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Wellbeing and mental health in school contexts: emerging evidence and future directions

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Outline

- Motivation
- International evidence
- National evidence
- New Irish findings
- Monitoring and measurement of wellbeing in schools
- Conclusions

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Motivation

Why focus on mental health and wellbeing in schools?

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Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice Review

- **Phase 1: Internal Review** DEY Wellbeing Office
- **Phase 2: Literature Review** commissioned ESRI Literature Review on wellbeing promotion in schools
- **Phase 3: Stakeholder Consultation** DEY Wellbeing Office broad stakeholder consultation

Literature Review on wellbeing promotion in schools



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Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice Review

- How school experiences contribute to student wellbeing
- Which students need the most support
- How to improve current policies and practices

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Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice Review

- Academic databases, grey literature and non-academic sources
- Quantitative and qualitative studies
- Policy reports and government agency documents
- Publications from international organisations (e.g., UNESCO, OECD)

Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice Review

- Case studies on how countries support wellbeing at school and evaluate programme impact

1. UK
2. Australia
3. Canada
4. Denmark

Defining wellbeing and mental health

- Psychiatry vs positive psychology
- Overlapping but separate
- Treat symptoms of mental ill health and nurture wellbeing
- Feeling (happiness, transient) in primary school
- Functioning (self-actualizing, competence) in post-primary

International evidence

Best practices in supporting student mental health and wellbeing

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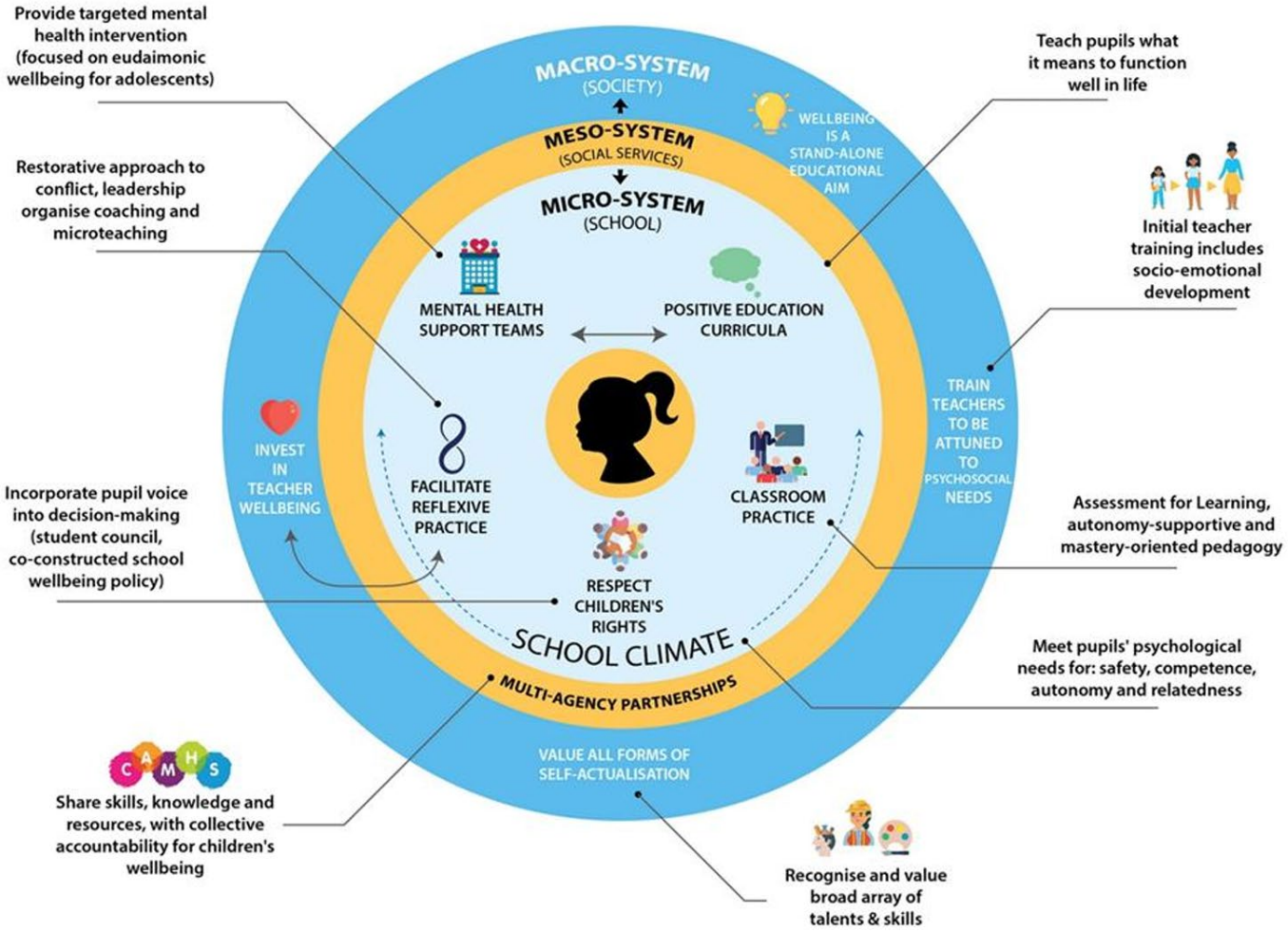
Understanding wellbeing in school contexts

