



**HAND:ET recommendations for supporting
teachers' social, emotional and diversity
awareness competencies in educational
policies and practices**



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INTRODUCTION

About the project

HAND:ET project rationale

The European Union (EU) and its member states are today confronted with several challenges regarding the teaching profession. These include high drop-out rates from the profession, the shortage of students enrolling in initial teacher education along with the shortage of teachers caused by an ageing teacher population (retirements). Teachers who stay in the profession encounter heavier workloads and high levels of work-related stress. In addition, they express the need to be more supported for dealing with the new era of classroom diversity and handling their increased workloads.

Focus and aim of the project

The HAND:ET project concentrates on teachers by supporting the development of their social and emotional competencies as well as diversity awareness (SEDA) to empower them for the complexity of everyday working life in ever more diverse classrooms and enable them to deal flexibly and competently with new challenges. It also places teachers' well-being at the centre by highlighting the ways the developing of SEDA competencies simultaneously fosters teachers' self-care and boosts teacher collaboration. By innovatively integrating diversity awareness with social and emotional competencies, the HAND:ET project equips teachers with competencies for meeting the challenges of teaching in diverse classrooms, preventing them from leaving the profession early, empowering them to monitor and plan their career while supporting their own well-being and that of their students.

Activities

To achieve these aims, several tasks were undertaken in the project, including six key tasks:

- ***Development of core competencies.*** We consider our core competencies to be: social and emotional competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making) as well as diversity awareness. The development of these competencies was delivered in the programme via the tools of mindfulness, empathic curiosity, and reflection.
- ***Development of the HAND:ET system.*** The project partners developed the HAND:ET programme, a set of innovative participatory activities and learning experiences that – together with regular/continuous supervision, monitoring and support – form the HAND:ET system.
- ***Train the Trainers.*** Close attention was paid to educating trainers to conduct the HAND:ET system in different national environments. Before the HAND:ET system was implemented in the field trials, all the trainers participated in train-the-trainers' preparations entailing a full 6 days of training (4 days for social and emotional competencies, 2 days for diversity awareness) and an 8-week online course in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction ("MBSR"). Throughout the implementation, the trainers were supervised to support them in the process.

- **Implementing the field trial experiment.** The HAND:ET system was implemented in five field trial countries (Austria, Croatia, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden). The longer (6-day on-site and five 2-hour online) programme was carried out for teachers and the shorter (2-day on-site and one 2-hour online) programme for principals and professional school staff.
- **Summative and Formative Evaluation.** The programme was evaluated in each field trial country in terms of both summative and formative aspects and combining an experimental and an interview-based approach.
- **Recommendations for policy and practice.** The HAND:ET recommendations for supporting teachers' SEDA competencies in educational policies and practices found in this document seek to raise awareness of the importance of providing systemic support for teachers' SEDA competencies and to identify areas where this support is especially needed.

About the HAND:ET recommendations

As a policy experiment, the HAND:ET project aims to provide policy-oriented research evidence to better understand the individual, school and system-level factors relevant for enhancing teachers' SEDA competencies as vital factors for supporting and navigating teachers' professional careers. Accordingly, the HAND:ET project seeks to contribute considerably to the forming of a comprehensive teacher policy in the EU that encompasses every stage of teachers' professional careers. In this manner, it sets out EU-level and country-specific recommendations addressing structural problems of the teaching profession today in an evidence-based way. As such, it outlines the conditions needed for the scalability, transferability and hence sustainability of the HAND:ET outcomes in the broader area of teachers' SEDA competencies and teachers' professional development.

The recommendations follow a review of existing national policy frameworks supporting teachers' SEDA competencies in the participating countries as well as findings of the external evaluation of the HAND:ET system and insights from the national stakeholder meetings.

