



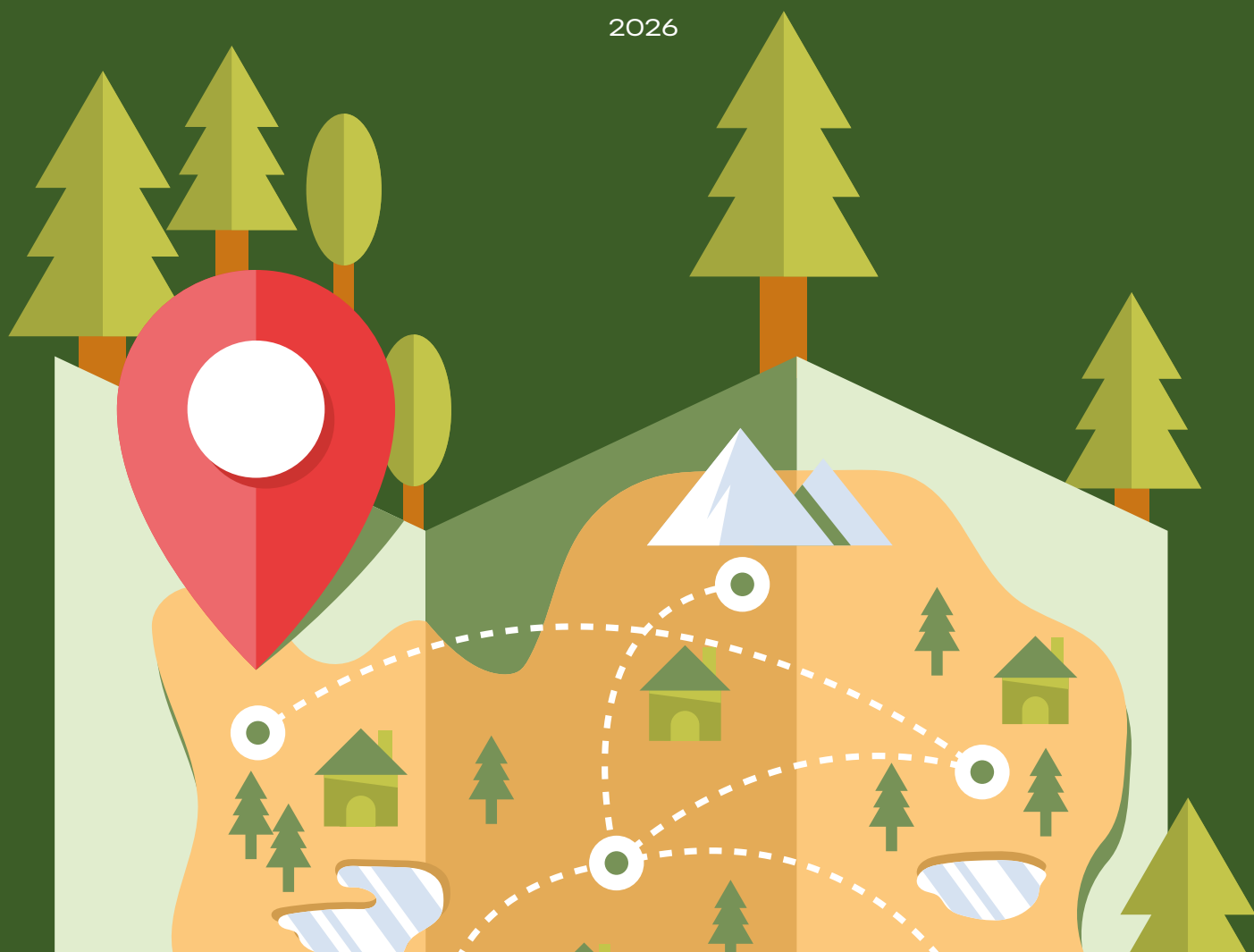
Discover, Create, Thrive Community

Practical Solutions for School Leaders to Foster Social
and Emotional Competencies

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Vilnius

2026



Erasmus+ Cooperation partnership in school education project:

“EmpowerED: Building Emotional Strength and Social Resilience through Art and Outdoor Education” (Project No. 2024-1-LT01-KA220-SCH-000253448)

Partners:

Vilnius University (Lithuania)

Miško Briedžio mokykla (Lithuania)

L2 Consulting AB (Sweden)

Uppsala Kommun (Sweden)

Sakarya University (Türkiye)



Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the National Agency. Neither the European Union nor National Agency can be held responsible for them.

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Introduction

School should be a place where each person is nurtured as a whole and in a balanced way – not just the mind, but also emotions, relationships, creativity and connection to the environment. In today's world, where children and youth face ever-changing challenges, social and emotional skills are just as important as academic achievements. However, these skills often take a back seat, giving way to assessments of academic knowledge, quizzes and tests. Art and outdoor education, as forms of experiential learning, offer a valuable way to restore a balance between emotions, relationships, creativity and knowledge.

