Rethinking language education:
how can teachers of languages contribute to developing learners' wellbeing and life skills?

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Outline

1. Introduction
2. The ECML and its 'Rethinking language education after Covid' initiative
3. Learners' well-being: experiences during Covid and activities which can help
4. Transversal competences – what do they mean for (language) teachers? Some examples
5. Some guidelines for the future

The size of the problem

Estimated prevalence and number of adolescents with mental disorders in Europe, 2019
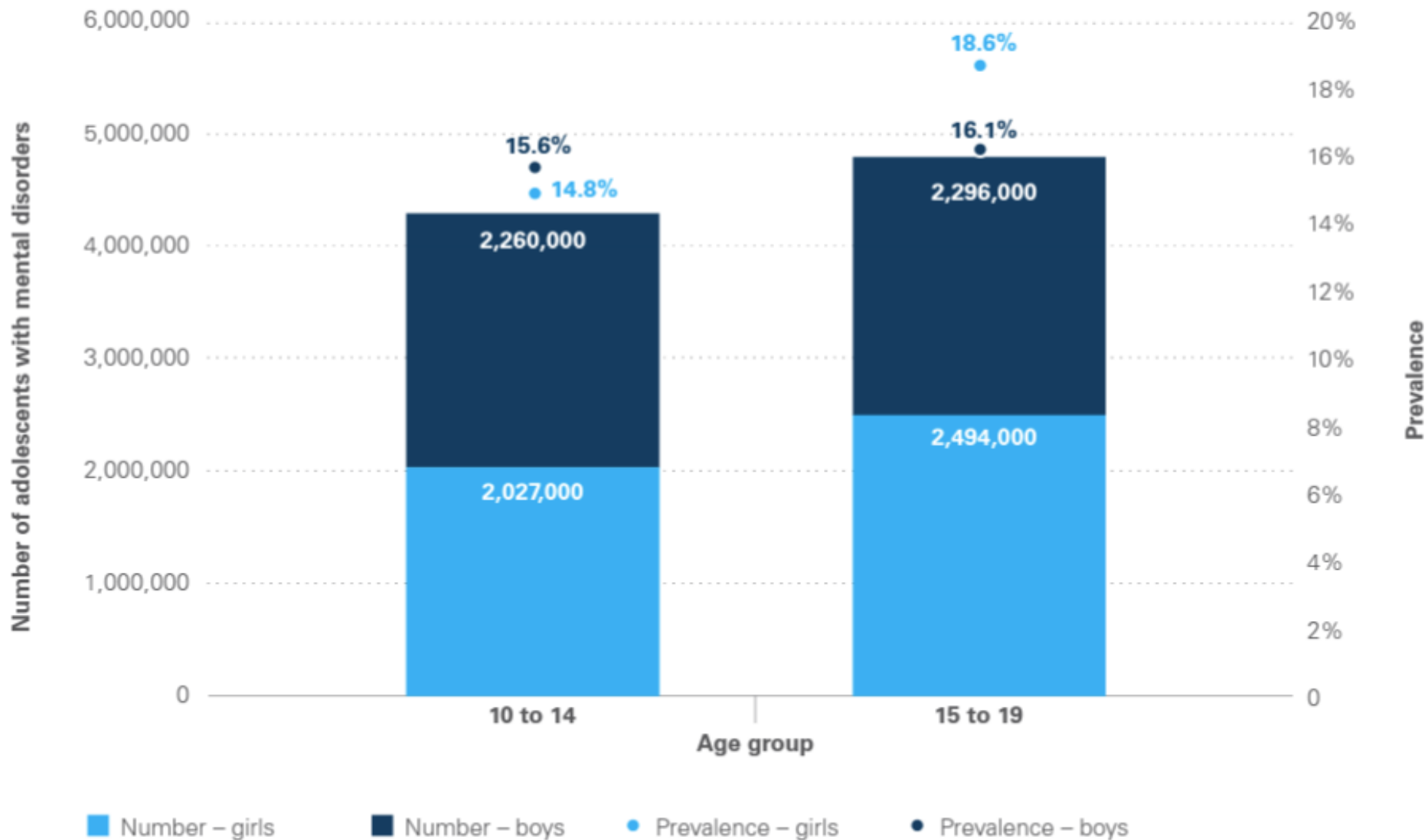
(UNICEF: THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S CHILDREN 2021)

What is 'wellbeing'?

