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Qualitative Assessment of the Irish 2018 Wellbeing Framework in Education

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Abstract

Recent evidence shows increasing wellbeing and mental health difficulties among young people in Ireland (Carroll et al., 2024) and internationally (WHO, 2021). This evidence emerges against the backdrop of significant policy focus, with the Department of Education publishing the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice in 2018 aiming to improve wellbeing initiatives in Irish primary and post-primary schools. This paper presents a qualitative analysis of stakeholder perspectives on the objectives and implementation of the policy. A theoretical sampling framework was applied, and semi-structured interviews conducted with diverse voices within the system including policy makers in the department of education; specialist educational service providers; school leaders and teachers; students; parents and academics. Results indicate that stakeholders were positive about the benefit of having a framework for future directions and decisions. However, several stakeholders reiterated the same challenge in translating the policy into effective school practices, often underpinned by a lack of teacher professional development and competing demands on resources. The policy has faced particular challenges due to the pandemic, which has created a need for reflections on the future shape of the policy. Including the voice of stakeholders, particularly students, will be critical in supporting effective development of the policy.

1. Introduction

This report provides a case study of the Irish Wellbeing in Schools Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018), which forms part of the interim evaluation of the European Education Area (EEA; European Commission, 2021). The EEA initiative structures collaboration between European Union Member States and key stakeholders to improve education and training systems in Europe (European Commission, 2021). The EEA targets five priority areas: quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training; lifelong learning and mobility; green and digital transitions; competence and motivation in the education profession; and higher education reinforcement. The Irish Wellbeing in Schools Policy Statement and Framework for Practice, first published by the Department of Education and Skills in 2018, provides a definition of wellbeing and an overarching structure for the area of wellbeing in Irish primary and post-primary schools. The policy states that schools play a key role in developing and enhancing young people's wellbeing, and underpinned by existing evidence, suggests the most beneficial forms of wellbeing promotion in schools are best achieved through preventative, whole school approaches. The policy outlines the key areas of wellbeing in education on which schools are advised to focus, the indicators of success in each of these key areas and statements of effective practice to guide schools. Resources to support schools have also been developed to accompany the policy. While the policy document was published prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the framework has largely been implemented during and post pandemic, which has had a significant negative impact on youth mental health globally (Viner et al., 2022). In this case study, we provide a brief overview of the policy and present key qualitative evidence, gathered through stakeholder interviews, on the objectives and implementation of the policy.

2. Methodology

During the month of June 2024, we conducted online semi-structured interviews with nine stakeholders. We used a theoretical sampling framework to identify participants that represented the following stakeholder groups: government department; specialist educational services; parent and student representative bodies; academics; school leaders and teachers. The interviews explored the conception of the Statement and Framework for Practice and how it is situated in the wider Irish and European context; the implementation of this policy in practice; whether the policy meets the needs it is designed to address within the education system; particular strengths or challenges in practice; comments on the wider issue of wellbeing in the current young generation; and potential future directions for wellbeing policy at national and European level. Semi-structured interviews afforded each participant the opportunity to relate their experiences and unique interpretations, unconfined by a more structured approach. All interviews within the case study were conducted by members of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) research team, recorded, by consent, and transcribed verbatim. Below, we structure findings from our case study into background of the policy, implementation, impact, state of youth wellbeing, and concluding remarks.

3. Background of the reform

According to the Department of Education (2018) in Ireland, wellbeing is comprised of many interrelated aspects including being active, responsible, connected, resilient, appreciated, respected and aware. The following definition of wellbeing has been adopted, which aims to take account of its multi-dimensional nature (World Health Organisation, 2001):