Vilnius University, together with partners from Miško Briedžio School (Lithuania), the public limited company L2 Consulting (Sweden), Uppsala Municipality Nature School (Uppsala Kommun naturskola, Sweden) and Sakarya University (Sakarya Üniversitesi, Türkiye), is implementing the Erasmus+ project EmpowerED: Building Emotional Strength and Social Resilience through Art and Outdoor Education (No. 2024-1-LT01-KA220-SCH-000253448). The goal of the project is to strengthen teachers' ability to foster social and emotional competencies in upper-grade students by applying experiential teaching methods – a combination of art and outdoor education principles.

As part of the project, [a book](#) ("Discover, Create, Thrive. Expanding Social-Emotional Learning Through Outdoor Education and the Art") for teachers was developed. It presents activities designed to foster the social and emotional competencies of upper-grade students through art and outdoor education. However, research shows that teachers' social and emotional competencies are closely linked to student engagement, well-being and academic achievement. It has also been found that strengthening teachers' social and emotional competencies improves their well-being, professional effectiveness and classroom climate, which, in turn, positively impacts students. Therefore, the entire school community should be involved in developing social and emotional skills. In an effort to contribute to the transformation of the school community, we dedicate this publication to school administrators, offering ideas for creating a learning environment and activities that involve both teachers and students. Through experiences in nature and creative activities, both teachers and students can learn more about themselves, connect with others and live in harmony with the world around them. The activities presented in this publication can serve as a source of inspiration for further creative work and can be implemented in the order and to the extent that best suit each individual school.

I would like to sincerely thank my colleagues Mindaugas Kazlauskas, Akvilė Girdzijauskaitė, Marmerta Ralytė, Laura Stašaitytė, Stina Lindblad, Lotta Carlegård, Anna Aldén, Mürsel Koca and Burak Delier, whose knowledge, experience and creativity were invaluable during this project.

Project Manager, Sigita Girdzijauskienė

Social and Emotional Competencies and Their Development

Social and emotional competencies can be defined as the ability to recognise and manage emotions, solve problems effectively and build positive relationships with others. These skills are essential for both children and adults. The CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) organisation, founded by researchers, has identified five key categories of social and emotional competencies that are essential for well-rounded personal development (CASEL, 2020):



Self-awareness – the ability to recognise one's own emotions, values and thoughts that influence behaviour. Self-awareness encompasses an understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses, self-confidence and a sense of optimism.



Self-control – the ability to effectively manage one's emotions, thoughts and behaviour in various situations. This includes stress management, impulse control, self-motivation and discipline in pursuing personal and academic goals.



Social awareness – the ability to feel empathy and understand other people's perspectives, as well as to recognise the social and ethnic norms and behavioural characteristics of different cultures. Social awareness fosters a sense of responsibility towards others.



Communication skills – the ability to establish and maintain friendly relationships with various people or groups. Communication skills include the ability to collaborate, resolve conflicts constructively, resist inappropriate social pressure and help others.



Responsible decision-making – the ability to make constructive decisions regarding personal and social behaviour that do not violate moral standards. This includes taking responsibility and the ability to identify and solve problems.

Social and emotional learning is an integral part of education and human development. This aspect of education helps young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for developing their identity, managing emotions, pursuing personal and collective goals, feeling and showing empathy, maintaining relationships and making responsible and compassionate decisions (Weissberg et al., 2015).

Durlak and colleagues conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis of 213 schools involving 270,034 students of various ages on the impact of social and emotional learning programmes. (Durlak et al., 2011). They found that, compared with control groups, programme participants had significantly better social and emotional skills, their self-esteem and engagement in school activities increased significantly, their grades improved and problem behaviours decreased.

A particularly important finding of this research was that the programmes were implemented by teachers at the schools studied. This suggests that when it comes to developing students' social and emotional skills, there is no need to bring in specialists, as school teachers are already doing this effectively. However, to ensure the successful integration of social and emotional learning into teaching practices and classroom culture, teachers must receive appropriate training and ongoing support.

The successful integration of social and emotional learning into school curricula can improve students' academic performance, behaviour and emotional well-being, as well as create a more supportive learning environment. Teachers play a key role in implementing social and emotional learning programmes, as they interact directly with students and can help them develop important social and emotional skills.

Thus, the development of social and emotional competencies is becoming an integral part of modern schools, encompassing not only instruction but also all aspects of school life and community relations.

