

Well-Being: Bridging the Gap between the Language of Policy and the Culture of Schools

Margaret Nohilly & Fionnuala Tynan, *Mary Immaculate College, Ireland*

Abstract

While there is an increasing interest in the notion of well-being—politically, societally and educationally—it remains an enigmatic, multifaceted concept that sometimes eludes definition in academic articles. This article takes account of policy developments in the area of well-being over the last decade in Ireland, particularly educational policy developments. It presents research findings from a study conducted with primary school teachers on the west coast of Ireland about what well-being means to them as teachers and their challenges in promoting it. The findings highlight that well-being is open to many interpretations, and there is a clear gap between the language of well-being policy documents and the practices taking place in schools.

Keywords Well-Being; Policy; Schools; Culture

Margaret Nohilly & Fionnuala Tynan. (2019). Well-Being: Bridging the Gap between the Language of Policy and the Culture of Schools. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership* 15(12). URL: <http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/view/886> doi: 10.22230/ijepl.2019v15n12a886

IJEPL is a joint publication of **PKD International**, the Faculty of Education at **Simon Fraser University**, the College of Education and Human Development at **George Mason University**, and the **University of Delaware**. By virtue of their appearance in this open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings 90 days after initial publication. Copyright for articles published in IJEPL is retained by the authors. More information is available on the IJEPL website: <http://www.ijepl.org>



*Childhood can be seen as a process of well-becoming,
where young people are gaining knowledge, skills,
values and attitudes that will sustain them
throughout their lives.*

Marwan Awartani & Janet Looney, 2015, p.11

Introduction

An increasing interest in the notion of well-being—politically, societally, and educationally—is evident in national and international literature. In the field of education, in particular, well-being has received much attention, yet it remains an enigmatic, multifaceted concept that sometime eludes definition in academic articles. A growing body of research indicates that learning and well-being are connected (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2017; O’ Brien & O’ Shea, 2017; Tynan and Nohilly, 2018). In the Irish context, well-being has become a central theme in both the *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2009; 2015). The junior cycle, which takes place after the third year of post-primary schooling, is the first state examination students sit. In addition, well-being guidelines have been published for both primary and post-primary schools.

This article takes account of educational policy developments in the area of well-being over the last decade in Ireland. In order to consider educational policy developments in relation to well-being, a small-scale mixed-methods study was undertaken with Irish primary school teachers. The purpose of the study was to ascertain their understanding of the concept of well-being—given the policy developments in the area—to identify the strategies teachers use to promote well-being, and to specify any challenges in promoting well-being in the school context. While well-being is becoming a policy priority and being embedded in educational language, no research findings on work undertaken with primary schools in the area have been published. The findings of the current study highlight that well-being is open to many interpretations, and there is a clear gap between the language of well-being policy documents and the practice taking place in schools.

Policy development in relation to well-being in Ireland

The development of a national policy in relation to well-being in Ireland is not just a matter for education; the Department of Health plays a central role in promoting and supporting the development of children’s well-being. In the last twenty years, many national strategies set out a vision for children that will enable them to enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential. In 2000, both the Department of Health and the Department of Education published the National Children’s Strategy in Ireland, entitled *Our Children – Their Lives*. As part of this national strategy, the government planned to establish a national longitudinal study of children in Ireland and launched the *Growing Up in Ireland* study in 2007. This study follows the progress of two groups of children: 8,000 nine-year-olds and 10,000 nine-month-olds. It examines the progress and well-being of these children at a number of important points in their childhood (*Growing Up in Ireland*, 2007). Data collection has continued to

take place since 2008. A key step in data gathering was the development of agreed-upon indicators of child well-being. A rigorous approach was adopted in developing these indicators (Hanafin & Brooks, 2005), which include nine components to reflect the complexity of children's well-being. The indicators are:

1. Physical and mental well-being
2. Emotional and behavioural well-being
3. Intellectual capacity
4. Spiritual and moral well-being
5. Identity
6. Self-care
7. Family relationships
8. Social and peer relationships
9. Social presentation (p. 5)

In the Irish context, the indicators consider well-being in a very holistic sense, taking account of the many factors impacting its development, including the family context and the wider social and peer context. However, despite the fact that this is the largest study of children ever undertaken in Ireland, the well-being indicators are not included or indeed referenced in recent educational policy documents on well-being.

The Department of Health (2013) developed a framework for health and well-being in Ireland entitled *Healthy Ireland* in 2013. This framework establishes a vision where “everyone can enjoy physical and mental health and well-being to their full potential, where well-being is valued and supported at every level of society and is everyone's responsibility” (p. 6). Indeed, the definition of well-being provided in this framework, which is based on the work of the World Health Organization (WHO), is integral to the overall definition of health: “Health means everyone achieving his or her potential to enjoy complete physical, mental and social wellbeing. ... Well-being also reflects the concept of positive mental health, in which a person can realise his or her own abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully and be able to make a contribution to his or her own community” (Department of Health, 2013, p. 9). This definition of well-being places a particular focus on mental health. The well-being guidelines developed for both primary and post-primary schools in Ireland also focus on promoting mental health, which is the area of well-being teachers feel the least capable and confident in addressing.