"Wellbeing is not just the absence of disease or illness. It's a complex combination of a person's physical, mental, emotional and social health factors. Wellbeing is strongly linked to happiness and life satisfaction. In short, wellbeing could be described as how you feel about yourself and your life."

Better Health Channel, Australia

Lack of wellbeing: some possible causes

Outside education:

Childhood trauma

Tensions at home

Social media pressure

Special needs e.g. ADHD, dyslexia etc.

Shyness and sensitivity

Poverty and poor housing

Lack of opportunity/facilities for exercise

Lack of food, e.g. no breakfast

Lack of sleep e.g. due to online gaming

Lockdown, e.g. Covid

…

In the educational environment:

- **Lack of competence in the language of schooling, difficulty understanding**

- **Low literacy, limited oracy, feeling inferior**

- **Bullying, including online harassment, problems making friends, loneliness**

- **Pressure from teachers, lack of empathy**

- **Negative feedback on interventions, test and exam results**

- **Lack of money for appropriate stationery, sports clothing etc.**

- **Online lessons, no school e.g during Covid**

- **…**

The European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), Graz

- "An enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe at the interface between policy, research, teacher education and practice."

- 30 members states (of the Council of Europe's 46)

- 4-year programmes of projects on various aspects of language education

- Training and consultancy related to project outcomes for member states

- Think tanks and other initiatives.

EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MODERN LANGUAGES

E C M L
C E L V

CENTRE EUROPEEN POUR LES LANGUES VIVANTES

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE
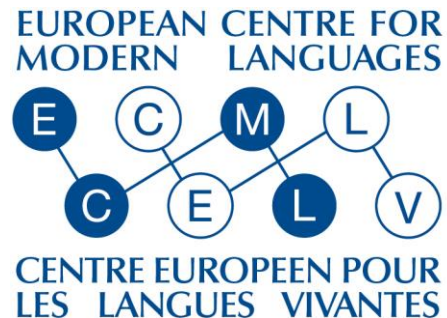
ECML's 2020 to 2023 projects

- Resources for assessing the home language competences of migrant pupils

- CLIL in languages other than English - successful transitions across educational stages

- CEFR Companion Volume implementation toolbox

- Developing teacher competences for pluralistic approaches - training and reflection tools for teachers and teacher educators

- Digital citizenship through language education

- Enhancing language education in cross-border vocational education

- Young children's language learning pathways

- Mediation in teaching, learning and assessment

- Building blocks for planning language-sensitive teacher education

2021-2022 initiative:

The future of language education in the light of Covid - lessons learned and ways forward

OVERVIEW OF THE INITIATIVE

Initial survey: language education during Covid - February 2021 ✓

Webinar on survey findings - April 2021 ✓

Two virtual think tanks - May and September 2021 ✓

21 case studies of practice examples from teachers – June-November 2021✓

Colloquium to review the first year of the initiative - December 2021 ✓

Learners' voices project webinar - May 2022 ✓

Collecting learners' voices survey - May-June 2022 ✓

Analysis of learners' and teachers' views - June-September 2022 ✓

Enlarged ECML Bureau Meeting - October 2022 ✓

Publication on results of the initiative - early 2023

EUROPEAN UNION

EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MODERN LANGUAGES
CENTRE EUROPEEN POUR LES LANGUES VIVANTES

COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

The 2021 initial survey

sample responses from teachers to the question:

"What in your view are the most important challenges in language education during the pandemic to be addressed in the future?"

- *"How to create a learning environment that helps learners (and teachers) to cope even better with loneliness and stress, since these are important issues during a lockdown. Wellbeing affects learning (and teaching) output in an important way."*

- *"Inclusion; learners with learning difficulties; disengaged learners; anger and depression issues; missing out on socialising; learning to handle strong feelings towards others without going overboard; learning social skills."*

- *"Language learning is also about communication, and this has been lost [during the pandemic]. All the important learning that comes from playing with peers has gone. There are children that no longer speak, children with parents that no longer have jobs, children suffering more abuse than they ever did before as parents are at home. I feel strongly that these issues need to be addressed."*

The Learners' Voices survey 2022

Sample responses from learners to the question:

"*What didn't you like about your language learning during the pandemic?*"

- "We did not see our friends and, as we were without them, we missed them a lot. We were lonely."

