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## UNICEF EDUCATION

# Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Case Study

## NORTH MACEDONIA

### Learning social and emotional skills in pre-school creates brighter futures for children

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In North Macedonia, 98 *per cent* of children attend public primary school; however, only 37 *per cent* of children aged 3 to 6 attend pre-primary education programmes. The foundation of mental health begins in early childhood. During these critical years, cognitive skills, emotional well-being, social competence and sound physical and mental health develop, building a solid foundation for success throughout a child's lifetime. Children equipped with quality early childhood education start primary school with a firm foundation – stronger social skills, larger vocabularies, better sense of numbers and curiosity to learn more.

In 2018, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia to carry out a comprehensive study around the pre-primary education sector. Major findings were that pre-school teachers in the country were often poorly equipped to plan, organise and produce an environment conducive to learning, monitor children's achievements and progress, cooperate with caregivers and provide the necessary support to children with developmental delays.

In response, UNICEF, with funding from the UK Government, is providing technical support to the Government of North Macedonia to enhance the professional development of teacher competencies for early childhood education. This includes the introduction of a national programme promoting the social and emotional development of pre-school children and developing a dynamic national platform for teachers' training, peer support and mentoring through professional learning communities, which are groups of teachers that meet regularly for mentoring support, co-teaching sessions and guidance from senior educators.

## RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

- **Development of teachers' social and emotional skills is crucial.** With UNICEF's technical and the UK Government's financial support, close to 70 *per cent* of the country's pre-school teachers were trained to integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) in their classrooms. For teachers to be effective in the classroom, they must first hone and continually check in on their own socio-emotional skills and well-being. For instance, pre-school teachers are encouraged to apply various self-regulation, gratitude and self-care techniques; they are also invited to have a personal journal to reflect on their learning journey. Monitoring data shows that these techniques and practices have helped teachers in their daily interactions with colleagues and children, placing them in a position to model the competencies they are trying to shape in the classroom.
- **Play and storytelling help pre-school children express their feelings.** After just over 2 years of implementation, caregivers and teachers are reporting benefits for children beyond their cognitive development. They are noticing that through play, exercises and storytelling, pre-school children can better express their feelings, get along better, show empathy for others in the group, care more about the environment and feel happier. Parents are also accessing a library of SEL resources for learning and playing at home which further solidifies the teaching in the classroom. Evaluative research around SEL will be carried out towards the end of 2021.
- **Collaboration among teachers and caregivers is paramount.** One week after pre-school closures on 10 March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and UNICEF issued a joint call for

teachers to film video lessons for an e-classroom online platform. Around 1,800 teachers stepped up and provided educational and socio emotional skills content to cover pre-primary, primary and secondary education. In less than a year, the now named [Eduino platform](#) became the single most valuable collective portal for digital content, collaboration and professional development for teachers, students and caregivers. Eduino offers open and [free 4,062 video lessons](#) and over 400 games for parents to stimulate their child's development at home. A significant portion of these resources is focused on offering distance learning modalities for pre-primary education, including multiple exercises and emotional well-being activities. The platform engages a community of 22,700 subscribed users, and over 6,000 parents, educators, teachers and other education professionals contribute to the growing wealth of resources and dynamic community. Materials are available in the five languages used in North Macedonia.

## NEXT STEPS

The pre-school SEL programme in North Macedonia is expected to reach all kindergartens by the end of 2021, training the entire pre-school workforce of 1,400 teachers. The establishment of a network of professional learning communities has prompted donors like the World Bank and the European Union to continue supporting the professional development opportunities of pre-school teachers. The MOE and UNICEF are continuing to expand the Eduino platform's content and reach, focusing on parental engagement and early childhood development. To date, 49 *per cent* of all teachers have used the platform for distance learning.

**Cost effectiveness:** For over the past three years, UNICEF and the UK Government invested US \$1,978,413 in North Macedonia to start a long-term reform in early childhood education. This included a new framework of professional competencies for teachers, SEL programmes for pre-school children, launching of professional learning communities and the development of the edduino platform, as well as bolstering teachers' career advancement and professional development.

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