



Submission to
Department of Education and Skills,
National Educational Psychological Service

Submission on Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing

On behalf of the INTO

25 January 2017

Introduction

The INTO welcomes moves to enhance the promotion of youth mental health and wellbeing. Addressing young people's mental-health needs is crucial if they are to fulfil their potential socially, emotionally and academically. Pupil wellbeing underpins all aspects of school life. Mental health awareness is a natural part of every class and underpins the whole school culture. The ethos of a school is often based around a vision of wellbeing with supports for students and staff. The SPHE curriculum is commonly referred to as the 'hidden curriculum' as many aspects of the subject are addressed indirectly through the ethos of the school and through the day-to-day interactions between pupils and teachers.

School Policies

Teachers already value the central role they play in teaching pupils how to be mentally healthy, just as they support and promote pupils' physical health. However, mental health and wellbeing programmes shouldn't be added on to a long list of things to do in schools. Instead the fundamental principles of mental health programmes should be subsumed into everyday school life. Furthermore, a commitment to mental health promotion must not be the sole responsibility of schools but rather a shared responsibility with the home, the school community and the wider society. Any taskforce for Youth Mental Health must take account of the need for a multi-disciplinary holistic approach to addressing wellbeing in young people.

Subjects, policies, programmes and practices are implemented in schools to ensure the promotion and enhancement of pupil wellbeing. The practices in schools that promote and enhance the wellbeing of pupils occur on a formal and informal level. Some of the practices that occur are a direct result of the implementation of school policies, many of which have a legislative requirement. Policies have been devised in schools to promote the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of pupils such as the Anti-Bullying Policy and the Code of Behaviour Policy. In addition, there are very clear procedures in place that schools must follow in relation to child protection. Since the Revised Primary School Curriculum in 1999, there has been a stronger emphasis on pupil wellbeing in the classroom. However, despite the increased awareness in schools, teachers continue to report a growing prevalence of mental health and wellbeing issues in students and additional supports are required to tackle the escalation.

In addition to the many formal policies, schools also have many informal practices within schools to advance pupil wellbeing. These can include breakfast or homework clubs. Whilst these initiatives are more prevalent in DEIS schools due to the necessary funding and personnel being provided, some non-DEIS schools manage to provide such services from their own budget and resources. Schools are very conscious of pupils' dignity and wellbeing and, therefore, make every effort to discretely provide lunches, second hand uniforms, book rental schemes and subsidised school outings to ensure no child misses out due to personal circumstances.

Wellbeing Programmes

There are a large range of programmes available that assist in the promotion and enhancement of pupil wellbeing in the classroom. The culture and atmosphere of the classroom and the school and how well SPHE is integrated across the curriculum will enhance the impact of any programme used. Many schools now use wellbeing programmes such as *Incredible Years*, *Friends for Life*, *Circle Time*, *Restorative School*, *S.A.L.T* and the *Roots of Empathy*. However, while teachers acknowledge the value of these programmes, they present significant cost and time barriers that make their implementation prohibitive in some schools. Furthermore, teachers must adapt these adopted programmes to benefit the Irish context. The development of a fully resourced and funded indigenous wellbeing programme, applicable to the Irish context, would be more desirable for teachers in Ireland.

Currently not all schools or pupils are aware of, or have access to, programmes specifically geared towards the emotional wellbeing of pupils, and which support the SPHE curriculum. It is essential that all pupils have an opportunity to access programmes that support their wellbeing. The introduction and implementation of programmes to support pupil wellbeing must be on a national level and not limited to local initiatives. Many of the programmes are being piloted in schools or they are only implemented for a period of time. There needs to be more funding made available to enable all schools and teachers to implement these programmes and ensure equity of access.

Curriculum

Teachers recognise that being in good physical health, eating a balanced diet and getting regular exercise all contribute strongly to positive mental health. Currently, the curriculum allows for one hour per week to be spent on physical education. Even though schools have well developed policies in relation to PE, many teachers find implementation challenging due to the lack of necessary resources and the nature of the physical environment. INTO research previously found that that over half of Irish schools do not have a PE hall so lessons are weather dependent. Action is needed to ensure that the status and profile of physical activity and physical education is raised (INTO, 2011) in order to promote positive mental health.

