'very poor' by one teacher (11 %), as 'neutral' by 3 teachers (33 %), as 'good' by 4 teachers (44 %), and as 'very good' by one teacher (11 %). The user-friendliness of the digital tools were rated as 'very poor' or 'poor' by one teacher each (11 %), as 'neutral' or 'good' by 3 teachers each (33 %), and as 'very good' by one teacher (11 %). See also Figure 5 for an overview of the ratings for the manual and learning activities.

In the open questions, respondents were asked what they liked about the learning activities and which improvements they would propose. The teachers commented that they thought the learning activities generally were fun, and that they liked to see the effect that it had on the children. They also mentioned some improvements, this mostly pertained to the age limit or length of the activities. Some activities were too long for the younger children, and other in activities the children had so much to say that the activity took much longer than anticipated. Breaking up the activities in shorter pieces was proposed for both issues (to be better suitable for younger children, or when children had a lot to say). Two teachers also mentioned that some activities required additional materials, which they didn't have time to make themselves. This either prevented them from performing the activity, or lowered the quality of the activity. Therefore, it was proposed to have more premade material ready, or available in the manual.

5. Teacher skills and appreciation of the learning activities

The teachers were asked whether they felt that they had the skills necessary to implement the teaching activities. Most of them (strongly) agreed with this statement (6 agreed, 67 %; 1 strongly agreed, 11%). Two teachers responded with 'neutral' to this question (12 %). Most teachers also agreed that training is needed to perform the learning activities (4 agreed, 44 %; 2 strongly agreed, 22 %). Two teachers did not feel that training was necessary (1 strongly disagreed, 11 %; 1 disagreed, 11 %). And one teacher answered with 'neutral' (11 %). See also Figure 6.

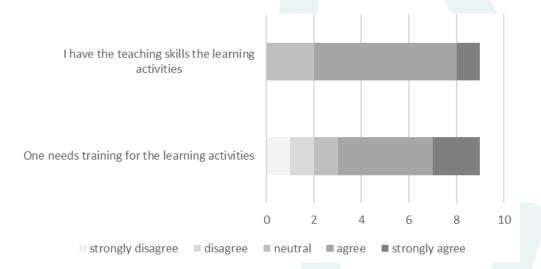


Figure 6. Teaching skills necessary for the teaching skills

There were also three open questions in this section: which of their own teaching skills helped them in implementing the learning activities, which skills in general are needed for these learning activities, and whether they noticed a difference in their teaching style after using the learning activities.

In terms of the teaching skills that helped them implement the learning activities, three teachers mentioned that socio-emotional training / skills had helped them. Other skills that were mentioned were leadership skills (2 teachers), communication skills such as teamwork and being able to listen (3 teachers). Creativity was mentioned by 2 teachers, and having an open-mind and empathy and being adaptable was mentioned by 3 teachers. One teacher mentioned that it was important to know the students well to tailor the activity to the class.

When it comes to the skills that are generally required to teach these learning activities, the two most important skills appeared to be (knowledge of) emotional regulation and good communication / social skills (including being a good listener and observer, conflict management), which both were mentioned by 6 teachers. In a similar vein, being open minded and empathic was also mentioned (4 teachers). Creativity was again mentioned by 2 teachers and 1 teacher also highlighted organizational skills such as time management. Some teachers also referred to the 'Learn & Play' training for their acquisition of these skills.

How the learning activities influenced the teachers afterwards differed somewhat. Some indicated that they felt no difference (3 teachers), but 2 of these teachers also indicated that they had required more tools for teaching now. Two teachers indicated that the atmosphere in the class had improved and one teacher indicated that her teaching style had become more playful. Two teachers indicated that they implemented the activities or topics in their classes more often, for instance by having more time for discussion and relaxation. Another teaching indicated that she tried to develop her personal teaching skills more and tried to be more coherent in her teaching.

6. Experienced effects on the pupils

The teachers were asked to evaluate how -and to what extent- the learning activities influenced the pupils, see also Figure 7. The teachers were generally positive about the effects of the learning activities on the pupils. When asked whether the learning activities helped the pupils reach their learning goals, most teachers responded with 'very' (5; 56 %), or 'extremely' (1 teacher, 11 %). Three teachers also answered 'moderately' (33 %). All teachers felt the students enjoyed the learning activities (7 answered 'very', 78 %; 2 answered 'extremely', 22 %). Most teachers also indicated that they felt that the students improved their wellbeing competencies (7 answered 'very', 78 %; 1 answered 'extremely', 11 %), while 1 teacher felt they 'moderately' improved their wellbeing competencies (11 %). All teachers indicated that the pupils improved their wellbeing (8 answered 'very', 89 %; 1 answered 'extremely', 11 %).