In 2014, the Child and Family Agency was established in Ireland, thus providing additional resources to monitor well-being outcomes for local children. In line with the aforementioned *Healthy Ireland* (Department of Health, 2013), the national policy framework *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014) confirms a cross-governmental approach to seeking to improve all aspects of health and well-being. The five national outcomes for children and young people across the framework are that they:

1. are active and healthy with positive physical and mental well-being;
2. are achieving their full potential in all areas of learning and development;

3. are safe and protected from harm;
4. have economic security and opportunity; and
5. are connected, respected and contributing to their world.

In relation to the outcomes, well-being is considered in a broad context, taking into account physical, mental, and sexual well-being, as well as the importance of play and enjoyment in sports, arts, culture, and nature. Certainly, it can be argued that policy developments at the national level promote the well-being of children and young people, albeit with various definitions of well-being. However, these national policy documents do not impact on school practice in the same way as education policy developments.

Educational policy development in relation to well-being in Ireland

There has been significant policy development in relation to well-being in education in Ireland. Ireland's primary school curriculum was last revised in 1999, and is currently being reviewed. In Ireland, the primary school system consists of eight years of school, which pupils generally commence at age of four or five. They leave primary school and progress to post-primary education at the age twelve or thirteen. In terms of curriculum subject areas, social, personal, and health education (SPHE) has strong associations with the concept of well-being. It provides "particular opportunities to foster the personal health, development and well-being of the child and to help him/her to create and maintain supportive relationships and become an active and responsible citizen in society" (Government of Ireland, 1999, p. 2). This subject area, however, is only allocated half an hour per week, which is the least amount of time allocated to any subject area. In a review of this curriculum area, teachers identified time as one of the greatest challenges to curriculum implementation (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2008). It would appear that even though schools are identifying well-being as a priority area, which is supported by policy development, it is not allocated adequate time to enable meaningful implementation.

Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years, *Aistear*, was published in 2009; it was the first curriculum area in the Irish context to incorporate well-being as a central theme. It is one of the four themes in the overall framework that describes children's learning and development. Well-being is outlined as having two major components: physical well-being and psychological well-being. Physical well-being takes account of children exploring, investigating, and challenging themselves in the environment. Psychological well-being focuses on children's relationships and interactions with their families and communities and their need to feel respected, included, and empowered. The aims of well-being for young children outlined in the *Aistear* framework include

1. Children will be strong psychologically and socially;
2. Children will be as healthy and fit as they can be;
3. Children will be creative and spiritual; and
4. Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life.

(National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009, p. 17)

The inclusion of well-being in this framework is significant, as it undoubtedly highlights its role as a central theme in education. The aims outlined in the *Aistear*

framework are very relevant to the developmental stages of learning for children of this age. Given that well-being is not yet recognised as a formal area of learning in primary education in the Irish context, a framework developed for primary school should build on the aims of the Aistear framework.

In early 2013, the *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention* was published jointly by the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Health. However, the particular focus of these national well-being guidelines is, in fact, on the promotion of mental health. This is highlighted in the foreword to the guidelines: “We know that the mental health and well-being of our young people is critical to success in school and life. ... It is especially important to address the myths and stigma surrounding mental health and suicide, which for many young people are barriers to seeking support” (Department of Education and Skills & Department of Health, 2013, p. V). The guidelines outline a whole-school approach to mental health promotion and suicide prevention, and the model is based on the WHO’s school model for mental health promotion, which is detailed in the guidelines. This was the first publication in the area of well-being to find its way into the formal schooling system in Ireland. The guidelines were also published at a time when there was a growing concern about suicide rates among teenagers. While the publication of these guidelines was a very positive step in promoting well-being in post-primary schools, the priority on mental health narrows the focus of well-being. Well-being is indeed synonymous with mental health, however, and the particular focus of the guidelines supported this concept.

In 2015, *Well-Being Guidelines in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* was published. It reflects an adjustment of the post-primary guidelines for the primary school context. There is little reference to suicide prevention and the focus on mental health is child-centred. The guidelines consider a number of both risk and protective factors for children that influence their mental health and well-being. As well as positive relationships with teachers and a sense of belonging and connectedness to school, a positive school climate is recognised as a key protective factor. While a copy of the guidelines was provided to all schools, the research study findings highlight that schools were not in fact familiar with the guidelines and were not using them to support the development of well-being practices in their schools.