Aistear

Wellbeing is one of the four themes in *Aistear*, the early years curriculum framework, along with identity and belonging; communicating; and exploring and thinking. *Aistear* tells us, 'the theme of wellbeing is about children being confident, happy and healthy' (NCCA, 2009a, p.16). The INTO believes that awareness of pupil wellbeing and mental health must start in the early years to ensure early intervention and prevention. *Aistear* has been commended and welcomed by teachers who are in a position to use and to engage with the framework. However, engagement has been on a voluntary basis due to the lack of state funding and a professional development programme. Furthermore, the absence of a fully resourced implementation plan, on a national basis, has resulted in many challenges for schools and

teachers. In order for the *Aistear* framework to meet the wellbeing needs of pupils it must be accompanied by a comprehensive professional development programme and resourcing.

Role of Teachers

Teachers have a strong sense of responsibility towards their pupils. Teachers not only look after pupils' learning but they also try to ensure that their wellbeing is enhanced. Teachers recognise their role in promoting mental health and wellbeing in schools, however, some young people who are experiencing mental health issues require assessment and treatment that is beyond the capacity of the teacher. Teachers are not best placed to deal with work that requires psychiatric or psychological training. However, teachers would welcome supports and resources that allow them to look out for signs, to build programmes into the curriculum and to have clear routes to specialist services for pupils and families that need them. While the focus of this submission is youth mental health, it is significant to note that the wellbeing of pupil and teacher is interdependent. Improving the classroom experience for one has a positive impact on the other. Therefore, teachers and principals must be supported in sustaining their resilience in the face of the stresses and strains inherent in the teaching profession.

External Support Services

There is a need for external support services to be more actively involved in supporting pupil wellbeing. It was reported that teachers who had contact with the Childhood and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) often found difficulty in ensuring that pupils received adequate support (INTO, 2015). There was a perceived lack of support there for the teachers who may need advice and back up but who have no qualification in mental health. These teachers have to draw on their inner empathy and understanding. Teachers feel that they need advice and support from external agencies to support and enhance the wellbeing of pupils who are struggling emotionally and/or socially.

There needs to be a multi-disciplinary and inter-agency approach to dealing with pupils who present with difficulties, for example, social or emotional difficulties. Research indicates that the key challenges to addressing mental-health needs include the shortage of mental-health professionals and the stigma associated with mental disorder (Patel, Vikram, et al., 2007). The services provided by CAMHS and other outside supports are not sufficient to meet the demand for services required. According to the Children's Mental Health Coalition Report (2015), one in seven children and teenagers referred for mental health treatment are still waiting a year or more to access appropriate services. Unfortunately, despite additional resources that have been put into CAMHS services in the last few years, community teams are struggling to cope with increased demand. CAMHS should be made more accessible, including through the provision of clear information to young people and their families. The INTO proposes that consideration be given to the provision of an in-school model of mental health support service. In-school support services have many benefits including an increase in attendance, a decrease in stigmatisation and improved cross-agency collaboration

between teachers and other professionals. Consideration should also be given to subsuming the various external supports for mental health and wellbeing under one umbrella service such as the Inclusion Support Service (ISS).

Conclusion

Wellbeing is very strongly linked to the 'spirit of the school' and the principles of wellbeing should permeate the whole school culture. Teachers are very aware of increasing mental health issues in pupils and make every effort to address such issues through school policies, curriculum subjects and wellbeing programmes. However, there are many challenges facing teachers and schools in their endeavours to enhance positive mental health and wellbeing. Teachers require fully resourced implementation programmes, adequate school facilities and professional development opportunities to allow them to better address the sensitive and complex nature of mental health issues. Moreover, schools require a clear pathway to external, professional mental health supports to meet the increasing prevalence of mental health issues in young people.

References

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