FIGURE 3.1 CLARKE ET AL. (2025) KEY COMPONENTS OF A 'WHOLE-SCHOOL' APPROACH TO WELLBEING



Source: Clarke, T., McLellan, R., & Harold, G. (2025). Beyond life satisfaction: Wellbeing correlates of adolescents' academic attainment. *School Psychology Review, 54*(1), 31–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2023.2217980

Notes: This framework was developed based on data collected on a UK sample.

School-level trends

Bottom-up, participatory and student-led approaches

- Meaningful student voice
- Co-design of materials, delivery, decision-making, evaluation
- Voices of marginalized and vulnerable students
- e.g., social network interventions, ambassadors

School-level trends

Partnering with parents and communities

- Adds strength, depth and impact
- Improves young people's experience of coherence
- Bridges gaps between the school and external supports/services

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School-level trends

Equity, inclusion and diversity

- Prioritise vulnerable and marginalised students
- Schools are centre-stage in promoting equity in society
- Transformative socio-emotional learning celebrates diversity and is relevant to the student body

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System-level trends

Teacher professional learning and school leadership

- Relational, collaborative and constructive pedagogy
- Teachers own social and emotional competences
- Mentoring, professional networks, collaboration communities
- Centrality of school leader

System-level trends

Intersectoral support for complex needs

- Collaborations with health services, mental health agencies, social services
- Inclusion of parents and students in decisions
- Interventions: accessible, responsive, appropriate and equitable

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National evidence

Student mental health and wellbeing in Ireland

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Student wellbeing and mental health in Ireland

- Ireland 24/36 for adolescent mental health
  - Health Behaviour of School-Aged Children 2022
- Irish policy:
  - Wellbeing Policy Statement (2018)
  - SPHE
  - NEPS services
  - Neart, counselling in primary pilot

Fás Aníos in Éirinn
Growing Up in Ireland

hbsc
HEALTH BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

MY WORLD SURVEY

NATIONAL STUDY OF YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH IN IRELAND

Being LGBTQI+ in Ireland

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Strengths of the Irish system

- School culture and belonging
- Whole school approach
- Emphasis on physical activity, arts, play and nutrition
- School autonomy in design, implementation and evaluation

"…it's about smiling and saying hello to a youngster in the morning. It's about looking out for that youngster who sits alone at lunchtime"

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Strengths of the Irish system

- School staff understand and demonstrate a desire to be a positive influence on students beyond the curriculum
- Wellbeing leadership teams
- Cross-government department action and initiatives

"you start with—you delegate those 'official' roles. Your guidance counsellor, your (wellbeing) coordinator. But you support them. Everyone gets involved"

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Areas for improvement in the Irish system

- Conflation between universal wellbeing and complex mental health supports
- Conflict between wellbeing promotion and academic commitment
- Teacher support and training for self-efficacy and mental health literacy
- Overwhelm with brief and unvalidated external interventions

Areas for improvement in the Irish system

- Underutilization of community and family resources
- Lack of student voice
- Equity, inclusion and diversity
- Access to and alignment of external services and supports

"ironically, with this wellbeing stuff, we've more forms to fill out, so we've even less time (for wellbeing promotion) now than we did before"

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New Irish findings on school experiences and student wellbeing

Dempsey, C., Farrell, E., & McCoy, S. (2025). Understanding the role of school experiences in the wellbeing of girls, SEN and low SES students: A self-determination theory approach. *Studies in Educational Evaluation, 86*, 101489. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2025.101489