Developments at the post-primary level continued in 2015, when the Department of Education and Skills (2015) published the *Framework for Junior Cycle*. The junior cycle is a three-year post-primary programme that culminates in a state examination. Well-being is one of the principles underpinning junior cycle education and incorporates the key skills of: staying well, communicating, working with others, and managing myself (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). This shows a definition not concerned solely with mental health but also with key social skills that enhance a sense of connectedness to others. Students also undertake learning in a new area entitled “well-being” throughout the three years of junior cycle. The associated curriculum guidelines were published in 2017. Recognising well-being as a discrete area of learning “will make the school’s culture and ethos and commitment to well-being visible to students” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2017, p. 8). The work of philosopher Nel Noddings is drawn upon to provide a rationale

for including well-being as a subject area in its own right; Noddings promotes care at the heart of human life and flourishing and, therefore, as an ethical ideal for education (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2017). She proposes that the primary aim of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring. The importance of teacher well-being is another central message of the guidelines, which recognise the importance of creating opportunities for teachers and staff to consider their own sense of well-being. The guidelines emphasise the importance of the whole school community building and sharing a common understanding of well-being. However, the guidelines recognise that arriving at a definition of well-being that communicates its multidimensional nature is a challenge. Given that much of the research and policy documentation defines well-being in psychological terms, it is often perceived as a combination of sustained positive feelings and attitudes. This approach presents challenges, as it ignores the fact that well-being and ill-being exist together as part of the human condition. Further, the individual is seen as solely responsible for their well-being regardless of the wider societal and contextual conditions that enable well-being to flourish (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2017). A definition should therefore communicate the multidimensional nature of well-being and consider it less as a state of being and more a process of well-becoming. The guidelines state that “student well-being is present when students realise their abilities, take care of their physical wellbeing, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and have a sense of purpose and belonging to a wider community” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2017, p. 17).

The new junior cycle is being implemented in schools. Well-being as a subject area began with 300 hours of timetabled engagement in 2017 and will increase to 400 hours by 2020. It will be important to evaluate developments in this area of learning once it becomes established practice in schools, in order to determine its success and provide direction for future well-being implementation.

In July 2018, the Department of Education and Skills (2018) launched the *Well-Being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023*. It is designed to provide an overarching structure in the area of well-being “encompassing existing, ongoing and developing work in this area” (p. 8). Schools are required to undertake a process of self-evaluation to implement the department’s well-being policy, and by 2023, all schools and centres for education are required to initiate a well-being promotion review and development cycle (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). Embedding well-being throughout the process of school self-evaluation places a strong focus on assessment results, which will be a challenging endeavour for schools. There are four key areas outlined in the document that schools must consider in well-being promotion: culture and environment, curriculum, policy and planning, and relationships and partnerships. The framework outlines statements of effective practice in these four areas and provides a standardised approach for schools to reviewing the area of well-being. This framework also highlights the Department of Education’s commitment to well-being.

In addition to policy development in terms of curriculum, well-being is also considered to have component parts that are frequently targeted as educational interventions. These include healthy-eating policies, increased attention to physical education

(PE), and a focus on social emotional skills and pro-social behaviour (Miller, Connolly, & Maguire, 2013). Considering national policy initiatives exploring well-being, educational policy documents influencing the well-being agenda, and the educational interventions provided in many schools, one might well assume that well-being is a developed concept in Irish primary schools. Anecdotal information, however, suggests otherwise. The current study sought to explore the relationship between policy and practice by investigating teachers' understanding of well-being and incorporating a focus on the challenges of embedding a culture of well-being in schools.

Current study

In response to the anecdotal confusion about the concept of well-being among teachers, a small-scale mixed-methods study was undertaken to ascertain the understanding of Irish primary school teachers on the concept of well-being, identify strategies currently in use to promote well-being, and specify the challenges, if any, of promoting well-being in primary schools. To this end, a series of workshops was organised for primary school teachers in three counties in Ireland in January 2017. The workshops took place over a six to seven week period and were organised through local education centres. The principal activities of education centres include the organisation and local delivery of teacher professional development. There are 21 full-time and nine part-time centres in Ireland. All primary school teachers across the counties were invited to attend. This included those teaching junior infants to sixth class (spanning ages four to twelve, approximately) and also those teaching pupils with special educational needs. The three counties in closest proximity to the university where the researchers are working were chosen. A central aspect of the research design was adopting a participatory approach.

Participatory research advocates for hearing the voice of the participant throughout the research process. Participatory research is rooted in pragmatism, and the researchers took a pragmatist view of participatory research. According to John Cresswell (2007), participatory research contains "an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which they live and work" (p. 23). The research was both recursive and dialectical and focused on supporting participants to bring about changes in practice in terms of implementing well-being in classroom and school life. This study sought to provide a voice for participants, both teachers and students. The study mirrored the key features of participatory practice identified by Stephen Kemmis and Mervyn Wilkinson (1998):

It was a recursive process. The study involved meeting teachers at three different continuing professional development (CPD) events as outlined in Table 1. Participants identified their CPD needs and clarified their preferences for the following workshop.

It was focused on bringing about positive changes in practice. As seen in Table 1, the second workshop involved action planning by participants. Rather than simply presenting information to teachers, the workshops focused on participants selecting strategies to suit their individual context. The outcomes of these action plans were discussed at the third workshop to highlight the barriers to implementation and facilitate group discussion on how such barriers might be overcome.