> *"Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community".*

It is viewed as a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life. The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education and Skills, 2018)

recognises that wellbeing does not necessarily mean the absence of stress, or negative emotions in life, and that people's experience of wellbeing may vary, with everyone experiencing vulnerability at some stages in their journey through life. Wellbeing is experienced at a personal level but is associated with and connected to a broad range of risk and protective factors that exist at the individual, relational, community, cultural and societal levels. This aligns with definitions used by international agencies such as the WHO and is grounded in an ecological model of human development prominent in developmental science (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The policy reflected and developed on a range of existing policies in primary and post-primary schools, including the National Children's Strategy (2000); the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014); the Wellbeing in Post Primary Schools (2013) and Wellbeing in Primary Schools (2016). The policy also drew on key guidance and objectives from the World Health Organization (WHO) Wellbeing Framework for Practice and OECD, PISA, Growing Up in Ireland and Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children studies. While there is no evidence that the reform was inspired by the European Union's Education and Training Monitor 2020 or its successor the EEA, the vision is aligned with the one set under the EEA strategic framework. While not informed by EC frameworks, the Irish wellbeing policy reflects wider EEA objectives, particularly as presented in recent guidelines for policymakers and educators (European Commission, 2024a, 2024b). This is particularly evident in the EEA emphasis on a whole-school approach to wellbeing, including the voice of young people in shaping their learning experience and wellbeing, taking account of additional resources needed for teacher professional development and the importance of monitoring and evaluation.

The vision and ambition of policy statement set out that by 2023 (changed to 2025 due to the Covid-19 pandemic) wellbeing would be at the core of every school's ethos; all schools and education centres would provide evidence-informed approaches; and Ireland would be recognised as a leader in this area (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). Of note, Ireland's wellbeing policy, along with Finland's student welfare policy, was explicitly named as an example of 'inspiring practices' in the recent Wellbeing Guidelines for Education Policymakers (European Commission, 2024a)'.

The Policy and Framework takes a Whole School Approach that (a) includes four key areas of wellbeing:
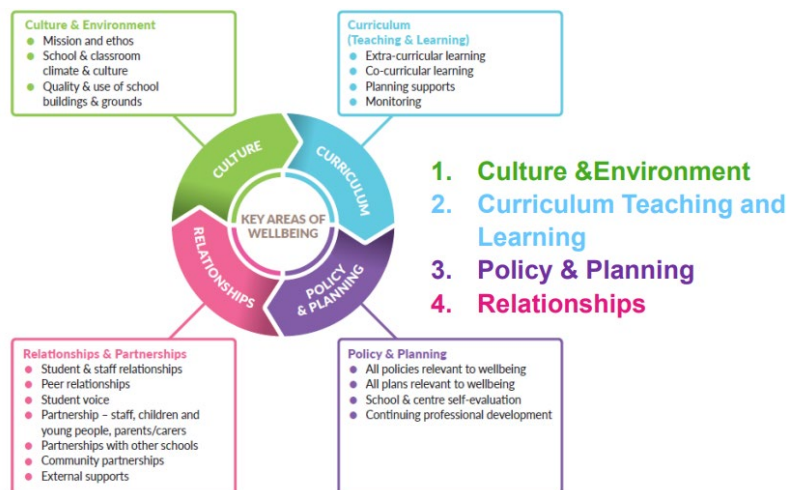
and (b) uses a continuum of support that includes universal and targeted approaches:
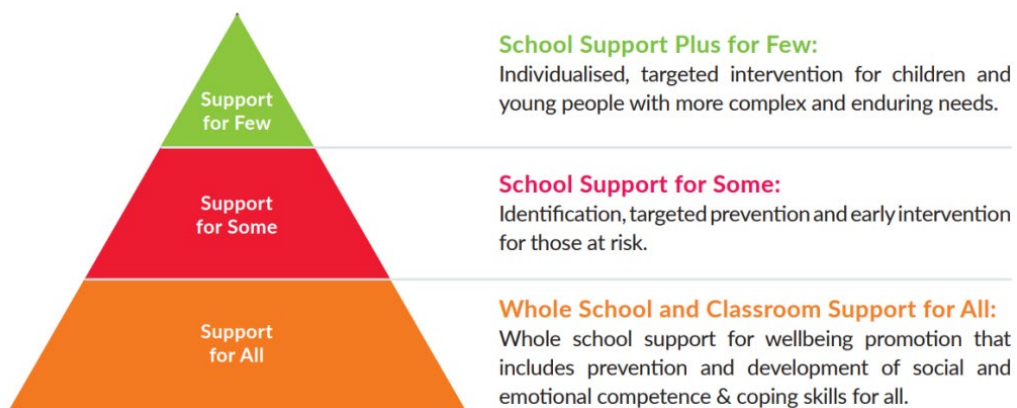
The Policy Statement and Framework (2018) states that it is guided by key principles, which in turn underpin its implementation and monitoring:

- 'The wellbeing needs and the best interests of children and young people are a central focus. This requires respect and value of the voice of children and young people and fostering their belonging and connectedness to the school community.

- All children and young people need access to equitable, fair, and inclusive opportunities to develop their wellbeing in ways that are responsive and suitable to their needs and contexts. Practices need to be tailored, responsive and relevant, building on the existing strengths of children and young people, school staff, families, and school communities. This means that practices will vary across schools and centres for education and from student to student.

- The policy promotes the use of evidence-informed practice, which brings together local experience and expertise with the best available evidence from research. It acknowledges that what works in one context may not be appropriate or feasible in another.

- The policy promotes continuous improvement practices and the use of data relating to outcomes to guide practice in our schools in relation to the promotion of wellbeing for all children and young people. The policy and framework for practice aims to ensure the use of a self-reflection process for the identification, monitoring, and review of outcomes.

- The wellbeing of children and young people is seen as a shared responsibility. Working in partnership with other departments and agencies is key to ensuring this policy is implemented'.

To implement this policy every school and centre for education is required by 2023 (extended to 2025 due to the Covid-19 pandemic), to use the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) process to

initiate a wellbeing promotion review and development cycle. Schools and centres for education will be supported in this process through using the Wellbeing Practice Framework and online Wellbeing Resources, and by the Department of Education Support Services. This should involve the development, implementation, and review of wellbeing promotion in their schools, which includes tracking impact. The policy acknowledges that wellbeing is challenging to measure and evaluate, but provided some suggested measures for success, including attendance, school completions, school transitions, internal data such as surveys and consultations within the school body, and inspection reports.

4. Findings

This section outlines the qualitative findings from our thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews.

4.1. Ambition of the Policy

Reflecting on the context for the Statement and Framework for Practice, stakeholders noted that prior to the introduction of the Statement and Framework for Practice, schools differed in their level of engagement and perspectives of wellbeing:

> *At the time there was a lot of difference in how schools were perceiving wellbeing. I was in Donegal; wellbeing was not that much of a focus. My school, all boys school, very much sporty folk, you know you deal with your own problems by yourself. In another school you might have the guidance counsellor playing a more proactive role in interacting with the students.* Student

Echoing these perspectives, stakeholders noted that the Statement and Framework acted to bring together several existing practices around the area of wellbeing in schools:

There was a lot being done and it was about trying to pull that together and put it into a comprehensive strategy. Parent

Several stakeholders were in support of the ambition of the policy and emphasised the central importance of wellbeing in learning and student engagement:

Wellbeing is so essential to education. I mean it's the first point. If a child is feeling stressed, anxious in any way, mentally unwell, then their ability to learn is gone. It's absolutely the way our education system should be, they should be prioritising wellbeing for learning. So, I'd be strongly endorsing it as a way forward and even although I have criticism of it, this was the first document. Parent