- "I felt sad, isolated and lonely. My eyesight got worse, and I need glasses. I missed all my friends. Sometimes I didn't understand what the teacher wanted me to do."

- "We missed physical contact with friends, lack of motivation, home distractions, looking at the screen 8 hours a day, getting bad posture because of sitting, it was stressful."

- "The school is not only about learning content, it is also learning about social interactions and having fun with our friends. Remote learning cannot give you that. It's a type of learning that you can participate in for a short period of time. It is not human friendly on the long run, as it causes health problems such as depression, obesity and addiction [to] technology

From the 2021 survey:

Reflections of some teachers on the well-being of learners during the pandemic

"I personally am more aware that each student has his or her own problems at home (some more, some less) <u>and these problems reflect on their work at school.</u> We, adults, should help them."

" I have also become more aware of the health issues my students suffered during the online lessons and how I attended to those issues."

"A more nurturing environment has always been my goal but even a better one should be created now <u>so as to cater for all the needs to be covered and special interests that the learners have to safeguard their wellbeing, academic performance and their mental health</u> in particular."

 "<u>I wish I had spent more time focused on individuals</u>. I wish our school would give more emphasis on individual students, especially those who simply "disappeared" from our reach during the pandemic."

"Perhaps the most important lesson for me has been that of putting the student first, by being sensitive to mood, <u>engaging interest through personalisation, being upbeat and maintaining a positive outlook</u> through difficult times."

Sample case studies submitted by teachers

- [A teacher in Albania reported on a lesson](#) in which learners did online role-playing. Each learner was asked to write down a personal problem caused mainly by the Covid lockdown experience. Then learners in pairs took the roles of 'client' and 'counsellor' alternately, with the 'counsellors' then reporting back on their proposed advice on the various problems. The teacher said she was surprised by the fluency of learners' oral interaction and oral production, **and she also felt the activity had given learners a chance to show support for each other and relieve some of the stress they were experiencing.**

- [Creative work at primary level:](#) a teacher of English in Spain reported on a lesson in a primary school. The underlying theme was the children's experience of and feelings about the pandemic. The first, second- and third-year children were asked to create posters illustrating the 'rainbow' theme that was so symbolic during lockdowns. Having created them, the children recorded themselves talking about their posters in English and about the feelings behind their creations. **For the teacher this was an example of how important it is to allow space for individual learners to express their emotions and feelings across subject boundaries. She also noted that language teachers have a special role to play in this because of the crucial nature of communication, including across national and cultural boundaries**.

HEALTH & LIFE SKILLS:

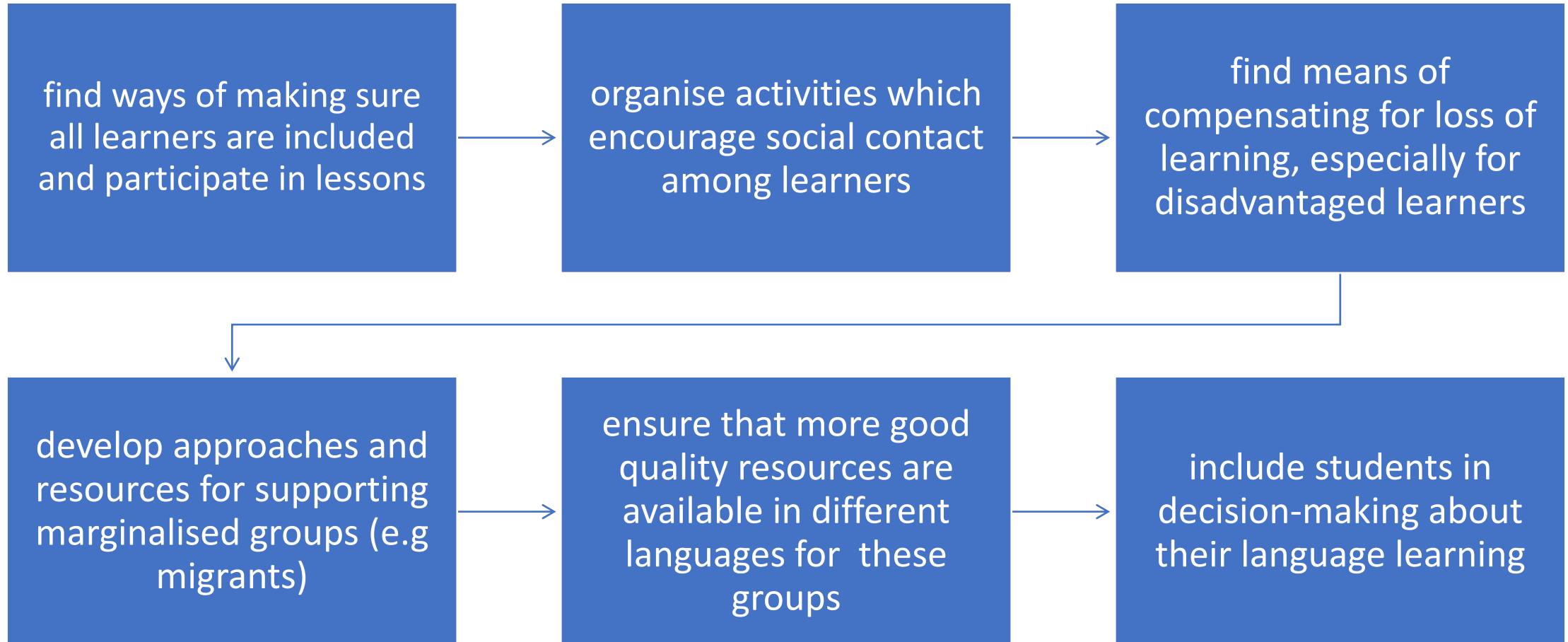# Challenges for (language) teachers

Teachers of all subjects should contribute to giving pupils:

- "competence which promotes sound physical and mental health, and which provides opportunities for making responsible life choices.

- the ability to understand and influence factors that are important for mastering one's own life

- awareness of value choices and the importance of meaning in life and relations with others

- the ability to draw boundaries and to respect others' boundaries, and the ability to deal with thoughts, feelings and relationships."

Extracts from: Core curriculum – interdisciplinary topics: Health and life skills (Norwegian curriculum – English version)

Some conclusions:
to support learners, we need to:

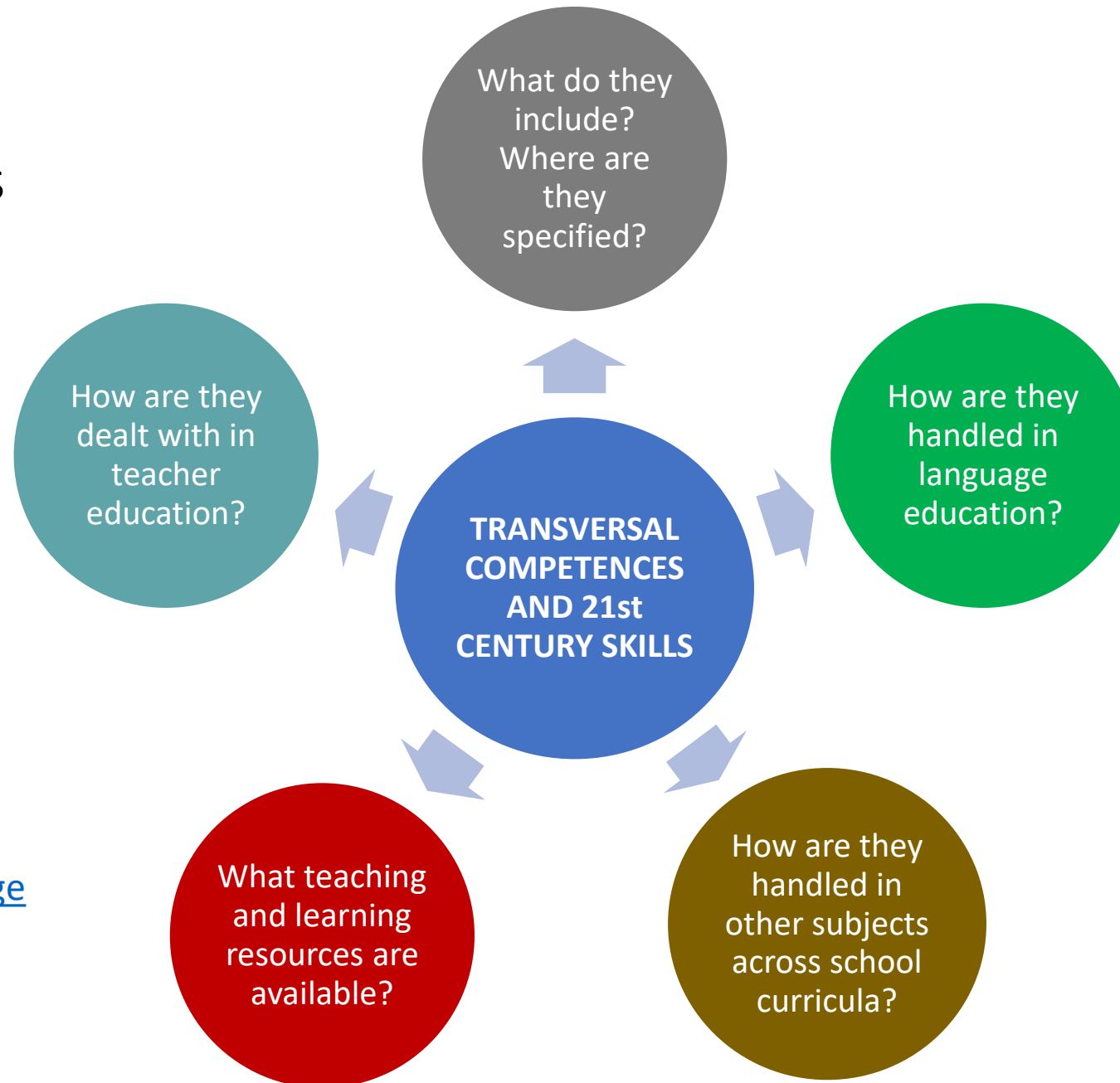|		
find ways of making sure all learners are included and participate in lessons	organise activities which encourage social contact among learners	find means of compensating for loss of learning, especially for disadvantaged learners
develop approaches and resources for supporting marginalised groups (e.g migrants)	ensure that more good quality resources are available in different languages for these groups	include students in decision-making about their language learning