It was focused on individuals freeing themselves from constraints, in this case the focus on student academic outcomes. As there are so few suggestions by the Department of Education and Skills regarding how schools can measure well-being, it was important for teachers to be creative in how to measure their definition of well-being.

It was emancipatory. Teachers decided what they would develop within their own school context. It established a community of practice that facilitated open discussion about how well-being could be addressed and promoted.

It was collaborative. Each action was developed through consultation with others. Researchers provided basic guidelines regarding areas of well-being and then called on participants to identify issues within them. The teachers then went and developed an action plan, tried it out, and provided feedback. It ensured that actions were context-based and relevant for each participant’s unique environment.

Table 1: Overview of the workshop process for participants

Workshop	Topics addressed	Methodology
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of wellbeing • Understanding of well-being • Concerns about wellbeing • Current approaches to promoting well-being in schools • Perceived enablers and barriers to promoting well-being initiatives • Professional development needs for workshops two and three 	Group discussion with participants noting key points on charts
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a whole-school approach to well-being • Action planning • Professional development needs for workshop three 	Action plans
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback on action plans • Well-being across the continuum of need • Well-being through the curriculum • Well-being through the school atmosphere/climate • Developing self-management • Developing self-regulation • Supporting feelings and emotions 	Focus group discussions and questionnaires

As evident from Table 1, data was collected in a variety of ways across the three workshops. In the first workshop, participants were asked to work in small groups and record their responses to a series of questions relating to well-being on flip-chart sheets. Questions included: What does well-being mean to me? What factors contribute to well-being in individual children? Where does well-being sit in terms of the current curriculum? What do you do as a teacher to promote well-being in your class? What are the challenges, if any, in promoting well-being? What are my needs as a teacher in the area? These questions were developed following a review of the literature on well-being in education. In workshop three, a focus group discussion was held with each group of teachers. This gave participants an opportunity to discuss the progress of their action plans and elaborate on their thoughts in relation to well-being.

The discussion was recorded digitally. The teachers also completed a questionnaire during the third and final workshop. A total of 35 teachers attended the workshops, as detailed in Table 2. The data collected across the workshops was analysed thematically, following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) six-step framework.

Table 2. Details of workshop participants

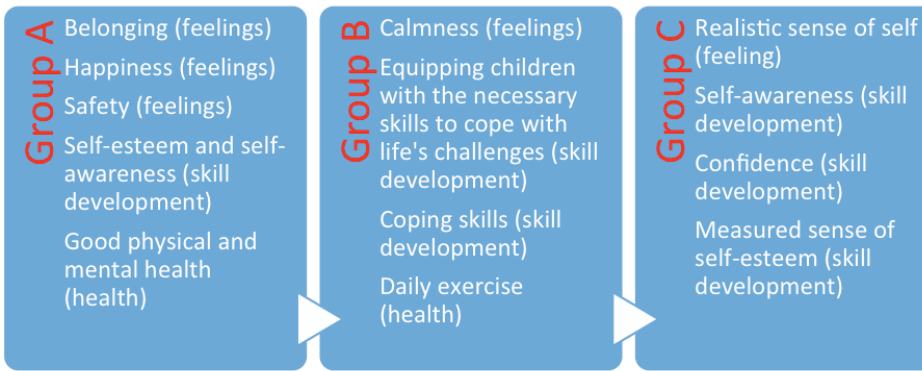
Participant	Gender	Education Centre	Participant	Gender	Education Centre
1	Female	A	18	Female	B
2	Female	A	19	Female	B
3	Male	A	20	Female	B
4	Female	A	21	Female	B
5	Female	A	22	Female	B
6	Female	A	23	Male	B
7	Female	A	24	Female	B
8	Female	A	25	Female	B
9	Female	A	26	Female	B
10	Female	A	27	Female	B
11	Female	A	28	Female	B
12	Female	A	29	Female	C
13	Male	A	30	Female	C
14	Female	A	31	Male	C
15	Female	A	32	Female	C
16	Female	A	33	Male	C
17	Female	A	34	Female	C
			35	Female	C

Results

What does well-being mean to me as a teacher?

The question ‘What does well-being mean to me as a teacher?’ was posed to the participants in all three workshops. In the first of the three workshops held in Education Centre A, teachers divided into groups of three or four. They separated into groups according to whether they worked in mainstream schools, special schools, or with students with special educational needs in mainstream schools and noted their responses on a flip-chart sheet. The themes that emerged included *skill development* for pupils, including self-esteem, self-awareness, confidence, responsibility, ability to cope, resilience, and social and communication skills. Interestingly, the teachers who worked in special schools identified skill development as core to well-being. Participants also identified the development of feelings, including a sense of happiness, safety, a sense of belonging, and compassion, as key to well-being. Health, both physical and mental, was also considered a component of well-being. Teachers’ responses varied somewhat in the different education centres. In Education Centre A, teacher responses focused on feelings, skill development, and health. This was similar in Education Centre B, however there was a stronger focus on skill development. In Education Centre C, the key focus was on skill development for pupils. Figure 1 summarises the responses across the three education centres.