The Recommendations presented in this document are divided into two sections. The general recommendations found in Part 1 are what we believe to be the most crucial while continuing to develop EU and national policies and practices in this area. In fact, these recommendations should be considered together since many are closely intertwined. The order in which they are listed does not suggest a particular priority, but may be seen as giving meaningful direction while undertaking actions for ensuring that the development of teachers' SEDA competencies in the EU reaches its full potential. These broader recommendations for the EU and national educational policies and practices are as follows:

1. Including SEDA content in teachers' professional development
2. Supporting the development and implementation of teachers' SEDA programmes
3. Considering the role of working conditions in teachers' well-being
4. Enhancing teachers' professional status in society
5. Improving policy frameworks for supporting teachers' SEDA competencies on all levels of the EU's multi-level governance

Part 2 presents the most important specific recommendations which we hold, in addition to the general recommendations found in Part 1, should be especially considered while developing national implementation plans for systemically supporting the development of teachers' SEDA competencies in the field trial countries (Austria, Croatia, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden).

The regional version of the HAND:ET recommendations for supporting teachers' social, emotional and diversity awareness competencies in educational policies and practices is published in Štremfel, U. (ed.) (2024, in press). Empowering Teachers Across Europe to Deal with Social, Emotional and Diversity Related Challenges. Volume 2: Policy Perspectives. Waxmann Verlag.

A large, stylized graphic of a hand in shades of grey and white, positioned on the left side of the page. The hand is open, with fingers spread, and is overlaid with white, curved lines that suggest movement or a specific gesture. The background is white, with blue horizontal bars at the top and bottom.

Recommendations for EU and national educational policies and practices

1. Including SEDA content in teachers' professional development

Key findings and outcomes

The analysis of the policy contexts of the field trial countries (Austria, Croatia, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden) reveals the current lack of systemic support to teachers and school staff for SEDA competencies development in both initial and continuous professional development. To address contemporary teaching challenges, programmes that focus on teachers' SEDA competencies are essential. In the EU countries, programmes have thus far largely focused on supporting students' SEDA competencies and less on the SEDA competencies held by teachers. The lack of opportunities for developing SEDA competencies in their initial education was revealed in particular by teachers participating in all the field trial countries (Štremfel, 2024).

Recommendations

1.1 Initial professional development

1.1.1 *Integrate SEDA competencies into existing courses and consider introducing them in the modality of specific subjects.* Although the universal nature of SEDA competencies allows them to be integrated into different subjects, to comprehensively address the topic specific subjects concentrating on SEDA competencies could provide further added value.

1.1.2 *Enhance university teachers' SEDA competencies.* Teachers serve as role models for their students. This also applies to university teachers who are educating future teachers.


1.1.3 *Ensure that every future teacher receives appropriate education in the field.* This could be achieved by adding SEDA competencies to the competency profiles of graduates (future teachers) and the criteria for programme accreditation and/or by requiring that all future teachers receive certain credits in the field of SEDA competencies development.

1.2 Continuous professional development

1.2.1 *Advocating the importance of continuous professional development in the SEDA field with the time allocated for continuous professional development being part of paid working hours.* The systemic arrangement of continuous professional development strongly influences teachers' readiness, motivation and responsibility to participate.

1.2.2 *Planning long-term continuous professional development programmes.* Long-term programmes with professional learning communities and supportive environments established inside schools are advised. The cooperation of principals in these programmes is crucial.

1.2.3 *Providing supervision as a systemic measure and practice.* For SEDA competencies to be developed fully, continuous long-term professional support in the form of supervision is called for.

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- 1.2.4 *Providing tailored support for early-career teachers.*** This is especially vital in the first year of employment, aimed at regulating stress, enhancing self-care and supporting teachers' SEDA competencies to meet a wide range of challenges in everyday working life.
- 1.2.5 *Establishing a teacher competence framework.*** This should clearly state the basic competencies that teachers should develop. As a first step, certain hours of continuous professional development in the field of developing SEDA competencies could therefore be made compulsory for every teacher to attend.
- 1.2.6 *Introducing obligatory special SEDA programmes for new employees without teacher qualifications.*** It is important to ensure that the current policy measures in place for overcoming the teacher shortages across Europe do not overlook the importance of the SEDA competencies of educational staff.