Outdoor education and artistic expression as a space for the development of social and emotional competencies

Through outdoor experiences and creative activities, students and teachers have the opportunity to get to know themselves better, build relationships with others and develop a sense of responsibility towards the world around them. When education moves to the schoolyard or into natural or cultural landscapes, learning becomes more community-oriented, engages more senses and strengthens a variety of skills. Among other things, physical activity increases. The benefits of this for physical and mental health are widely recognised.

Outdoor education is an educational approach based on the interplay between authentic experiences and reflection. For some time now, there has been a growing recognition that outdoor education is beneficial for the development, health and well-being of children and young people (Becker et al., 2017; Mann et al., 2021). There is no doubt that adults also reap the same benefits. Outdoor education contributes to:



Self-confidence and perseverance: the calming effect of nature helps individuals stay focused for longer. This is especially important for those individuals who have difficulty concentrating.



Resilience and risk assessment skills: the challenges encountered outdoors foster the ability to make responsible decisions and build resilience in the face of adversity.



Strengthening social bonds: changing the environment creates opportunities to modify ineffective behavioural patterns, fosters empathy and encourages cooperation.



Deeper learning: engaging all the senses helps foster a deeper understanding, which strengthens students' confidence in their academic abilities and their ability to solve complex problems.



Physical and mental health: physical activity and mental health benefits occur naturally and are consistently encouraged.



Positive group dynamics: when learning outdoors, new roles, relationships and ways of collaborating can emerge.

Education through artistic expression is not merely a matter of aesthetics, but also an effective approach for systematically developing students' social and emotional skills. When artistic expression is integrated into subjects such as social studies, science, and language arts, it deepens students' understanding of social issues and creates an engaging learning environment. Research shows that students who regularly participate in arts programmes achieve better academic results, are more engaged in the learning process and form stronger peer relationships (Catterall et al., 2012; Winner et al., 2013).

Artistic activities provide students with a safe space to explore and articulate complex emotions, thereby strengthening their self-awareness. Joint projects also foster the ability to seek compromise, listen actively and respectfully accept differences, which contributes to social maturity. Artistic activities can help to reduce stress and improve group dynamics, thereby creating a more engaging and positive learning environment.

Creativity naturally leads to discussions about justice, responsibility and identity, which form the foundation of the school's democratic mission and are an important part of character education.

When outdoor education and artistic expression are combined, they reinforce one another: experiential learning in nature meets a reflective and expressive artistic perspective. Together, they create a learning environment where students can grow academically, socially, emotionally and physically, and where there is space for thoughts, feelings, relationships and knowledge.

Social and Emotional Learning and Sustainable School Development

The entire school environment is important for students' learning and well-being. The development of social and emotional skills in schools cannot be piecemeal or limited to isolated initiatives – it requires a consistent approach and the involvement of the entire school community.

It is important to emphasise that social and emotional competencies are not developed solely through individual activities. They are shaped by a school's overall culture: relationships, daily activities and decision-making. Therefore, a systematic approach is essential, one that involves the entire school community of teachers, administrators, educational support specialists, students and parents. Equally important is the development of teachers' own social and emotional competencies, which is linked to a more supportive classroom climate, student well-being and the quality of education (Jennings, Greenberg, 2009; Savina et al., 2025). Therefore, to ensure the sustainable development of schools, it is essential to provide appropriate working conditions, clear leadership and support for teachers' mental health; furthermore, school operations must be consistent and cohesive, i.e., the values and goals a school espouses must be reflected in its daily practices.

This systemic approach is closely linked to education for sustainable development, which emphasises that sustainability in schools should not be viewed as a standalone subject but a principle that permeates all aspects of school life and is integrated into the curriculum, values, relationships and decision-making. From this perspective, social and emotional learning becomes a key component, as it helps develop the competencies essential for social sustainability: empathy, responsibility, cooperation and the ability to work together (UNESCO, 2020; UNESCO, 2024).

The EmpowerED project (2024–2026) puts this principle into practice through outdoor education and artistic expression. These types of educational approaches create favourable conditions for the development of social and emotional competencies: outdoor activities help reduce stress, build self-confidence and strengthen connections with others, while artistic activities foster creativity, self-expression and collaboration (Maller et al., 2006; Farrington et al., 2019). What is important is that in such activities, social and emotional skills are often developed naturally, through experience, rather than solely through direct instruction.

A book for teachers titled *Discover, Create, Thrive. Social and Emotional Learning Through Outdoor Education and the Arts* offers specific activities for use when working with students. However, to achieve lasting impact, the methods used by teachers alone are not enough – the commitment of the entire school community is essential. Therefore, this publication is intended for school administrators and other decision-makers, with the aim of helping to create the conditions that will enable the consistent integration of social and emotional learning into school life.