**Figure 1: Summary of participants' responses to the question:
What does well-being mean to me as a teacher?**

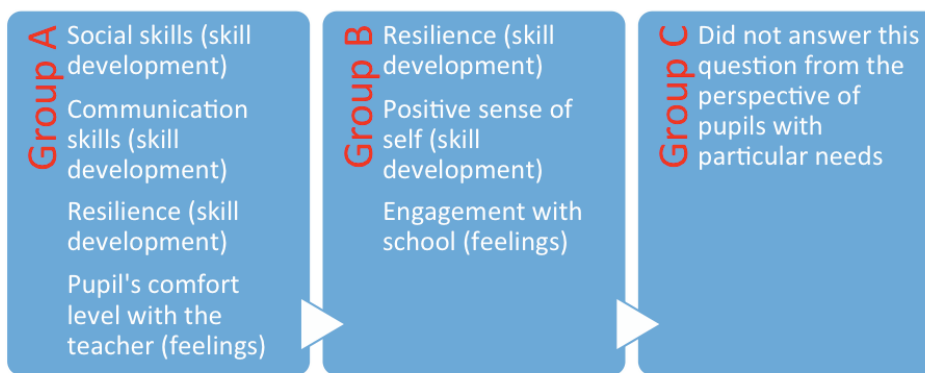


In the focus group discussions during the third workshop, teachers referred to how their understanding of well-being had developed across the workshop process, as reflected by Participant 27:

Yeah, I definitely find from the meeting of last week that I am more inclined to think about well-being as an area, rather just than running through life, do you know? I am thinking more specifically as having to cater for that area, you know, on its own.

When participants were asked to explore this question, the responses of teachers working in special schools or with pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools were based on their experiences of working with pupils with a variety of needs. These teachers in Education Centre A highlighted skill development, particularly social and communication skills, as inherent to well-being. They also noted that pupils' comfort levels with teachers enhanced their sense of well-being. Developing resilience skills was also regarded as core to well-being for pupils with particular needs. Indeed, these teachers in Education Centre B also identified skill development, particularly resilience, as core to well-being. They also noted the importance of pupils having a positive sense of self and being able to engage in school. There were fewer teachers in attendance in Education Centre C, so the teachers considered the needs of all pupils, rather than dividing into groups of mainstream and resource teachers. The responses are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Summary of participants' responses from teachers in special schools to the question: What does well-being mean to me as a teacher?



What are the challenges in promoting well-being in primary schools?

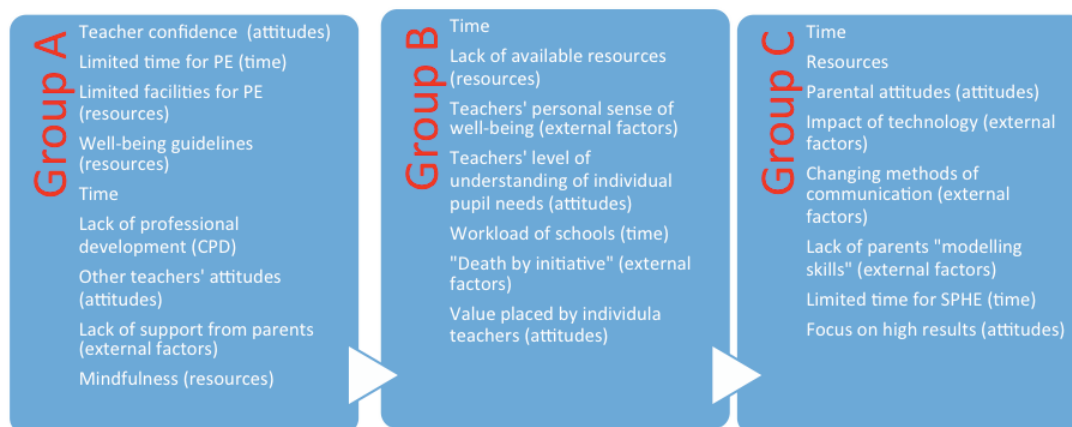
Participant teachers at all three education centres were asked to identify any challenges they experienced in promoting well-being at their school. As the question was

framed to consider all levels of challenge, the groups were rearranged to include a both mainstream and special educational needs teachers. All three education centres identified challenges in promoting well-being. The themes that emerged from the collated responses from the three workshops included time, attitudes, resources, the availability of CPD, and external factors. Factors relating to time included the limited time available for well-being, which was a common theme reported across all education centres. The limited time available for subjects that support well-being was also highlighted, particularly PE and SPHE. The workload of schools and teachers, which inevitably impacts on the time available for well-being, was also touched on.