Some general guidelines

We need to put in place sound structures and measures for responding to the wellbeing needs of learners by:

- highlighting in the curriculum the importance of learners taking responsibility for their language learning and of helping each other through **peer learning**.

- encouraging language teachers to take advantage of the **special potential of language lessons** (more so than other lessons) to serve as **a forum where problems can be raised and discussed** as part of learning activities.

- making sure that some tasks are dedicated to **maintaining social links and interaction among learners** and to organising catch-up or 'checking-in' sessions with sub-groups of learners and/or individuals.

Transversal competences in (language) education

Transversal competences – some questions

From: Transversal competences in language education – Resources

(ECML Think Tank 2022)

What do they include? Where are they specified?

How are they dealt with in teacher education?

How are they handled in language education?

TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCES AND 21st CENTURY SKILLS

What teaching and learning resources are available?

How are they handled in other subjects across school curricula?

Transversal competences mentioned in think tank questionnaires

- Initiative, ambition
- Entrepreneurial and career competences
- Co-operation/ collaboration skills
- **Physical, mental and emotional awareness and health**
- **Wellbeing competence**
- **Interaction skills**
- Civic skills
- 'Executive' skills
- Digital competence
- Legal competences
- Citizenship competences including competences with regard to living together
- **Socio-relational competences**
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Time management

- **Soft interpersonal and intrapersonal skills**
- Sustainable development
- Ethical and environmental skills
- Global citizenship
- Gender equality
- **Cultural competence**
- **Cultural awareness**
- **Cultural expression**
- **Intercultural communication**
- Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights
- Sustainability competences
- **Tolerance**
- Reasoned decision making
- Respect for diversity

Skills needed for success in school, life and work

- "Foundational skills, namely literacy and numeracy, are essential

- "**Transferable skills allow young people to become agile, adaptive learners and citizens equipped to navigate personal, academic, social, and economic challenges; transferable skills include problem solving, negotiation, managing emotions, empathy, and communication**

- "Digital skills and knowledge support the development of digitally literate children and adolescents who can use and understand technology, search for and manage information, communicate."

(Adapted from: https://www.unicef.org/education/skills-development)

A key transferable skill: learning to learn

"Pupils who learn to formulate questions, seek answers and express their understanding in various ways will gradually be able to assume an active role in their own learning and development."

[However,]

"In spite of their personal efforts and use of learning strategies some pupils will have learning challenges."