The activities presented in this publication are flexible and can be adapted to meet the specific needs of each school. They are designed not only to foster students' social and emotional skills but also to enhance the well-being of the entire school community, promote collaboration and foster social sustainability.

The Role of School Leaders in Developing Sustainable Practices for Social and Emotional Competence Education

In the field of education, integrating artistic expression with social and emotional learning can help create a school where social sustainability is not merely a goal outlined in strategic documents but a living, everyday part of students' experiences.

For this approach to take root, individual projects or the initiatives of a few enthusiastic individuals are not sufficient. A comprehensive school strategy is needed to integrate these individual activities into a school's ongoing operations. School administrators play a key role in this process, as they can help shape it in a focused manner:



Set priorities and eliminate unnecessary activities: clearly identify what can and should be eliminated to free up resources for developing social and emotional competencies and promoting mental health in general.



Ensure adequate resources and planning: make sure that teachers have access to the necessary materials, appropriate equipment and, most importantly, the collaborative planning time required for cross-curricular cooperation.



Foster a culture of innovation: create an organisation where “failures” are viewed as valuable learning experiences that give teachers and students the courage to try new methods and activities.



Ensure sustainability: agree on and implement measures to make social and emotional learning outdoors and through the arts a natural and consistent part of school life, rather than a temporary initiative.

Developing social and emotional competencies in everyday school activities

To ensure that the development of social and emotional skills becomes an integral part of daily school life, practical solutions are essential. We have prepared some examples of how social and emotional competencies can be developed by applying the principles of outdoor education, incorporating art, and involving the entire school community.

The suggested examples (hereinafter referred to as “actions”) are marked on the map as stops, and the map itself reveals different paths towards a school culture grounded in the development of sustainable, social and emotional competencies, where there is room for all of these elements. You do not have to do everything at once – you can start with small steps, focusing on activities or topics that are relevant to many people, and involve students, teachers and other community members in the process. Set a clear goal or vision. Expand your knowledge by participating in professional development activities, learning from other schools or research findings, and sharing your work to inspire others. Change takes time, but every step counts.

You decide for yourselves which actions to take, how to organise them and in what order to carry them out, based on your needs and what you have already accomplished. In other words, consider them a source of inspiration and support in the process of improving your school.

The actions are divided into four main thematic areas, reflecting different aspects of implementation at the whole-school level.



A Pathway to a Social and Emotional Learning-Friendly School

1

Actions at the
organisational
level



2

Involvement
of the school
community



3

Integrating social
and emotional
learning into the
teaching and
learning process



4

Infrastructure
improvement



I. ACTIONS AT THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

A whole-school approach to social and emotional learning requires alignment between the school administration's priorities, the teaching practices employed by teachers and the planning processes. The following actions are just a few examples of practical ideas that school leaders can adapt to integrate the development of social and emotional competencies into their strategic plans, professional development activities or leadership practices.

Action 1. Communicating a shared vision of social and emotional learning to the school community

This action helps school leaders transform social and emotional learning from a one-off initiative into a genuine school-wide priority that impacts students' academic achievement, well-being and interpersonal relationships. A shared vision makes it clear that this is not just a "side activity", but something that permeates everyday teaching, communication and decision-making at the school. When such a vision is clearly defined and consistently communicated, it becomes easier to align teachers' activities, students' expectations and community involvement. In this case, everyone is united by shared values: empathy, cooperation and responsibility.

Target audience

The school administration team, teachers, students, parents (guardians, caregivers) and local community partners.

Time period: initial development of the vision 4–6 weeks.

Review: once per quarter/semester.

Proposed Implementation Path

- Include priorities for social and emotional learning in the school's strategic plan.
- Discuss the integration of social and emotional learning at meetings of teachers or administrators.
- Communicate shared values through school events, meetings or newsletters.
- Involve parents and community representatives in discussions about the school's values and well-being.
- Highlight the importance of experiential learning in nature and the arts for social and emotional learning outcomes.

Example

The school can organise a community workshop or a forum where students, teachers and parents come together to discuss shared values related to communication, collaboration and well-being, and explore ways to integrate these values into the school's daily practices.

Expenses

An action that is free or requires very little expenditure.

Social and emotional skills are developed

It fosters self-awareness, empathy and responsible decision-making.

Action 2. Strengthening staff competencies through international training in social and emotional skills

The Role of the Administration

The effective implementation of social and emotional skill development depends not only on the programmes selected, but also on the readiness and confidence of teachers and educational support specialists in integrating social and emotional skill development into their daily practice. This initiative enables school leaders to strengthen their internal capacities by providing opportunities to participate in professional development activities related to social and emotional competencies, arts education and outdoor education.

From an organisational perspective, participation in structured professional development activities helps facilitate the transition from individual teacher initiatives to a coordinated, school-wide implementation model. The school administration plays a crucial role in identifying appropriate learning opportunities, facilitating participation and ensuring the dissemination of knowledge within the school following the training.