In relation to attitudes, one challenge was teacher confidence in the area of well-being. Furthermore, teachers' level of understanding of pupil's individual needs was considered a challenge in dealing with well-being, as was teachers' ability to respond appropriately to the widening variety of needs presenting in the classroom. Participants also considered parental attitudes to well-being, as well as the varying attitudes of colleagues and other teachers in the school. The focus on high results and assessment grades was noted as a further challenge.

A number of challenging factors emerged relating to resources to support well-being. These included the facilities currently available for the provision of PE and the lack of available resources in general to support well-being. The well-being guidelines were also noted as a challenge, as they did not provide enough guidance for teachers. Mindfulness was also considered a challenge, as teachers attending Education Centre A considered it as the only resource/approach to address well-being, rather than one of many.

**Figure 3: Summary of participants' responses to the question:
What are the challenges in promoting well-being in primary schools?'**

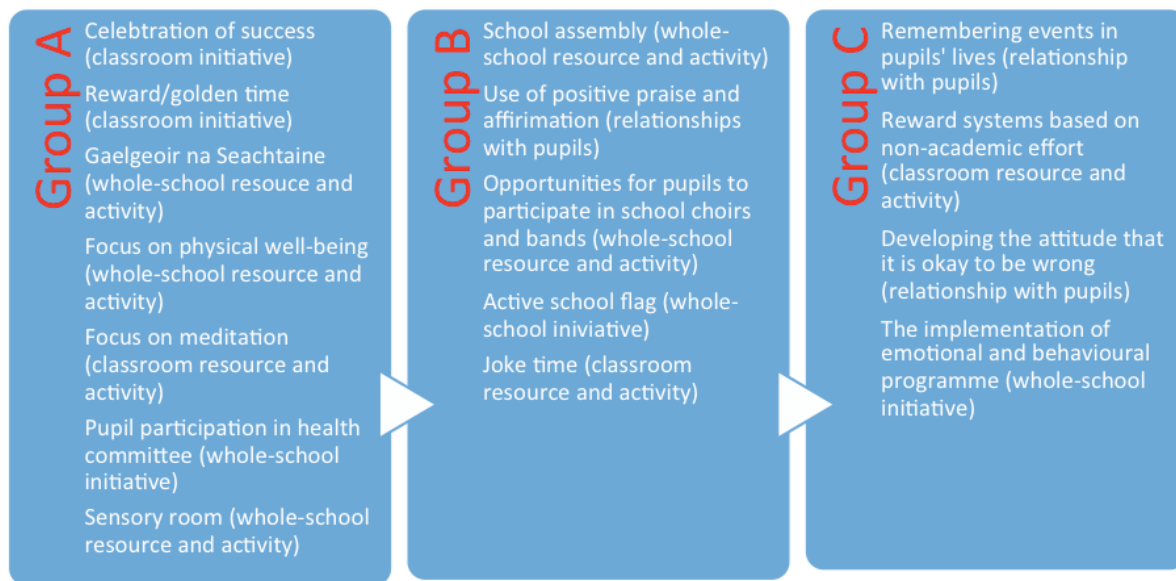


Participants cited the availability of relevant CPD for teachers as a challenge. Finally, a number of external factors were highlighted as challenges. These included: the lack of support from parents in promoting well-being, a perceived lack of modelling coping skills by parents, and teachers' own senses of well-being. Participants also noted the number of initiatives being promoted by schools (which they found overwhelming), the impact of technology on young people's lives, and the changing methods of communication in today's society as challenges. Figure 3 summarises the findings by group. Across the three education centres, there was certainly a wide-ranging and diverse list of challenges presented in relation to promoting well-being in the primary school.

What do I do as a teacher to promote well-being in my class?

Teachers across all three workshops were also asked to share strategies they use to promote well-being at the class level. The themes collated from their responses were: whole-school initiatives, whole-school resources and activities, classroom initiatives, classroom resources and activities, and a focus on relationships with pupils. A range of whole-school initiatives was identified, including the involvement and participation of pupils on committees, involvement in initiatives such as the active school flag (which details the school’s participation in PE and sport), and the implementation of an emotional and behavioural programme across the school. Participants highlighted whole-school resources and activities that included a focus on physical well-being, such as *Gaelgeoir na Seachtaine* (Irish speaker of the week), a sensory room in the school, student assemblies, and opportunities for students to participate in extra-curricular activities, such as the school choir and band. Participants also highlighted classroom initiatives, including the celebration of success through rewards and “golden time” for pupils. They also highlighted classroom resources and activities, including a focus on meditation and “joke time” as a weekly feature of classroom life (see Figure 4). In terms of relationship building with pupils, participants identified strategies such as positive praise and affirmation, remembering special events in pupils’ lives, and developing the attitude that it is okay to be wrong.

Figure 4: Summary of participants’ responses to the question: What do I do as a teacher to promote well-being in my class?