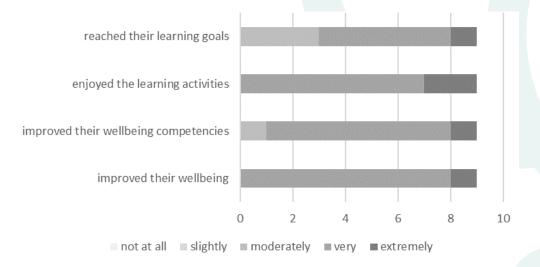


Figure 7. Evaluation of the effects of the learning activities on the pupils

In an open question, the teachers were asked to further specify which effects they noticed on their pupils (both positively and negatively). No negative consequences were mentioned, but two teachers did mention that the pupils struggled at first with the reflection part and with opening up to their classmates. All teachers mentioned that social and emotional skills improved, such as tolerance, social cohesion in the class, less behavioural problems, and better ability to express emotions.

In an earlier part of the 'Learn & Play' project, seven different domains of wellbeing competencies were established for school-aged children. The teachers were also asked to indicate, for each of these seven domains, how many students improved on this domain. Here, the largest improvements were noticed on the cognitive and emotional domain. To a lesser extent, the improvements were found for social competencies and values, followed by perspective/mindset, identity / self-image, and the physical domain. For cognitive and emotional development, most teachers indicated that either 'many' (4; 44 %) or '(almost) all' (4; 44 %) pupils improved, whereas 2 teachers saw improvements on these domains in 'a few' students (2; 22 %). For social competencies, 3 teachers saw an improvement in '(almost) all' pupils (33 %), 4 saw improvements in 'many' pupils (44 %), and 2 in 'a few' students (22 %). For values, 1 teacher saw improvements In 'a few' pupils (11 %), 6 teachers saw improvements in 'many' pupils (67 %), and 2 in '(almost) all' pupils (22 %). For both perspective / mindset and identity / self-image, improvements were noticed in 'a few' pupils by 2 teachers (22 %), in 'many' pupils by 5 teachers (56 %), and in '(almost) all' pupils by 2 teachers (22 %). Last, improvements were also noticed in the physical domain, for 'a few' pupils by 1 teacher (11 %, for 'many' pupils by 7 teachers (78 %), and for in '(almost) all' pupils by 1 teacher (11 %).

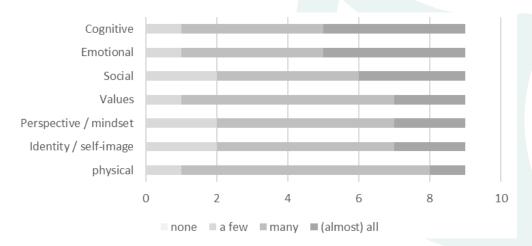


Figure 8. Effects of the learning activities on the pupils per wellbeing competency domain

7. Other comments

At the end of the survey, the teachers had the opportunity to provide additional comments or feedback. Here it was indicated that the classes sometimes were too large (25 pupils), when groups of 10-15 pupils were seen as more ideal. One other teacher commented that the activities could be tailored to suit pupils with special needs (such as Autism Spectrum Disorder) better. Yet another teacher commented that the effects of the students may be bigger after implementing more learning activities, and over a longer period of time.

General conclusion

In general, the teachers rated the learning activities very positively, and they also indicated that they saw improvements for the pupils in terms of their wellbeing competencies and wellbeing in general.

1. Manual and learning activities

The teachers liked the organization of the manual, and the step-by-step introductions. They also indicated that they were looking forward to the translated manuals, and one point of improvement was that the preparation of materials could be facilitated better as they did not always have enough time to prepare these materials themselves. The largest room for improvement, though, was in the digital tools. Unfortunately, no comments were provided on the digital tools in the open questions, and therefore it is difficult to specify whether this was a specific problem with the digital tools in this project, or whether this reflects the difficulties that some teachers in general experience when shifting to digital technology in education.

2. Teacher skills

The skills that the teachers required to implement these learning activities pertained mostly to social and emotional skills, as well as communication and leadership skills. The teachers also indicated that training in these skills was necessary to implement these learning activities. On the other hand, they did feel that they had enough skills (or training) themselves to implement these activities and in the open questions some teachers also referred to the 'Learn & Play' training for their own acquisition of these skills.

3. Effects on the pupils

The teachers indicated that the learning activities helped their pupils reach the learning goals and improve both the wellbeing competencies and wellbeing. In terms of wellbeing competency domains, improvements were found within all seven domains and especially in the emotional and cognitive domain. Especially the cognitive domain was somewhat surprising, as cognitive improvements were not mentioned in the open questions. On the other hand, the teachers did mention several improvements in the social domain, which scored slightly less than the emotional and cognitive domain. It might therefore be worthwhile to explore in future applications, how exactly the cognitive domains improve with the learning activities.

Overall, the learning activities appeared to be enjoyed by both the pupils and the teachers, and beneficial effects were noticed on all domains of wellbeing competencies as well as wellbeing of the pupils.

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