International professional development initiatives also contribute to the long-term sustainability of social and emotional skills development by boosting staff motivation and fostering a shared understanding of the principles of social and emotional learning.

Target audience

Teachers, the school administration team and educational support specialists.

Searching for opportunities: ongoing.

Participation in training: 2–5 days.

Sharing knowledge at school: 2–4 weeks after participation.

Proposed Implementation Path

- Identify national and international professional development opportunities related to the development of social and emotional competencies.
- Encourage employee participation in Erasmus+ KA1 mobility activities.
- Explore opportunities to participate in Erasmus+ transnational cooperation activities (TCA/TBV) that offer short-term training for school staff.
- Allow time for participating employees to share the knowledge they have gained, for example, during meetings or internal training sessions.
- Incorporate the training results into the school's strategic plan and its implementation activities.

Example

The school would typically send two teachers or specialists to participate in short-term international training courses on the integration of social and emotional competencies through outdoor education, funded through Erasmus+ KA1 or TCA (TBV). After the training, participants can organise an in-house workshop for their colleagues to present the practical methods they have learned about (such as arts-based reflection activities or collaborative tasks in nature) and help them adapt these methods to their school setting.

Expenses

It may be funded through Erasmus+ or other publicly available professional development programmes.

Social and emotional skills are developed

It strengthens teachers' emotional awareness, collaboration skills and responsible decision-making, and fosters students' social and emotional competencies.

Action 3. Use of school data to monitor the implementation of social and emotional skill development

The Role of the Administration

This initiative helps school administrators assess their progress in developing social and emotional competencies and identify areas that need more attention or warrant greater change. Regularly reviewing the data helps ensure that these initiatives do not remain isolated efforts, but instead become a natural part of everyday school life.

When monitoring is simple and clear, it is easier to make informed decisions and respond promptly to challenges related to student well-being, collaboration or engagement. This use of data also helps the entire community better understand that social and emotional learning is a shared responsibility for the whole school and encourages its consistent implementation across different classrooms.

Target audience

The school leadership team, the social and emotional learning group, teachers and educational support specialists.

Time period

2–3 weeks.

Data collection: once per quarter/semester.

Review during social and emotional learning group meetings.

Proposed implementation path

- Select simple indicators for measuring the implementation of social and emotional learning (e.g., student participation in organised activities, attendance, behavioural incidents and challenges in peer interactions).
- Conduct brief surveys of students and/or teachers regarding the school climate and well-being.
- Analyse existing observation data or feedback from teachers.
- Share information about any changes at staff meetings.
- Use the results when planning future social and emotional learning activities or training sessions.

Example

At the end of each term, the school can analyse anonymous behavioural or attendance data to identify trends in student collaboration or engagement. Based on the results, school administrators may decide to incorporate additional reflection activities, peer mentoring or targeted support for teachers.

Expenses

Existing survey or school data systems can be used.

Social and emotional skills are developed

It enhances emotional regulation, social awareness and responsible decision-making by ensuring timely adjustments to social and emotional learning practices.

II. INVOLVEMENT OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

The following actions offer practical ideas that schools can implement to involve the wider community in social and emotional learning initiatives and experiential learning activities. These initiatives highlight the importance of collaboration between the school and the community in fostering social and emotional competencies, as the involvement of parents and community partners strengthens shared responsibility for well-being and reinforces values such as empathy, cooperation and inclusion.

Action 4. Organising a school event to highlight social and emotional competence development

The Role of the Administration

This initiative enables school administrators to strengthen the development of social and emotional skills by organising school-wide events that complement classroom instruction. Such events create opportunities for shared experiential learning, where students, teachers and other community members participate in activities that foster empathy, communication and collaboration.

From an organisational perspective, such events promote social and emotional learning as a shared responsibility by involving various stakeholders, including parents and local partners. The administration plays a crucial role in coordinating preparations across different departments, allocating shared spaces and promoting active community involvement.

Proposed implementation path

- Set aside time for planning interdisciplinary activities.
- Invite parents and community partners to participate.
- Encourage the joint creation of activities or installations.
- Facilitate collaboration among different age groups.
- Organise reflection sessions after the event.

Target audience

Students, teachers, parents (guardians, caregivers) and members of the local community.

Time period

4–6 weeks.

Implementation: Day 1.

Review: at the next staff or implementation team meeting.

Example

A “Fair of Emotions” can be organised, during which students, teachers and parents participate in creative or interactive activities related to the expression of emotions and collaboration (e.g., collaborative art installations, creating emotion maps or group storytelling).

Expenses

Activities are free or require very little expenditure; recycled materials and existing school resources can be used.