4.2. Implementation of the Policy

Our analysis and reports from stakeholders find several areas of progress in the policy implementation. The Department reported on the strengths of the policy, including the inter-departmental collaborative approach taken, the building of necessary administrative structures, the focus on professional development to build capacity, the additional supports provided for schools such as Student Support Teams (Department of Education, 2021d) and Teacher Wellbeing (Department of Education, 2019), and the alignment of the policy with other wellbeing initiatives such as the Junior Cycle wellbeing reforms. It is positive to note that a new implementation plan is currently being devised, which will be underpinned by a review, to include contributions from schools, school management bodies and students. Challenges have also emerged and are largely acknowledged by the Department, which augers well for the review process ahead. In particular, the Department noted that a cross-departmental approach takes time, the Covid-19 pandemic delayed implementation, more stakeholders need to buy in, and encouragement was needed to achieve this, the student voice needed more recognition, and, as noted in the original policy, that evaluating wellbeing

through measuring and evaluating impact was a challenge. Further, a number of stakeholders felt that there was a lack of stakeholder engagement in the design and development of the policy and in its implementation. This was particularly apparent among the parent and student representatives. These experiences provide valuable lessons for policy development in Ireland and across the EU.

One key strength of the Irish policy stems from co-ordination across areas and domains – including supports for students with additional needs, measures to address bullying and creating inclusive school environments. However, evidence gathered suggests this has not been seamless and resistance from teachers was noted. Teachers pointed to the strain on teacher time and a lack of resources to support implementation. These are issues that have been identified previously by Irish teachers and principals, both regarding wellbeing but also teachers job satisfaction and stress more broadly (e.g., Byrne & McCarthy, 2021; Darmody & Smyth, 2011) and are likely to be common across international systems. For some, wellbeing became a box-ticking exercise, that lost sight of the meaning behind the framework. The difficulties also reflected a need for more and better professional development in this space – both through initial teacher education and CPD.

We're relying a lot on teachers to implement and do things differently; they need a lot of training and redirection and support to help them really hit the ground with this. Every time we want to do something with teachers to help them be better, we're relying on their goodwill and some of them are fantastic for that. Academic

Not making teachers into therapists but equipping them with the bare minimum to be able to respond appropriately. Post-pandemic students are coming with new issues that haven't been confronted before and teachers don't know how to deal with it. If teachers are given the choice to learn about how to deal with these issues, they'd take it because it is an issue they're struggling with, and we students are saying help. Student

The evidence also suggests that policymakers should be aware of structures within schools and the hierarchy within Irish schools was mentioned as a barrier to engaging with the whole school approach to wellbeing:

Because of the way teachers and schools are, other people's roles are often diminished… It's often a special needs assistant who will pick up what's happening before a teacher because they have a different eye on the classroom and different eye on the wider school. Academic

One important lesson related to knowledge sharing within and across schools, *clustering schools really helps share good practise* (School Leader), a learning which may support implementation in other countries. This sharing of resources and knowledge is an informal practice across Irish primary and post-primary schools within local areas, though formal clustering has been introduced in Irish primary schools (Department of Education, 2024). However, the nature of the high stakes exam system at senior cycle level in Ireland and between-school competitiveness (McCoy & Byrne, 2024) poses a challenge to system-wide cooperation and support across wellbeing reforms, an issue that might receive attention in EC policy.

Every school is part of a system but the industrialised education system we have dictates that schools don't talk to each other, share resources, collaborate because they're competing.

Academic

Resistance to change also featured as a barrier to implementation. Several stakeholders reflected on the training and mindset of teachers and school leaders and how their perspectives contribute to the impact of wellbeing programmes within schools. This was reflected on at the point of teacher recruitment:

The teaching profession is very conservative, they all come from the same background, talk the same, dress the same. In my lectures it's very hard to get them thinking creatively. Who

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are we recruiting to the teaching profession, how we train them and how we continue to train them afterwards, that's key. Academic

This extended up through to school leadership, where some felt that age and mindset had significant effects:

I think you're going to see a shift in how mental health is taken care of in schools because when I engage with younger principals, in their 30s, they view mental health very differently to those who are in their 50s. Student

But a lack of focus on school leaders in the early stages of implementation was also seen to contribute to these difficulties, highlighting the importance of considering the needs of all stakeholders from the outset of implementation.