2. Supporting the development and implementation of teachers' SEDA programmes

Findings and outcomes

The findings of the HAND:ET system formative and summative evaluation show several positive outcomes, including an increase in teachers' SEDA competencies together with their positive assessment of the programme, perceived changes in terms of aspects of their lifestyle and a wide range of reported learning outcomes. The HAND:ET system may accordingly be evaluated as effective, even though its effects are complex, appear to vary across countries, and depend on the particular outcome being examined. Based on the findings, several strengths are recommended for consideration while planning and conducting programmes to support teachers' SEDA competencies (for more details, see Kozina, 2024).

Recommendations

- 2.1 ***The integration of social and emotional competencies and diversity awareness.*** The complexities of temporary teaching challenges call for enhanced social and emotional competencies and diversity awareness. By including this combination of competencies, they could reinforce each other and lead to more positive outcomes.
- 2.2 ***Content flexibility.*** SEDA programmes should maintain their key ingredients (focus on core competencies and core activities) and at the same time be adapted to the needs of specific national contexts, schools or participants. Adaptations might also relate to the different career stages of the participants.
- 2.3 ***Length of the programme.*** Even though the HAND:ET was implemented in longer (whole-year) and shorter (two meetings) versions and hence allows flexibility in its delivery, the longer version is preferred by participants and proved to be more efficient.
- 2.4 ***Long-term supervision support.*** Ensuring long-term professional support for those participating in SEDA programmes would enhance the programmes' long-term effectiveness and the quality embodiment of key ingredients in the programmes in teachers' daily practice.
- 2.5 ***On-site implementation of the programme.*** The on-site (yet outside the school) implementation compared to on-line/virtual implementation permits the more active involvement and collaborative work of teachers, encouraging their interaction and exchange. It also creates a possibility to establish a distance from everyday working life and to focus on the development of SEDA competencies.
- 2.6 ***Whole-school approach.*** Given that SEDA competencies are strongly linked to a positive school climate, SEDA programmes should include the whole school. The involvement of the school leaders is important for assuring commitment and sustainability. This includes changing the school culture by making the orientation towards social interaction and relations more pronounced. It further allows the programme to be adapted to suit a given school's needs.
- 2.7 ***Competent and experienced trainers.*** Trainers with adequate professional backgrounds and experiences are required for the delivery of the SEDA programmes, addressing the participants' needs and creating a positive and

inclusive atmosphere. To successfully perform their role, the trainers must have initial training and supervision support. It is essential that trainers undergo the training with a focus on their own SEDA competencies.

2.8 *Small groups.* Groups (15–25 participants) are preferred for implementation of the SEDA programmes because the acquisition of SEDA competencies entails many practical and interactive exercises while small groups also enable all participants to participate actively.

2.9 *Multi-method evaluation of the programme.* SEDA programmes must be evaluated. A multi-method approach is advised, consisting of qualitative and quantitative measures and combining an experimental and participant-focused procedure that includes summative and formative components.



3. Considering the role of working conditions in teachers' well-being

Key findings and outcomes

Teachers report work-related stress arising from the volume of administrative tasks, staff shortages, lack of support from external professional agencies, challenging behaviour of students, frequent changes in national policies and regulations and in some cases also a lack of skills and training. Their low satisfaction with existing working conditions was also demonstrated in strikes (e.g., in Croatia in 2019 and Portugal in 2023).