(Extracts from: Norwegian core curriculum: Learning to learn – English version)
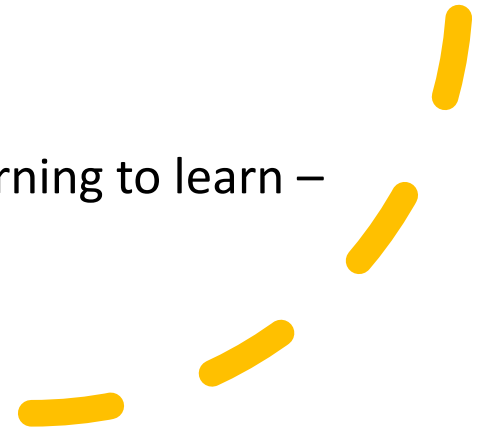
Learning to learn and learner autonomy

- Get learners to think about the <u>ways in which they learn</u>: children and older learners do not all have the same 'learning styles' and learning preferences

- Check whether learners of all ages have <u>special learning needs</u> which may mean that they can easily be 'left behind' in their learning

- From an early age get learners to <u>do some activities in small groups or by themselves, without the teacher supervising them all the time</u>

- <u>Familiarise learners with the technology and apps that they will need to use</u>. Youngsters are now accustomed to using technology, but it is easy for some to get left behind

- Help learners <u>plan their work and their time</u>. Tell learners they have choices in the way they do things and ask them to explain what they are going to do and how

- Give them some <u>help at the beginning of the activity or during the first few minutes</u>.

- Show them that <u>you are confident that they can do things by themselves</u>, and that they do not always need to be helped or supervised

- <u>Get them accustomed to assessing their own – and each other's - progress and their own work.</u>

(From Rossner and Heyworth 2023)

Transversal competences and the teaching and learning of foreign languages

In the Norwegian curriculum, there are three broad interdisciplinary topics:

- health and life skills

- democracy and citizenship

- sustainable development.

How appropriate and feasible is it to work on topics like these in the teaching and learning of foreign languages?

Let's think about the CLIL model...

"…Being able to express their feelings, thoughts, experiences and opinions about health and life skills provides pupils with new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patterns, as well as on their own way of life and that of others.

The ability to handle situations that require linguistic and cultural competence can give pupils a sense of achievement."

DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe 2020)

Values

- Valuing human dignity and human rights
- Valuing cultural diversity
- Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law

Attitudes

- Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices
- Respect
- Civic-mindedness
- Responsibility
- Self-efficacy
- Tolerance of ambiguity

Competence

Skills

- Autonomous learning skills
- Analytical and critical thinking skills
- Skills of listening and observing
- Empathy
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills
- Co-operation skills
- Conflict-resolution skills

Knowledge and critical understanding

- Knowledge and critical understanding of the self
- Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication
- Knowledge and critical understanding of the world: politics, law, human rights, culture, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment, sustainability

How do these competences fit in with foreign language learning ?

VALUES

Valuing human dignity and human rights

Valuing cultural diversity

Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law

ATTITUDES

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Respect

Civic-mindedness

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SKILLS

Knowledge and critical understanding of the self

Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication

Knowledge and critical understanding of the world: politics, law, human rights, culture, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment, sustainability

KNOWLEDGE AND CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING

Rethinking language education

Language education should help to:

Give	Give learners agency
Address	Address real-world topic(s) that are relevant to learners
Provide	Provide authentic learning opportunities
Encourage	Encourage reflective practice
Foster	Foster democratic citizenship
Create	Create communities that stay in touch

References and follow up

- Better Health Channel (Victoria, Australia)

- Council of Europe (2020). *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*

- ECML (2021-2023) The future of language education in the light of Covid - lessons learned and ways forward, and Final Report

- ECML (2022) Transversal competences in foreign language education, and background document

- Mercer S. (2021). An agenda for well-being in ELT: an ecological perspective. *ELT Journal* vol. 75/1: 14-21.

- Rossner R. and F. Heyworth. (2023). 'Learner wellbeing and learner autonomy' in *Rethinking language education after the experience of Covid - Final report*. Graz: ECML, pages 59-64

- UNICEF (2019). *Global Framework on Transferable Skills*. New York: UNICEF

- UNICEF (2021) *The State of the World's Children* : *On my Mind*

- UNICEF Adolescent education and skills

- Utdanningsdirektoratet, Norway. *Core curriculum - Health and life skills* and *Curriculum for English ENG01-04*.)

Your comments and questions

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