Social and emotional skills are developed

Promotes empathy, communication and social awareness.

Action 5. Integrating sustainability through creative community projects

The Role of the Administration

This initiative enables school leaders to foster socially responsible behaviour by integrating sustainability themes into school and community activities. Instead of limiting sustainability education to classroom lessons, school administrators can initiate creative projects that involve students, teachers and the local community.

Such initiatives provide students with opportunities to practice empathy, shared responsibility and collective decision-making in real-life social situations. The administration plays a key role in coordinating partnerships, allocating spaces and promoting community engagement.

Target audience

Students, teachers, parents (guardians, caregivers) and members of the local community.

Time period

4–8 weeks.

Public presentation: the final week of the project.

Proposed implementation path

- Select a sustainability topic that is relevant to the community.
- Involve parents and local partners.
- Set aside time for joint planning.
- Encourage the use of recycled materials or natural materials.
- Organise a public exhibition or presentation.

Example

A “Waste Exhibition” can be organised, where students, together with parents and community partners, create installations using natural materials while exploring themes related to consumption and environmental responsibility.

Expenses

An action that is free or requires very little expenditure.

Social and emotional skills are developed

Promotes social awareness, empathy and responsible decision-making.

III. INTEGRATING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INTO THE TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS

This set of actions focuses on integrating social and emotional learning into daily teaching practices and social interactions at school. To effectively develop social and emotional skills, it is essential to provide students with opportunities to apply them in real-life collaborative situations.

Action 6. Organising thematic social and emotional learning weeks

The role of the Administration

This initiative helps integrate social and emotional learning across academic subjects by establishing a dedicated period to develop social and emotional competencies through interdisciplinary teaching and experiential learning methods. Thematic social and emotional learning weeks provide an opportunity to integrate classroom activities, outdoor education and artistic approaches with broader school goals related to collaboration, empathy and responsible decision-making.

By temporarily shifting from subject-based teaching to project-based or activity-based learning, schools create opportunities for students to apply their social and emotional skills in real-life situations. The involvement of school administrators is crucial for coordinating preparation among teachers

Target audience

Students and teachers from all grades.

Preparation: 4–6 weeks.

Implementation: 1 week.

Review: following a staff meeting or a project team discussion.

of different subjects, scheduling time in the school calendar, and ensuring that social and emotional learning goals are clearly communicated to teachers

**Proposed
implementation
path**

- Select a topic related to social and emotional competencies (or a specific skill), such as collaboration, communication or environmental responsibility.
- Set aside time for interdisciplinary lesson planning.
- Encourage subject teachers to develop activities that integrate social and emotional competencies into the curriculum.
- Include outdoor education and artistic activities into the programme.
- Organise student presentations or group reflections at the end of the week.

Example

During “Collaboration Week” or “Sustainability Week”, students can participate in activities such as nature art, in which small groups create temporary installations using natural materials such as leaves, stones, branches or sand. Each group must work together to create an artistic piece that reflects a specific value (e.g., trust, empathy or responsibility). During the creative process, students discuss ideas, assign roles and make decisions together. Once they have finished their work, the groups present their projects and reflect on how they interacted, resolved disagreements and supported one another.

Expenses

An action that is free or requires very little expenditure, utilising existing scheduling options and available materials.

Social and emotional skills are developed

Promotes the development of skills in collaboration, communication and responsible decision-making.

Action 7. Application of structured reflection

The Role of the Administration

This action helps to integrate reflection as a systematic practice into a school's social and emotional learning process. School administrators ensure that experiences related to social and emotional learning are consistently supplemented with structured opportunities for reflection, allowing students to reflect on their emotional responses, interactions with others and decision-making processes. Consistent reflection helps transform individual social and emotional learning activities into a continuous process of behavioural development.

Instead of implementing a single centralised reflection tool across the entire school, it is possible to create a common reflection system that defines the purpose, frequency and overall structure of reflection. This approach ensures consistency while maintaining flexibility across different classes and age groups.

Target audience

Students in all grades. It is implemented by teachers under the guidance of school administrators or the team responsible for social and emotional learning.

Implementation: once a month.

Review: at the end of each educational period.

Proposed implementation path

- Incorporate reflection as a regular part of social and emotional learning activities.
- Develop general reflection questions or guidelines for teachers.
- Incorporate reflection into classroom sessions, outdoor education or project-based activities.
- Enable teachers to choose appropriate forms of reflection (written, visual or verbal).
- Encourage implementation teams to analyse summarised insights (e.g., recurring challenges related to collaboration or communication) as part of monitoring the school climate.

Example

At the classroom level, students can keep individual or group “emotion journals” in which they reflect on situations they have experienced during collaborative projects, outdoor education activities or creative workshops, describing their feelings, interactions with others and insights gained about teamwork and decision-making.