Recommendations

- 3.1 ***Paying attention to teachers' personal and professional well-being with systematic analysis of teachers' needs in the field.*** This should help develop evidence-based system-level measures for the field.
- 3.2 ***Supporting principals in recognising the importance of SEDA competencies.*** Principals' recognition of the importance of SEDA competencies in the school environment along with the development of their own SEDA competencies are important for positive interpersonal relations and positive school climate.
- 3.3 ***Establishing support services with which teachers can discuss their challenges in a safe environment.*** This may be created by establishing internal support services in schools or external ones, depending on the national context.
- 3.4 ***Ensuring the highest possible percentage of permanent jobs in schools.*** Fairly frequent temporary contracts make the profession less attractive and add to teachers' stress. Frequent fluctuation of educational staff can also negatively impact the school climate and the students' well-being, which largely relies on stable and supportive relationships with teachers.
- 3.5 ***Establishing national career frameworks.*** It is vital to establish national career frameworks that allow stimulating career progression and enhance teachers' motivation and willingness to remain in the profession.
- 3.6 ***Providing flexible career paths.*** These may allow teachers to temporarily perform other tasks in the education system (e.g., practically oriented research, work of public officials on the local or national level).
- 3.7 ***Raising teachers' awareness of the importance of exposing the problem of their non-favourable working conditions on the policy and societal levels.*** Teachers possess the greatest insights into the professional challenges they are facing. To address them systemically, it is necessary that they proactively communicate them to the policy level.

4. Enhancing teachers' professional status in society

Key findings and outcomes

Human beings have existential needs to feel valued and feel that they have integrity. Teachers are on the frontline when many societies' challenges are expressed in the classroom as a microcosm mirroring society at large and at the same time crucial agents when the classroom of today is seen as the society of tomorrow (Juul & Jensen 2005, 2017; Mattson, 2019 in Kozina, 2024). However, the TALIS (OECD, 2019a, b) data reveal that the majority of teachers in the HAND:ET countries do not feel valued in society. This can add to teachers' already stressful working conditions, low well-being, and burnout. Although SEDA competencies can help teachers cope with these pressures, systemic changes in society are also required to make the teaching profession more valued.

Recommendations

- 4.1 **Attracting students to teacher university programmes.** Systematic educational policy measures (e.g., scholarships) are needed to attract the best candidates to the teaching profession.
- 4.2 **Increasing the capacity of teachers' programmes in university programmes.** The projected teacher shortages across the EU in the coming years make it reasonable to expect that empty positions will not be fulfilled by the existing capacities (number of students) in teachers' university programmes.
- 4.3 **Issuing public campaigns to promote the teaching profession.** To reveal individual teachers' stories and the role they play in students' lives as inspiration for (young) citizens to value the teaching profession and enter it.
- 4.4 **(Public) recognition of teachers' achievements with awards for teachers.** Individual teachers' achievements should be strongly promoted to increase the profession's value in society, as confirmation of their work and to inspire other teachers to stay in the profession.
- 4.5 **Raising parents' awareness of their rights and obligations, as well as the boundaries of their involvement in the educational process.** Teachers today report parents' communication as a considerable element of their work-related stress. It is important to establish appropriate relationships of responsibility and authority between educational institutions and parents as concerns achieving students' learning and educational goals.
- 4.6 **Encouraging media coverage of the importance of teachers and knowledge in society.** More frequent and supportive reporting on education-related issues can help raise awareness of the important role played by teachers and education in society.

5. Improving policy frameworks for supporting teachers' SEDA competencies on all levels of the EU's multi-level governance

Key findings and outcomes

The review of existing policies in the countries participating in the HAND:ET project shows that the development of teachers' SEDA competencies is not being optimally systemically supported in terms of clear political goals, initial and continuous professional development, favourable working conditions as well as systematic measurement and supporting policy-oriented research in the area. For many of these measures, concerning which we have already presented recommendations in the previous sections, high-level political and policy support is needed.