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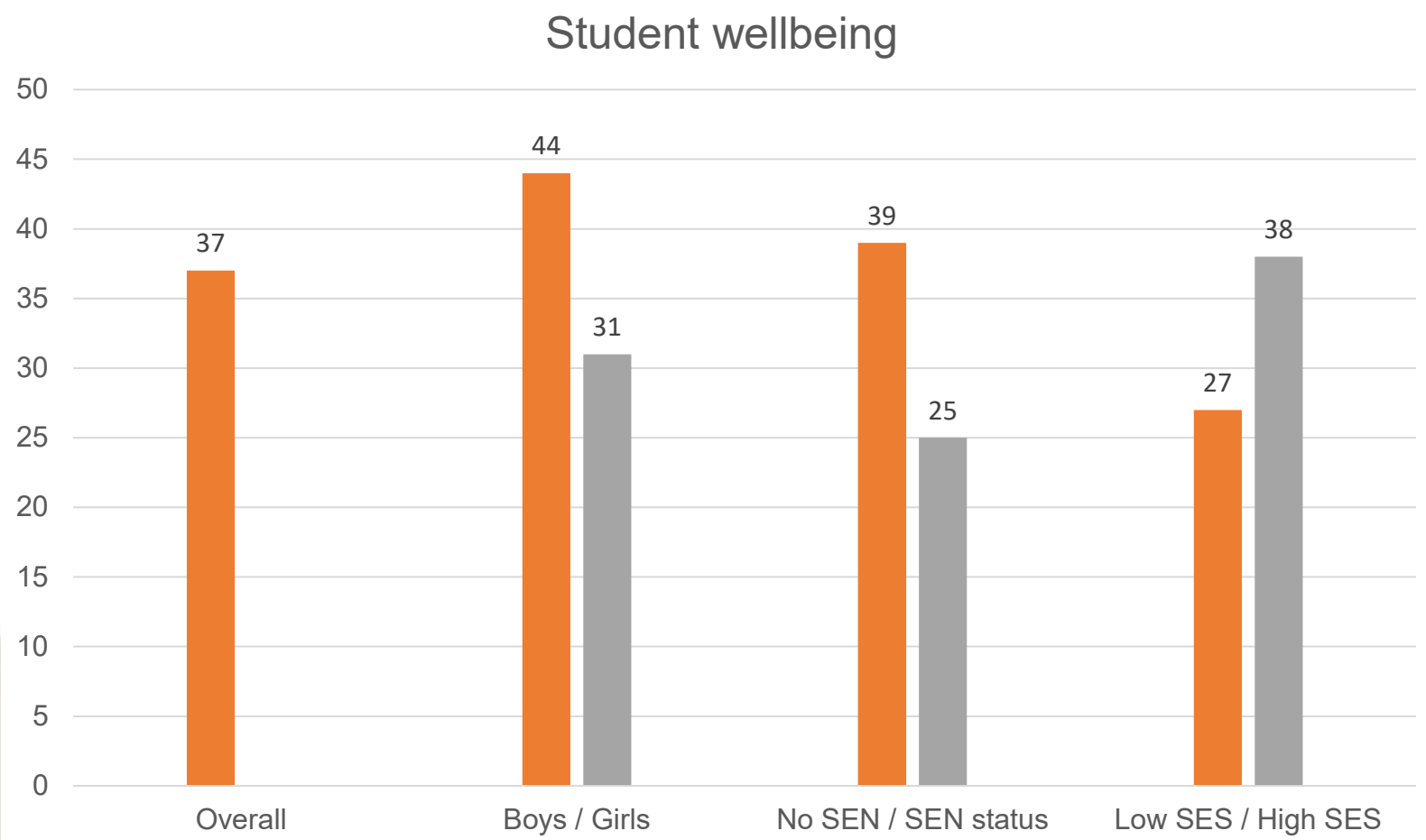
Student groups differ in their wellbeing



2242 students

21 post-primary schools

Higher wellbeing among:

