



Emotional Wellbeing in Primary Schools

IPPN Position Paper

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1 BACKGROUND

IPPN is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. It is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education as an official Education Partner, IPPN works with the DES, the National Parents' Council, management bodies, unions, education agencies, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,600 Principals and Deputy Principals.

2 CONTEXT

For several years principals have been highlighting increasing levels of child emotional ill-health, including issues such as anxiety, depression, neglect, obesity, bullying, physical and sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, anti-social behaviour and specific mental illness.

Meanwhile, principals say that they do not feel sufficiently trained to support these children adequately. Clearly, teachers are not trained to diagnose, solve or resolve emotional and mental health problems among their students or their families. However, there are some actions that can be taken by schools to support these children, and their families, provided the required supports and training are provided at a national level. This position paper sets out to examine what needs to be done and how this may be achieved.

3 THE ISSUE

The proportion of principals citing depression among children as the greatest child welfare challenge has doubled since 2009. Three times as many principals in 2016 stated that mental illness was the greatest child welfare challenge than in 2009. In the same way, neglect has increased by 6%, and obesity has doubled from 3.3% in 2009 to 6.1% in 2015. In 2016, the greatest challenge is family issues such as marital breakdown and bereavement. Despite the anti-bullying guidelines and training for teachers on bullying prevention, the rate of bullying has remained constant during this period, with 25% stating in both 2009 and 2015 that bullying was the greatest challenge. The number of principals citing anti-social behaviour reduced from 17.9% to 10.8% in the same time period, which may also be explained by the focus on, and resources given to, bullying prevention strategies. The number of principals citing alcohol abuse, drug abuse, sexual abuse or physical abuse as the greatest challenge in the past 6 years has declined slightly, which is also encouraging.

Given the prevalence of child welfare issues in our primary schools, and the related issues around emotional wellbeing, it is crucial that school principals and teachers are equipped to deal with these issues, both to identify problems and to address them adequately. A January 2016 IPPN membership survey of principals tells us that 79% of principals feel 'insufficiently trained' or 'not trained at all' to identify mental health issues in children, much less adequately support them once the problems have been identified. Children can present with a very wide range of emotional issues on a spectrum of emotional wellbeing, from complete wellness on one end to suicidal at the other. While the supports available at the more extreme end are relatively well known, it is less clear where to go for help when a child displays distress or the school becomes aware of some dysfunction at home. In other words, there is a need for a clear 'continuum of support' to meet the varying needs right across the spectrum. By this we mean that there needs to be support for ALL children to help them develop emotional literacy and resilience to cope with life's many challenges; additional support for SOME children experiencing significant personal challenge; and, for the FEW children who require it, referral to medical and/or psychiatric experts to deal with diagnosed illness. This is in line with National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) guidelines, which we wholly endorse and support. It needs to be emphasised that it is not the responsibility of teachers to deal with issues of mental health when they arise, as the professionals in this field have the expertise and qualifications to address these issues. A teacher's role in this continuum of support is restricted to creating a safe place for children to express their anxieties. As educators, we need to give children the language and the opportunity to express and convey their emotions. This can be achieved by creating a school environment where it is safe for a child to talk to a teacher on a human level. Schools need to engage in a professional conversation around this issue.

It must be acknowledged that there is a range of national, regional and local services available to schools aimed at improving awareness and providing support around mental health, including NEPS, SESS and DCYA youth services committees. This is particularly true at second level. There are also state programmes such as the DOHC Health & Wellbeing Programme as well as national guidelines for mental health promotion in schools (NEPS, 2015). However, it is fair to say that supports and services are largely ad hoc and inadequate, do not integrate with each other and it is not clear to schools which services to engage with, when and how. Some supports are available only in certain regions or counties.

Others are only available in specific local areas. Schools report having to prioritise between the needs of the child and the CPD needs of staff when accessing NEPS resources. There is a need for joined-up thinking as well as provision and a clear communication plan so that schools know where to go to help children in their schools, whatever the type or severity of issue.

In November 2015, IPPN co-hosted (with NAPD) a National Symposium on Emotional Wellbeing in Schools, with the aim of raising awareness among school leaders and education agencies of the importance of this issue. An informal working group was initiated and is working towards an Action Plan on Emotional Wellbeing in Schools. Our partners in this work are wellbeing ambassador Conor Cusack, the Ombudsman for Children, NAPD, the Teaching Council, NEPS, and the DES Inspectorate. Our recommendations (below) will be further informed by the work of this group.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To improve the situation in schools significantly, there is a real need to create an Action Plan for Emotional Wellbeing. This Plan would need to include all education sectors, from pre-school to post-primary. When a strategy is backed up with action, as was the case with the National Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy, impressive results can be achieved in as few as five years. This Plan should involve all of the key stakeholders in education – principals, teachers, the Department of Education & Skills and its agencies, Teaching Council, Ombudsman for Children, the Department of Health & Children, the Health Service Executive, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Professional Development Service for Teachers, among others.
2. Map the existing cross-sectoral guidelines for emotional wellbeing and identify any gaps in provision.
3. Develop a cross-sectoral continuum of supports and services for schools, whereby it is clear which service to engage, for what type of issue, and how to go about it.
4. Develop a CPD programme for teachers and for principals to develop an understanding of the issues pertaining to emotional wellbeing, how to identify specific issues and how to avail of the continuum of supports and services described above.
5. Review the balance of the national curriculum, ensuring that adequate time is given to personal development, emotional wellbeing and resilience to help children develop holistically as well as academically – preparing them for life, not just for the workplace. A rebalancing in favour of SPHE and PE would be a good place to start.
6. The emotional wellbeing of staff is central to managing the emotional wellbeing of children. Unless the staff themselves are emotionally well they cannot hope to provide the best relationship with, or the environment necessary to deal with the wellbeing needs of children. This requires a sustained focus underpinning all that the school does. Personal development of staff has to be emphasised as an integral component of a teacher's continuous professional development, beginning with the Colleges of Education.
7. A school culture focussed on emotional wellbeing for all needs to form part of the SSE process and be evaluated as part an element of WSE to form a continuum of action.

5 CONCLUSIONS

IPPN believes that the above recommendations would collectively greatly improve schools' ability to support children to develop emotionally and deal with issues that arise during their school years. The timing is right, given the recent emphasis on mental health and wellbeing across government departments and Irish society generally. While there is no desire to reinvent the wheel, there is certainly a need to integrate services and supports and also to plug any gaps in provision. With the emotional health of everyone in the school community at stake, what could be more important?