Investment wasn't made in school leaders at the beginning to help them understand and implement this in their own school. And if the school leader doesn't believe in it, it won't happen. School Leader

Several stakeholders raised the point that greater collaboration is needed between schools and mental health services, and that more specialised supports are key in providing adequate supports for young people:

For the complex needs including trauma, [support is] non-existent. Guidance counsellors are not for trauma and adverse childhood experiences. We've increased counsellors for third level students, we have something for primary students, but we have nothing for secondary students, [the group] probably most in need. Academic

4.3. Impact of the Policy

One key challenge for the Irish wellbeing policy is the lack of evaluation built into the programme from the outset, something which EC Guidelines have been important to emphasise (EC, 2024a). Stakeholders were conscious of this weakness and pointed out that Ireland is '*one of the only countries in the world that doesn't have a National School Climate*

Survey' (Academic). While evaluation and measurement of impact were profoundly impacted by the onset of COVID-19, the evidence highlighted how schools in Ireland prioritised wellbeing priorities and focused on providing care during this time of considerable upheaval (Mohan et al., 2020). The pandemic highlighted two things for policymakers: the need for policies to be flexible and responsive to emerging need and the need to (re-)assess direction frequently. The teacher supply challenge in Ireland (and across many countries) (Harford & Fleming, 2023) further compounded difficulties in implementation and highlighted the complexity of factors shaping programme outcomes.

Overall, stakeholders agreed on the need for more emphasis on wellbeing moving forward to see the impact that had been the ambition of the policy:

> *We need to do more on every element, whether it's teacher training, CPD, working with*
>
> *parents*. Parent

One issue that provoked differing responses and somewhat less consensus related to the appropriateness of addressing complex wellbeing issues at the school level. While some stakeholders felt that Irish policies focusing on schools are insufficient to address needs, others were positive about school settings being an effective and appropriate environment to intervene, with the help of other professionals, and provide supports that span across children's wider social worlds and tackle overall wellbeing issues:

> *Schools are very good settings to intervene because it's where children are comfortable. It's*
>
> *where they go every day. They've got trusted adults around them. It's generally a safe setting.*
>
> *And I think that's where we need to be piling in services for children and parents, not just*
>
> *educational services but broader services. Parents are so key to making sure that whatever's*
>
> *happening in the school is also being supported in the home. If you've got very different*
>
> *messages in the school to the home then children follow their parent lead, so it negates a lot*

of what's happening in a school if the parents aren't being brought along and supported.

Primary School Parent

5. Conclusions

Recent evidence shows increasing wellbeing and mental health difficulties among young people in Ireland (Carroll et al., 2024) and internationally (WHO, 2021). In response to this, this policy aims to improve wellbeing initiatives in Irish schools. Overall, our analysis and recent research highlights important lessons from the Irish experience. The policy has several strengths; stakeholders were positive about the comprehensiveness of the policy and the benefit of having a framework for future directions and decisions:

The framework gives you the structure, an evidence-based model that when we're developing new services and supports, we're saying, well, how does it talk to the framework that's here?

Parent

Considerable work and expertise went into developing the policy, that drew on international evidence and was successfully embedded into the wider Irish policy context. Elements of the policy are innovative and display a commitment to inclusion and wellbeing in schools. However, several stakeholders reiterated the same weakness; the translation of the policy into effective school practices, limited by lack of teacher professional development and competing demands on resources.

The policy has faced several challenges, which have been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Social ramifications during the pandemic, such as school closures, have resulted in global increases in child and adolescent mental health problems (e.g., Foley et al., 2021; Vinner et al., 2022). This has led to unforeseen new priorities arising around youth wellbeing supports and a need for reflection on the future of the policy and how it should evolve to best meet the needs of young people today. The Department of Education reported

that an internal evaluation of the wellbeing policy is underway that will be critical to give us

a better sense of where the gaps might be emerging in the framework. This process will be

important in shaping further iterations of the policy. Future developments can also be guided

by independent evidence, evaluation, and metrics. Including the voice of stakeholders,

particularly students, will be critical for shaping effective and impactful policies into the

future.

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