

# Defining Wellbeing in Irish Post-Primary Schools

## Introduction

There is a lack of consensus in the literature on what wellbeing is and how it should be defined (Burke, 2020). Definitions are blurred and too broad to understand (Forgeard et al., 2011). This can have adverse consequences when perceptions of the term are not addressed (Thorburn, 2018).

Though wellbeing is not a new concept, it has become more important in the educational context in recent times, evident in its inclusion on agendas of international organisations such as the UN (1989), UNICEF (2016), and WHO (2020). Nonetheless, teachers and school management struggle to grasp its meaning (Doran et al., 2023), which makes the implementation of a wellbeing policy and framework in schools more difficult (Camfield et al., 2009).

## The research

The research described here focused on how teacher wellbeing is perceived by key stakeholders, principals, deputy principals, and teachers in post-primary schools in Ireland. Phase two examined the similarities and differences in these perceptions of wellbeing. All key stakeholders in post-primary education in Ireland were invited to participate, and participants included the Teaching Council, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI), Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI), Joint Managerial Body for Voluntary Secondary Schools (JMB), Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), principals, deputy principals, and teachers.

Through the lens of dialectical pluralism, 13 interviews and a focus group were used to gather further data. Principals and deputy principals were from Munster and Leinster and had a variety of management experience, up to 20 years. The focus group consisted of seven post-



**Dr Annemarie Doran**

Assistant Professor, Hibernia College

---

**The lack of consensus on a definition of wellbeing makes implementation of a wellbeing policy and framework in schools more difficult. This article explores the problem by reporting on the findings of a research study involving a wide range of educational stakeholders. It stresses the importance of a collaborative and agreed definition of wellbeing in the educational context.**

---

primary teachers from seven different schools. Participants were aged 23–60, with teaching experience ranging from less than one year to over 20 years. They were employed in both private and public schools (Education and Training Boards, voluntary secondary schools, and community colleges), in areas with widely varying socioeconomic circumstances. Thematic analysis was used to determine the key themes, including how wellbeing is defined.

## Findings

The findings showed that to enable a school to follow a wellbeing policy and framework, a clear definition of wellbeing is imperative, as there are adverse consequences when individual perceptions of the term are not addressed (Thorburn, 2018) and when a common definition is not outlined to ensure that everyone is working towards a common goal.

The research found confusion among all participating groups about the definition of wellbeing in the school context, with little empirical evidence on the definition of teachers' wellbeing and limited knowledge on how it is measured (McCallum et al., 2017). It is widely accepted that wellbeing is important in the school environment, with links to students' outcomes, yet there is still much confusion about what it means.

While it is clear that wellbeing is a growing concept, theory-based formulations of wellbeing are absent in both research and practice. The lack of a clear definition creates difficulties for many aspects of school culture, including management decisions, legal responsibility, and blurred boundaries of accountability. It was well noted in the findings that wellbeing is also a personal journey and something that all participating groups aim for, yet it is unique to everyone.

The research stresses the importance of a collaborative approach from all key stakeholders on agreeing to a definition of wellbeing, and the need to embrace a series of components. Participants acknowledged how fluid and diverse wellbeing can be. It can be relative to a teacher's career stage and experience, as it encompasses individual elements that interact across a lifespan (McCallum & Price, 2016). Wellbeing can perhaps then be described only in very broad terms.

The study emphasised the difficulty of defining wellbeing in the school context, because it is experienced differently by different people. This relates to Dierner's (2009) definition, where wellbeing needs to be considered in relation to how an individual – in this context a teacher – feels and functions across several areas, such as cognitive, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. This approach is supported by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), which stresses the importance of studying an

---

*The research stresses the importance of a collaborative approach from all key stakeholders on agreeing to a definition of wellbeing.*

---

*Study participants are challenging principals and deputy principals to centre teacher wellbeing as an integral part of the school's community structures.*

individual in the context of the multiple environments in which they are positioned (Darling, 2007), not just one specific setting.

## Conclusion

When formulating a definition for teacher wellbeing, perhaps the key stakeholders need to consider it in this context. Schools are central to promoting the wellbeing of children, young people, and teachers, so it is no surprise that the study participants are challenging the educational stakeholders, particularly principals and deputy principals, to centre teacher wellbeing as both a foundation to and an integral part of the school's community structures. To achieve this, however, a collaborative and agreed definition of wellbeing needs to exist. This is the challenge, and it is necessary in order to move forward in supporting teacher wellbeing effectively.

## REFERENCES

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992) 'Ecological systems theory'. In: U. Bronfenbrenner (Ed.) (2005), *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development*, pp. 106–173. Sage.
- Burke, J. (2020) *The Ultimate Guide to Implementing Wellbeing Programmes for Schools*. Routledge.
- Camfield, L., Streuli, N., and Woodhead, M. (2009) 'What's the use of "well-being" in contexts of child poverty? Approaches to research, monitoring and children's participation', *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 17, 65–109.
- Darling, N. (2007) 'Ecological systems theory: The person in the centre of the circles', *Research in Human Development*, 4(3–4), 203–217.
- Diener, E. (2009) *Assessing Wellbeing: The Collected Works of Ed Diener*, vol. 331. Springer.
- Doran, A., Burke, J., and Healy, C. (2023) 'The domino effect: The impact of school leadership on teachers' wellbeing', *Irish Teachers' Journal*, vol. 11.
- Forgeard, M.J., Jayawickreme, E., Kern, M.L., and Seligman, M.E. (2011) 'Doing the right thing: Measuring wellbeing for public policy', *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 1(1).
- McCallum, F., Price, D., Graham, A., and Morrison, A. (2017) 'Teacher wellbeing: A review of the literature'. Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales.
- McCallum, F. and Price, D. (Eds.) (2016) *Nurturing Wellbeing Development in Education: From Little Things, Big Things Grow*. Routledge.
- Thorburn, M. (Ed.) (2018) *Wellbeing, Education and Contemporary Schooling*. Routledge.
- UNICEF (2016) *Strategy for Health 2016–2030*. New York.
- United Nations (UN) (1989) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Geneva: UN publications.
- World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) 'Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak'. 18 March. Geneva: WHO. [www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-MentalHealth-2020.1](http://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-MentalHealth-2020.1).