Recommendations

- 5.1 ***Making education a high political priority.*** This would signal to all stakeholders that education is important and unite them in a common commitment and efforts to promote education as a prerequisite for a better future of society.
- 5.2 ***Establishing clear EU and national policy frameworks for developing teachers' SEDA competencies.*** Clear policy frameworks would clarify actors' responsibilities and enhance their awareness and commitment to the issue.
- 5.3 ***Articulating the political and policy goals related to developing teachers' SEDA competencies.*** For policies to be effective, it is vital that their goals are clearly stated. This sharpens the focus of different stakeholders in the pursuit of these goals, while also improving the chances that their achievement is properly measured.
- 5.4 ***Making the SEDA dimension of education valued.*** This could be done in terms of exposing teachers' and students' outcomes in this field as an important indicator of quality education, which at the moment is largely focused on cognitive outcomes and ignores social and emotional ones.
- 5.5 ***Opening up possibilities for teachers' voices in education policymaking.*** Teachers should be given the normative and de facto possibilities to participate actively in the forming of teacher policy on the school, local, regional, national and EU levels.
- 5.6 ***The systematic introduction of SEDA competencies into school development plans*** would enhance the whole-school commitment to developing SEDA competencies.
- 5.7 ***Support systematic needs assessment of teachers in the SEDA field.*** This should also be related to teachers' well-being, occupational stress, and burnout. The assessment of teachers' needs is important for developing responsive policies in the area.
- 5.8 ***Supporting scientific research in the field.*** Scientific research insights are crucial for developing evidence-based measures to support the development of teachers' SEDA competencies and their well-being.



Recommendations for National Implementation Plans

AUSTRIA

Current state

According to the Education and Monitoring Report (European Commission, 2023), Austria's education system faces several challenges involving the teaching profession, including:

- the considerable staff shortages due to the ageing teaching force, rising student numbers and many qualified graduates choosing not to enter the teaching profession;
- the low attractiveness of the teaching profession;
- the teaching profession is not valued by society; and
- the limited mentoring and support available for new teachers.

Recommendations

- The development of teachers' SEDA competencies could be integrated into the Human Resource Development Framework for the Austrian school system currently being prepared by the European Commission's Technical Support.
- The national campaign "Great Job" aims to modernise the image of schools, encourage people to join the teaching profession, and develop teacher education. At least in the final phase, this campaign could be considerably supported by the content regarding the development of teachers' SEDA competencies.

Both activities could be especially supported by:

- raising awareness among education professionals and policymakers that SEDA competencies and mindfulness approaches can increase mental health and of the fact that teachers need SEDA competencies as a fundamental tool in their daily duties while interacting with each other and their students;
- providing a clear national definition of SEDA competencies;
- ensuring the provision of mentoring and supervision for young teachers in the area of SEDA competencies;
- providing for a better structure of continuous professional development, more information about how to find specific offers, more possibilities to advertise them, structural possibilities to attend continuous professional development programmes as a whole school team or for more than 2 hours, not outside official working hours, and by offering incentives to participate in continuous professional development; and
- relieving principals of organisational and administrative tasks, expanding the opportunities to build their SEDA competencies, and establishing a positive school culture as important factors of teachers' and students' well-being.

CROATIA

Current state

According to the Education and Monitoring Report (European Commission, 2023), the Croatian education system faces several challenges involving the teaching profession, including:

- the shortage of teachers in certain areas of the country (e.g., islands, small rural areas);
- the shortage of STEM teachers;
- the low salary (compared with the average salary);
- pressure from parents;
- the high administrative workload;
- the fact teachers feel that the teaching profession is not valued; and
- the large share of teachers who do not feel they can influence the educational policy or that politicians appreciate their opinions.

Recommendations

- To raise the awareness of school principals concerning the urgent need to address teachers' well-being and the development of their SEDA competencies.
- To consider a further national adaptation of the HAND:ET programme.
- To continue the discussion on the organisational and legal aspects of further introduction of the HAND:ET programme into the educational space in Croatia.
- To contemplate ways of introducing the SEDA competencies empowerment programme into the first year of teachers' careers (apprenticeship period).
- To discuss possible modes of implementing the programme in the designated career period with the Education and Teacher Training Agency.
- In consultation with local educational stakeholders, to consider the possibilities of implementing SEDA learning in local communities.
- To consider amendments to the legislative framework in order to remove the barriers to effective in-service education.
- To reinforce the national funding of research/projects about SEDA competencies in schools.

PORTUGAL

Current state

According to the Education and Monitoring Report (European Commission, 2023), Portugal's education system faces several challenges involving the teaching profession, including:

- the ageing teacher force and the fact not many young people are entering the profession;
- particular regions, subject areas and specialisations are encountering teacher shortages;
- the number of teacher graduates is shrinking;
- teachers believe that society does not value their work; and
- many teachers report work-related stress and exhaustion.