In the focus group discussions, which were a component of the third workshop, it was clear teachers were really focused on implementing well-being practices in their classrooms:

We had a no school bag day in *Rang a Sé* [sixth class] ... there was no school bag coming in the following day. Even though they were all working the following day, it was just different. They thought it was a huge event, which was great because it wasn't. It worked a treat anyway. (Participant 3)

I'm a resource/learning support teacher, I'm just conscious now of using our sensory room more often than I would have before, and I'm trying to encourage other people on the staff to use it more and try to encourage them to use it for, not necessarily the children with specific needs, just for time out. (Participant 28)

Discussion

The findings from the current research highlight the gap that exists between national educational policy in the area of well-being and day-to-day practice in schools. While the junior cycle well-being guidelines acknowledge that the multidimensional nature of well-being presents challenges in terms of definition and interpretation, the feedback from teachers highlights that well-being is open to multiple interpretations. This is very apparent when reflecting on the findings from teachers in the three different education centres. Some teachers consider well-being related to health, others as the development of skills in pupils, and still others as the development of empathy. Even though the three groups of teachers agreed upon some components of well-being, there were many varying factors, which serve to augment the need for the whole school community to develop an agreed-upon understanding of well-being. It also highlights the need for national CPD for teachers in the area of well-being. Reflecting on the findings from teachers in special schools and teachers in mainstream schools working with pupils with special educational needs, it is apparent that a continuum of need exists in relation to well-being. The well-being guidelines for primary schools (Department of Education and Department of Health, 2015) recommend that schools adopt the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) continuum of support model as a structure for the promotion of well-being and mental health. The continuum can be represented by three levels: support for all, support for some, and support for a few. While workshop findings illustrate that, in practice, teachers differentiate support for pupils along a continuum, the teachers did not make reference to the continuum of support or the national well-being guidelines supporting their practice at the school level. Furthermore, teachers presented a very broad interpretation of well-being, in comparison to the guidelines, which have a prominent focus on mental health. Interestingly, the teachers' definition of well-being reflected the broad principles of the primary school curriculum and showed well-being as supporting the holistic development of the child.

The findings from the workshops identified many challenges in promoting well-being at the primary school level. The importance of addressing teacher well-being and considering the care and needs of the teacher who is at the frontline of supporting students is a very important consideration emanating from the research findings. This is endorsed in the well-being guidelines for junior cycle (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2017), which recommends that opportunities are created for staff to reflect on their own needs while planning for well-being. However, primary school well-being guidelines do not address teacher well-being. Indeed, as the findings from this research illustrate, contextual factors such as policy initiatives shape teacher well-being. The teachers from all three education centres who participated in the research identified time pressure as a real barrier to implementation

and certainly the Irish curriculum is perceived as overloaded. National policy initiatives with a strong focus on national assessment results and trends, such as the implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategy in recent years, have led to an increased performative culture in schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), which does not provide the ideal conditions or environment for well-being to flourish.

An interesting contradiction emerged from the research findings. While teachers expressed feeling that a limited amount of time was allocated for both SPHE and PE per week, and time was identified as one of the main challenges to implementing well-being, teachers also welcomed the idea of a programme that would address well-being. Given that PE and SPHE in particular are two of the core subject areas that support the development of well-being at school, teachers seemed to be looking beyond the curriculum for a solution to implementing well-being. This is further emphasised by the fact that none of the teachers referred to implementing the Aistear curriculum in the early years, even though well-being is a central theme of that framework. These findings reinforce the multiple levels of understanding and interpretation associated with well-being. The well-being guidelines for primary school argue that “Social, Personal and Health education is central to pupil development in its broadest sense and is an essential part of school curricula” (Department of Education and Skills & Department of Health and Children, 2015, p. 15). The importance of implementing the SPHE curriculum, which includes a focus on whole-school approaches to well-being, is endorsed across the continuum of support. These findings again confirm the lack of awareness of the national well-being guidelines and further illustrate the disconnect between national policy and daily practice.

It is evident from the study findings that the teachers who participated in the workshop are doing a lot of work to promote the well-being of their students, although prior to the workshop they did not identify many of their actions and approaches as components of well-being development. Furthermore, the examples provided by the teachers illustrated that many components of pupil well-being are being addressed, including taking care of physical well-being, supporting pupils to develop strategies to cope with the stresses of life, and ensuring pupils have a sense of belonging to the school community. What the feedback did highlight, however, is that in most of the schools there is no real structure to addressing well-being; it happens in a more ad hoc way. It was while reflecting on what they do to promote well-being in their classrooms that many teachers began to realise they were supporting this area of children’s learning and development in a holistic way. The development of a conceptual framework encompassing the multidimensional elements of well-being would help to support teachers and schools to structure an approach to well-being responsive to the needs of students, similar to the junior cycle well-being guidelines (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2017). This is also recommended in the recently published *Well-Being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (Department of Education and Skills, 2018).

The focus on mental health promotion is the dominant discourse in the well-being guidelines for primary schools. Listening to the voices of practising teachers has demonstrated that a focus on the physical, spiritual, and emotional components

of well-being, where pupils are provided with opportunities to feel included, respected, safe, and nurtured, is equally important. There is a danger in aligning well-being purely with mental health, as this fails to account for the holistic developing needs of pupils both physically, socially, spiritually, and emotionally.

