An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

NCSE RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2026

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

Dr Caoimhe Dempsey

School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork

Abstract

Concerns about young people's mental health and wellbeing have intensified, prompting calls for schools to play a greater role in supporting students. However, uncertainty remains regarding effective approaches to wellbeing promotion and monitoring, particularly for vulnerable groups. This presentation combines empirical research with a narrative review of Irish and international evidence, funded by Ireland's National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). First, findings are presented from a review of empirical research, policy documents and international guidance examining school-based wellbeing promotion and monitoring in Ireland and internationally. Findings highlight strengths in Irish approaches, including emphasis on school culture, belonging and whole-school wellbeing. Second, recent Irish evidence is presented which examines associations between school experiences and wellbeing among 2,243 Irish secondary students aged 14 and 17. School belonging and autonomy were positively associated with wellbeing and accounted for a substantial proportion of wellbeing differences among students with special educational needs. Priorities for development include distinguishing universal wellbeing promotion from specialist mental health support, strengthening student participation, improving teacher education and parental engagement, and embedding mental health services in schools. Together, these findings can inform future educational policy and practice to support student wellbeing and mental health.

Bio

Caoimhe Dempsey is a Lecturer/Assistant Professor in the School of Applied Psychology at University College Cork. Caoimhe's training is in developmental and educational psychology, and she has experience in a range of quantitative, qualitative and mixed method research. Her research focuses on the risk and protective factors for both wellbeing and mental health in the school context and her previous projects have spanned from early primary school to post-secondary school aged samples. Caoimhe holds a Ba in Psychology from Trinity College Dublin, and an MRes and PhD in Developmental Psychology from the University of Cambridge. She previously held a postdoctoral fellowship at the Economic and Social Research Institute and Trinity College Dublin. She is currently involved in several projects looking at how best to support children and young people's socio-emotional development and wellbeing through the quality of relationships across home and school contexts. Caoimhe has a strong track record of published academic research in high-quality journals as well as experience disseminating her research to a wide audience of stakeholders, policy makers and the public through podcasts, webinars and invited presentations.