- Boys vs girls
- High SES vs low SES
- No SEN vs SEN

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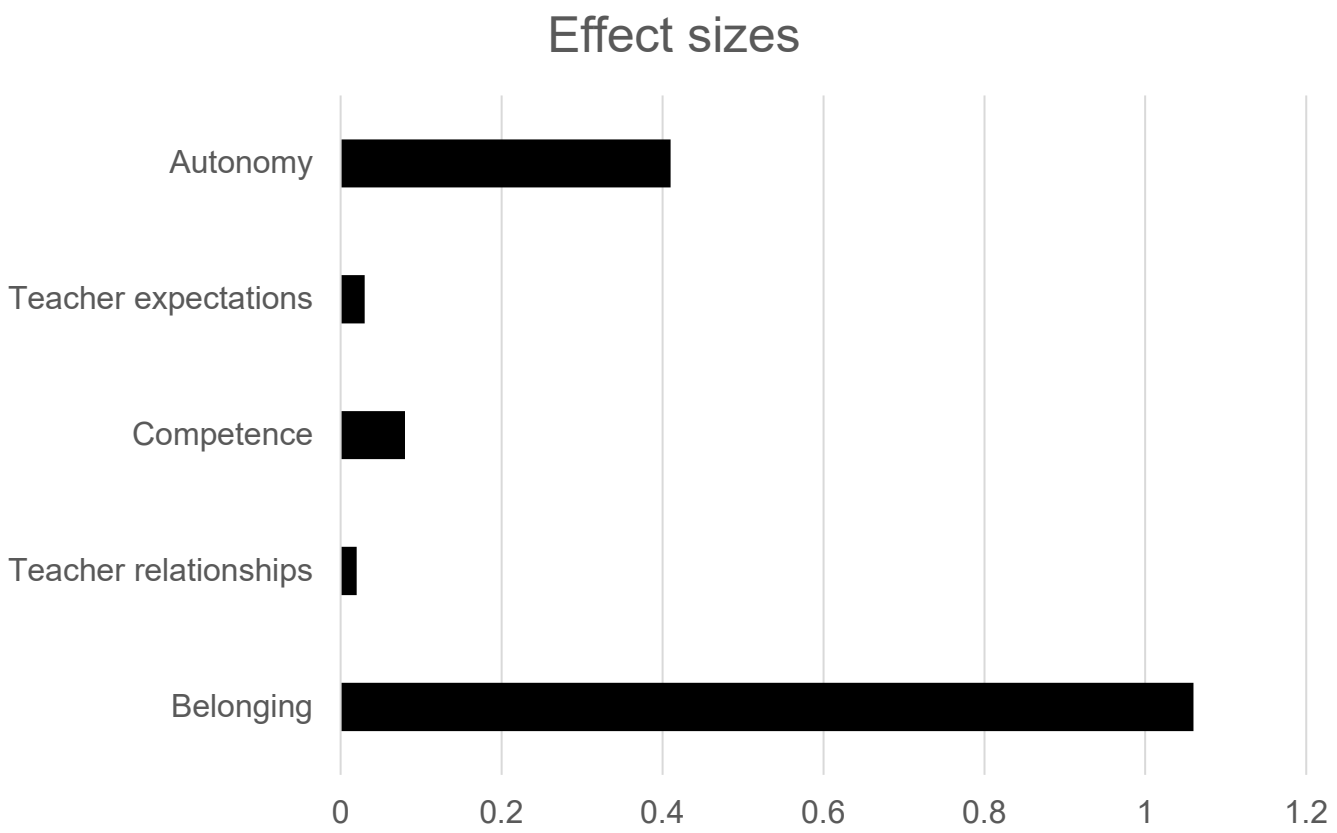
Belonging and student voice are important



Largest effects:

- Student voice/ autonomy
- Belonging

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School plays a different role for different students

- Low SES students: belonging and autonomy are more closely related to wellbeing
- SEN status students: school factors explain nearly 50% of the difference in wellbeing with non-SEN status students
- Gender: school factors did not explain the gender differences

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Monitoring and measurement of wellbeing in schools

Of mental health and wellbeing in schools

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Monitoring and measurement

Important at all levels: national data gathering programme evaluations, school-level data

Measurement should have a goal:

- Create a snapshot of all students' wellbeing
- Evaluate the impact of a school initiative
- Analyse differences in student subgroups



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Monitoring and measurement

- Methods should be robust, comparable, appropriate
- Partnerships with universities, research institutes and health services support quality
- External programmes must show evidence of effectiveness

Monitoring and measurement

- Students should be central in the decision-making
- Aims and findings should be shared with the school body
- Parents and communities can be engaged in the process

Conclusions

And future directions

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Conclusions

- Significant strides in Irish educational policy and practice related to student wellbeing
- Many current approaches are effective, particularly when student belonging, school autonomy and access to services are prominent

Future directions

- Increasing inclusive student-led approaches
- Quality assurance of external programmes
- Updating teacher education
- Strengthening access to services
- Differentiating policy related to wellbeing and mental health

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Thank you

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