Given that well-being is a national priority in Ireland, and indeed an international priority, this research has promoted a timely discussion of the well-being guidelines and the disconnect between policy and practice. In considering how to bridge the gap between the language of policy and the culture of schools, listening to the voice of practising teachers has raised important considerations.

Website

Growing up in Ireland: National longitudinal study of children, www.growingup.ie

References

- Awartani, M., & Looney J. (2015). *Learning and well-being: An agenda for change*. Doha, QA: World Innovation Summit for Education.
- Braun, V., & Clarke V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77–101.
- Cresswell, J.W. (2007). *Qualitative enquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crosnoe, R. (2007). Gender, obesity and education. *Sociology of Education*, 80(3), 241–260.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs. (2014). *Better outcomes, brighter futures: The national policy framework for children and young people*. Retrieved January 4, 2019, from https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/cypp_framework/BetterOutcomesBetterFutureReport.pdf.
- Department of Education & Department of Health. (2000). *Our children – their lives*. (Dublin) Retrieved January 1, 2019, from <https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/Aboutus/stratfullenglishversion.pdf>.
- Department of Education and Skills. (2011). *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life: The national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people, 2011–2020*. (Dublin)
- Department of Education and Skills & Department of Health and Children. (2013). *Well being in post-primary schools: Guidelines for mental health promotion and suicide prevention*. Retrieved January 8, 2019, from https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Well_Being_PP_Schools_Guidelines.pdf.
- Department of Education and Skills & Department of Health and Children. (2015). *Well-being primary schools: Guidelines for mental health promotion*. Retrieved January 8, 2019, from <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Well-Being-in-Primary-Schools-Guidelines-for-Mental-Health-Promotion.pdf>.
- Department of Education and Skills. (2015). *Framework for junior cycle*. Retrieved January 12, 2019, from <https://www.ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle>.
- Department of Education and Skills. (2018). *Well-being policy statement and framework for practice 2018–2023*. Retrieved January 19, 2019, from <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/wellbeing-policy-statement-and-framework-for-practice-2018%E2%80%932023.pdf>.
- Department of Health. (2013). *Healthy Ireland: A framework for improved health and wellbeing, 2013–2025*. Retrieved January 7, 2019, from <http://health.gov.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2014/03/HealthyIrelandBrochureWA2.pdf>.
- Government of Ireland. (1999). *Social personal & health education curriculum*. Dublin, IE: Stationery Office.
- Growing up in Ireland. (2018). *National longitudinal study of children*. Retrieved January 5, 2019, from <http://www.esri.ie/growing-up-in-ireland/>.

- Hanafin, S., & Brooks, AM. (2005). *Report on the development of a set of national child well-being indicators in Ireland*. Retrieved January 13, 2019, from http://www.most.ie/webreports/Fatima%20reports/New%20Folderjulyend/Report_on_the_Development_of_a_set_of_Child_Well_Being_Indicators.pdf.
- Kemmis, S., & Wilkinson, M. (1998). Participatory action research and the study of practice. In B. Atweh, S. Kemmis, & P. Weeks (Eds.), *Action research in practice: Partnership for social justice in education* (pp. 21–36). London, UK: Routledge.
- Miller, S., Connolly, P., & Maguire, L.K., (2013). Wellbeing, academic buoyancy and educational achievement in primary school students. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 62(6) 239–248.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2008). *Primary curriculum review, phase 2*. Retrieved January 19, 2019, from http://www.ncca.ie/en/Publications/Reports/Primary_Curriculum_Review_Phase_2_Final_report_with_recommendations.pdf.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2009). *Aistear framework*. Retrieved January 19, 2019, from http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Early_Childhood_Education/Framework_for_early_learning/.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2017). *Junior cycle well-being guidelines*. Retrieved January 22, 2019, from http://www.juniorcycle.ie/NCCA_JuniorCycle/media/NCCA/Curriculum/Wellbeing/Wellbeing-Guidelines-for-Junior-Cycle.pdf.
- Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. (2009). *Growing up in Ireland, national longitudinal study of children, the lives of 9 year olds*. Retrieved January 14, 2019, from http://www.most.ie/webreports/Fatima%20reports/New%20Folderjulyend/Report_on_the_Development_of_a_set_of_Child_Well_Being_Indicators.pdf.
- Sabia, J.J., & Rees D.I. (2015). Body weight, mental health capital, and academic achievement. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 13(3), 653–684.
- Solari, C.D., & Mare R.D. (2012). Housing crowding effects on children’s wellbeing. *Social Science Research*, 41(2) 464–476.
- Tynan F, & Nohilly M. (2018). *Wellbeing in school’s everyday (WISE): A whole-school approach to the practical implementation of wellbeing*. Mary Immaculate College, Ireland: Curriculum Development Unit.