Expenses

An activity that is free or requires very little expenditure, using notebooks or existing digital tools.

Social and emotional skills are developed

It fosters self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation and responsible decision-making.

Action 8. Implementation of peer mentoring

The Role of the Administration

This initiative enables school administrators to strengthen bonds among students of different age groups, fostering cooperation and relationship-building. Peer mentoring programmes provide students with opportunities to practice communication, empathy and collaborative problem-solving in real-life social situations.

From an organisational perspective, structured mentoring relationships can strengthen informal support networks within the school community and contribute to the development of positive interpersonal norms based on inclusion and mutual support.

Target audience

Students of different grades, coordinated by teachers.

Preparation: 4–6 weeks.

Implementation: on an ongoing basis throughout the school year.

Proposed implementation path

- Identify potential mentors among older students.
- Provide them with initial training or guidelines.
- Assign mentors to younger students.
- Schedule regular meetings (e.g., once a month).
- Encourage general participation in educational or recreational activities.

Example

Older students may be paired with younger ones to help them adjust to school more easily or to collaborate on projects. Mentor–mentee pairs can meet during breaks or at designated times to discuss challenges related to group work, communication or everyday school life, thereby developing interpersonal skills in everyday situations.

Expenses

An action that is free or requires very little expenditure.

Social and emotional skills are developed

It enhances relationship-building skills, empathy and collaboration.

IV. INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENT

These initiatives focus on integrating social and emotional learning into the physical school environment by creating shared spaces that foster emotional awareness, reflection and positive social interaction. Incorporating elements that align with the principles of social and emotional learning into a school's infrastructure can provide informal opportunities for students to develop their self-regulation and collaboration skills. The following actions offer practical ideas that schools can implement to integrate the principles of social and emotional learning into their daily school environments.

Action 9. Creating a social and emotional learning garden

The Role of the Administration

This initiative enables school leaders to promote the development of social and emotional skills through participation in shared outdoor learning spaces. School gardens can provide opportunities for collaborative planning, shared responsibility and reflection on caring for the environment.

From an organisational perspective, such initiatives foster collaboration among students, teachers and community partners, while also strengthening experiential learning beyond the classroom.

Proposed implementation path

- Identify a suitable outdoor space for landscaping.
- Invite teachers, students and parents (guardians, caregivers), as well as community partners, to participate.
- Allocate shared responsibilities for supervision.
- Integrate gardening activities into project-based learning.

Target audience

Students, teachers, parents (guardians, caregivers) and local community partners.

Preparation: 6–8 weeks.

Implementation: ongoing.

Example

The school can set up a small educational garden where groups of students, together with their parents or volunteers, can participate in planting and maintenance activities to create shared green spaces.

Price

An action that is free or requires very little expenditure.

Social and emotional skills are developed

Promotes cooperation, responsibility and environmental awareness.

Action 10. Creating spaces for reflection on social and emotional learning in the school environment

The Role of the Administration

This initiative enables school administrators to integrate social and emotional learning into the physical school environment by creating dedicated outdoor reflection spaces that promote emotional awareness and self-regulation. Social and emotional learning reflection stations can provide informal opportunities for students to pause, recognise their emotions or resolve conflicts outside the classroom.

From an organisational perspective, integrating such spaces into shared school areas reinforces social and emotional learning as a whole-school approach, rather than merely a classroom activity. The administration plays a key role in identifying suitable locations, coordinating the installation and ensuring accessibility for people of all ages.

Target audience

The entire school community.

Preparation: 4–6 weeks.

Implementation: throughout the school year.

Proposed implementation path

- Identify suitable locations on school grounds
- Prepare simple reflection questions or visual aids.
- Install durable signs or markings.
- Introduce their use during class meetings or assemblies.
- Encourage voluntary use during breaks or transition periods.

Example

A “Feeling Path” could be created, consisting of several reflection stations set up along a frequently used path on the school grounds. Each step may include a visual aid (e.g., an emotion wheel, calming strategies or brief reflective questions such as “How am I feeling right now?” or “What might help me calm down?”).

The stations can be set up using simple materials, such as wooden signs, painted stones or laminated boards, placed at short intervals so that students can systematically move through the different stages of reflection (e.g., recognising emotions, identifying causes, choosing coping strategies).

In addition to promoting individual emotional regulation, the presence of such spaces in common school areas conveys an important message that emotional experiences are recognised and valued within the school community. In this way, the physical environment itself reinforces the understanding that well-being is important and provides students with support in overcoming their daily challenges.

Expenses

Small-scale; recycled materials can be used.

Social and emotional skills are developed

Promotes emotional awareness, self-regulation, and responsible decision-making.