Recommendations

- A new model of initial teacher training featuring longer internships is presently being prepared in Portugal. The possibilities of including SEDA competencies development programmes in this framework should be considered.
- Intentions to reduce the administrative burden on teachers open space for discussion concerning whether this time can be devoted to teachers' professional development in the field of SEDA competencies.
- Since several (shorter) trainings for teachers in the SEDA competencies field exist in Portugal, a common framework for these trainings and more systematic support for this framework should be considered.

SLOVENIA

Current state

According to the Education and Monitoring Report (European Commission, 2023), Slovenia's education system faces challenges regarding the teaching profession, including:

- data from the Employment Service of Slovenia point to challenges when recruiting qualified teachers; still, no comprehensive dataset on teacher shortages is centrally available;
- somewhat over 25% of Slovenian teachers reported that they wish to leave teaching within the next 5 years (OECD, 2019b), namely, higher than the OECD average. Slovenia is one of the top five countries in which teachers who reported experiencing stress at work are a lot more likely to want to leave teaching within the next 5 years;
- the small percentage of teachers who perceive that their work is appreciated by society; and
- the discriminatory behaviour of teachers as well as non-supportive relationships with students are issues exposed by international comparative assessment studies.

Recommendations

- To help future professionals in education acquire new competencies, including digital and sustainable development competencies, the Ministry of Education plans to develop a proposal for updated pedagogic study programmes that will be tested and evaluated in at least 92 pilot studies. This could present an excellent opportunity for developing the SEDA competencies to be involved in the experiment as well.
- As concerns digital skills and competencies for environmental sustainability, the Ministry of Education should consider options for supporting large-scale training in the field of a safe and supporting school environment, which also encompasses teachers' SEDA competencies, with the Recovery and Resilience Plan.
- The need for high-quality, long-term and empirically tested continuous professional development programmes targeting teachers' SEDA competencies should be recognised. The evaluation of the existing programmes in this regard should be provided.
- Greater time in the curriculum should be devoted to activities for developing students' SEDA competencies and specific support should be given to develop class teachers' SEDA competencies.
- The transfer from university to work, along with mentoring and supervising for early career teachers, should also be better supported in the field of SEDA competencies development.
- To consider the involvement of teachers' well-being and SEDA competencies as an indicator of quality education in the new framework for identifying and ensuring quality in education.
- To enhance the whole-school approach and positive school climate by:
 - supporting whole school teams, including principals in the development of SEDA competencies;
 - considering opportunities for meaningfully including SEDA learning in School Education Plans; and
 - further relieving school counselling service staff of administrative tasks so they can fully use their competencies to support teachers in the field of occupational stress, well-being and SEDA competencies development.

SWEDEN

Current state

According to the Education and Monitoring Report (European Commission, 2023), Sweden's education system faces several challenges involving the teaching profession, including:

- teacher shortages in most education sectors; and
- teachers do not believe that their profession is valued in society.

Recommendations

- In Sweden, the preparation of a national professional programme for teachers is in progress. It is aimed at teachers' competence development, increasing the quality of teaching, and making the profession more attractive. At this point, it is important to stress the importance of quality (evidence-based) programme implementation and to advocate the need to develop teachers' SEDA competencies as part of continuous professional development.
- The Swedish National Agency for Education should provide long-term, national in-service training for teachers and other school staff concerning the understanding and development of SEDA competencies to support teachers in their personal and professional development. This could be organised in the same manner as the investment in in-service training in reading, science and mathematics areas in Sweden.
- The responsibility for organising and running compulsory schools in Sweden is held by the main organisers (public or independent) while initiatives for focusing on SEDA competencies to some extent depend on individual schools or municipalities. Raising awareness among principals and local authorities about the importance of SEDA competencies is therefore needed.
- In Sweden, continuous professional development of whole-school teams is already practised in the fields of reading, science and mathematics literacy. Recognising the importance of SEDA competencies, such a framework of trainings could be established in this field as well.

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Further reading

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