

# The Wellbeing and Values In-School Project

## Designing a wellbeing and values programme for primary school children

### Introduction

All schools are mandated to promote wellbeing through the school self-evaluation process (DES, 2018). The Department of Education provides no prescribed curriculum, so each school must create their own wellbeing programme. It recommends a whole-school approach comprising universal and targeted levels of intervention, as set out by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS, 2007; DES, 2019).

In a busy primary-school environment, teachers are under pressure to deliver overloaded curricula and meet stringent time pressures and multiple demands. They struggle to source and refine appropriate materials and resources to meet their students' wellbeing needs. This article shares insights from a practitioner project that sought to work with teachers in their school contexts to design and develop a detailed, year-long, whole-school wellbeing and values programme.



**Susan Brophy**

Special Education Teacher, Holy Cross NS

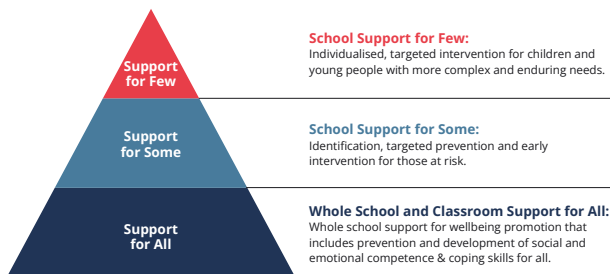


Figure 1: NEPS Framework

This article describes the design and implementation of a programme of interventions to support the development of independent wellbeing skills among younger children in primary education. Teachers used innovative pedagogies that empowered children to become self-directed, self-regulated learners. By reinforcing universal human values through quotes, songs, and stories, the children learned to build on their strengths, take control of their feelings and emotions, and develop their inner moral compass.

## The Literature

Definitions of wellbeing in children are problematic, because it is not constant and can vary from child to child and from moment to moment (Svane et al., 2019; Vujčić et al., 2019). As a result, solutions and programmes informed by both academic and practitioner research are difficult to find, particularly on providing teachers with the resources to help them support young children in the development of appropriate wellbeing or coping strategies.

The inextricable link between emotion and cognition must be recognised in order for learning to be truly holistic (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Eustace & McHugh, 2022). The cognitive processes of learning, decision-making, and problem-solving, used widely in schools, are all affected by emotion. These emotional processes are necessary for the child to develop an ‘emotional rudder’ or inner moral compass. Regular mindfulness practice helps children comprehend their mind-body connection more fully. It allows them take control of their emotions, trust their moral compass, boost their self-esteem, and strengthen their resilience.

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*‘I consider time a challenge for teachers, but the Plan is very accommodating, so this should help with organising it, as the information and resources are ready to go!’ (Teacher)*

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*Phase One:* This action learning project took place during 2021–2022 in a large co-education urban primary school. A customised wellbeing programme (the ‘Plan’) for all classes provided: a year-long multimodal values pedagogy for the holistic development of children from all classes; targeted support for an at-risk cohort with additional needs; and universal support for all children.

Class teachers, special education teachers (SETs), deputy principal, and parents all contributed to designing, developing, and refining the Plan, which comprised songs, stories, quotes, mindful activities, guided visualisations, breathing exercises, and coping techniques. Children who needed extra support were provided with small-group wellbeing sessions (focused interventions) by the SET. They were encouraged to write about a particular value and what it meant to them, to share their story at home, and with the SET and their peers in the small-group session the following week.

Positive affirmations from family, teachers, and peers provided a triangulation of support for the children, who each week built up a positive picture of themselves. Teacher buy-in was critical to our success. To avoid adding to teachers’ workload and ensure their engagement with the Plan, we made it

*This is so child-centered, with the lovely variety of different video clips. They are all there for you. That's the highlight. You can go in, find the link, put it on, and the children are engaged. It's so age-appropriate.'*

easy to implement, delivered teacher training and support, and provided hyperlinked content with easy access to additional resources.

*Phase Two:* A research grant from the Teaching Council enabled further development of the Plan during 2022–2023 that specifically targeted children from Infants to First Class and an at-risk cohort with additional needs in the original school and a second, smaller, rural primary school. This revised Plan also met the specific need of developing children's coping skills and strategies for use in the schoolyard and other social situations. Teachers in both schools

found that the Plan's non-prescriptive nature gave them autonomy as professionals to choose and apply the resources with the children in their group as they saw fit.



Figure 2: Components of the Wellbeing and Values Plan

## Discussion

All children need to be resilient. Resilience training is not just for at-risk groups (Forman, 2021; Eustace & McHugh, 2022). Both school communities recognised the need for a customised, detailed Plan to help children develop coping skills and strategies to deal with life's uncertainties. Having a Plan was essential to meet the specific needs of schools facing unique or localised challenges.

The teacher's role goes beyond teaching and plays an important part in student wellbeing. Developing new pedagogical practices is a necessary part of the

teacher's role in implementing a whole-school wellbeing plan; especially for younger classes and children at risk.

## Final thoughts

In today's ever-changing, always-on world, it can be increasingly difficult for children to explore that space, to find the time to choose a response, to simply be in the moment and balance life's challenges with the resources within themselves.

Teaching children the skills of mindful breathing and the power of positive thinking, and reinforcing human values through songs and stories, can empower them to become self-directed, self-regulated learners, building on their strengths, learning how to take control of their feelings and emotions and helping them develop the resilience and mental strength necessary to deal with the pressures of modern life. Recommendations from the study include the need to provide a complete, fully functioning Wellbeing Resource Pack for teachers, and more detailed training for special education teachers with the focus on at-risk children.

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Scoil Chaitríona Junior, Renmore, Galway, was named as the national winner of the Explorers Ocean Champion School Awards 2023 for their Healthy Ocean project, 'Caring for our Ocean'.

Mick Gillooly, Interim CEO of the Marine Institute said:

"The children's enthusiasm was evident in many ways: in their shadow puppetry films, when they went on beach cleans, and in their musical performance 'Fadhb na Mara' about ocean conservation. Their work was exceptional."