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Anna is a landscape architect and vocational teacher who has been working at municipal nature schools in Sweden since 2002. She leads outdoor activities for students in grades 4–9 and provides training for teachers on outdoor education, natural sciences, nature-based activities and crafts. In her work, Anna often uses images and models to help students better understand and visualise the subject matter.

Lotta Carlegård, Sweden

Lotta is an outdoor education specialist and teacher who has been working with students in grades 4–9 since 2003, teaching English and Swedish. In 2005, she founded “Class Without Walls”, a nature school where she works as a teacher trainer, lecturer and author. In 2007, she published the textbook “Att lära in engelska ute” (“Learning English Outdoors”) and is the editor of the book “Teaching in the Outdoor Classroom”. Lotta leads courses and lectures for elementary and secondary school teachers, participates in national and international projects, and organises nature and cultural exploration activities through her travel agency, “Discover Dalarna”.

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Burak is an artist and a lecturer at Sakarya University Faculty of Art Design and Architecture. He develops both solo and collective projects, examining the relationship between art and politics and the influence of capitalism on contemporary art practice. His solo exhibitions include “The Small Room of History” (Karşı Sanat, 2022) and “Freedom Has No Script” (Iniva, London, 2014), and his collective projects include “Barmagazine: The Magazine That Thinks It’s a Bar” (2018). Burak has participated in international exhibitions, including “Istanbul. Passion, Joy, Fury” (Rome, 2015), “Unrest of Form” (Vienna, 2013), the Taipei Biennales (2008 and 2010), and the 10th Istanbul Biennial (2007). In his work, Burak turns life into a subject of inquiry, creating absurd juxtapositions through the use of unconventional, improvised tactics and elements of everyday life.

Akvilė Girdzijauskaitė, Lithuania

Akvilė holds a master's degree in education and has experience in teacher professional development and project management. Her passion for nature and animals prompted her to move from the city to a small village, where she and her like-minded partner, Mindaugas Kazlauskas, founded an alpaca farm and the Miško Briedžio School. Here, Akvilė combines her teaching experience with the concepts of sustainability, community and outdoor learning.

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Sigita has a degree in psychology and works at the Institute of Psychology at Vilnius University and the Lithuanian Center for Inclusive Education. Her main areas of research include children's and adolescents' learning, behavioural and emotional difficulties, cognitive abilities, creativity and talents. She is the author and facilitator of numerous workshops for teachers on the education of gifted children. At Vilnius University, in collaboration with the Miško Briedžio School, Sigita implements projects that apply the principles of outdoor education and animal-assisted education methods.

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Mindaugas holds a PhD in philosophy. Since 2007, he has been working as a project manager, expert and evaluator at various organisations. His research focuses on experiential learning, non-traditional educational methods, the concept of consciousness, and the relationship between humans and animals within the context of phenomenological philosophy. Mindaugas is one of the initiators and founders of the Miško Briedžio School and a farmer at the Miško Briedžio Farm.

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Mürsel was born in 1985 in Eskişehir, Turkey. In 2003, he graduated from Anatolia High School in Eskişehir and studied ceramics at Anadolu University. In 2014, he began working as a research assistant in the Department of Ceramics and Glass at Sakarya University. Mürsel is currently continuing his academic and artistic pursuits, combining research with creative work.

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Stina is an outdoor education specialist and holds a master's degree in biology; she has been working in this field since 2002. She founded the nature school "Sustainable Learning", where she works as a teacher trainer, lecturer and author. Stina is the co-author of several methodological books for teachers: "Att lära in svenska ute" ("Learning Swedish outdoors"), "Att lära in svenska ute 2", "Att lära in SFI ute" ("Learning new languages outside"), "Leka och lära genom fysisk aktivitet ute" ("Play and learning through outdoor physical activity"), and "Teaching in the Outdoor". She is also a co-author and editor of the publication "Att lära in ute för hållbar utveckling" ("Outdoor Learning for Sustainable Development"). Stina teaches courses and gives lectures to teachers at all levels of education, with a particular focus on sustainable development goals. She is a former chair of the Association of Nature Schools and vice chair of the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation.

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Mamerta works as the head of international project administration at the Faculty of Philosophy at Vilnius University, where she assists researchers in developing and coordinating research initiatives. She holds a master's degree in education and has several years of teaching experience in Lithuania and abroad, including in Vietnam, China and the United States. She is interested in social and emotional learning and learning outside the classroom, viewing these approaches as meaningful ways to support students' growth and well-being. She also participates in various international projects that promote innovation in education.

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Laura is a philologist by education, but a translator and nature lover by vocation. After graduating from Vilnius University with a degree in philology, she works as a translator of films and children's books, participates in educational projects on environmental protection and outdoor education, and is interested in the topic of outdoor survival.