

# Emotional Wellbeing Symposium

## The Way Forward – Angela Lynch

This may be an unusual place to start a conversation with you, but the emotion I am feeling, and have been feeling, is fear. Fear that my words may not be good enough to persuade you to take the most important step on the journey that could make the greatest impact on the children/students in our school communities. I was afraid of maybe tripping up on my way to the podium, of my mouth going dry, stuttering or worst of all, my mind going blank.

My son reminded me in a recent conversation that at times of greatest discomfort we can often learn the greatest lesson. One of the odd things in life is that, even though the things that lead us to the most progress in our lives are preceded by risk, we tend to opt for certainty instead. The pull to stay in the comfort zone is strong. However, if we do the things that we have always done, then we will get the results we have always got. In my 36 years teaching, 20 of them as a principal and the last 4 years managing the IPPN Principal Advice service, I am convinced that we must do things in a different way.

We must examine the culture in our schools and take proactive action to develop resilience and emotional wellbeing in our school communities.

It can initially feel uncomfortable to speak about emotional wellbeing. Teachers have said that they are not sufficiently trained or do not have the necessary skills to deal with the emotional wellbeing issues of children particularly their anxieties. Perhaps you as a leader in your school question whether you have the capacity to lead in this area of emotional wellbeing.

Could it be you as the leader fear that you cannot control your school's culture and that most of the school community (who determine the school culture) have little or no incentive to listen to you. Managing a school culture is not dependent on the authority you have as a school leader, but can only be affected by increasing your influence over the behaviours, beliefs and relationships in the school. People follow the person not the role.

In the words of Mark Twain, I ask you to “Go out on a limb, that’s where the fruit is.” The fruit in life belongs to those who are willing to go out on a limb and harvest it.

So what do we mean by a culture of wellbeing? We can all understand the explicit, objective, curricular, academic culture in every school and then there is the school culture. The academic culture is well-served.

However can the same be said of the school culture? The school culture where emotional wellbeing is at its heart comes about when all members of the school community take collective responsibility for that culture. It takes sustained effort focussed on commonly shared goals and values. It needs to address both the big picture and short term demands at the same time.

Culture change requires a critical mass of determined individuals. What we believe in has a powerful impact on those around us and it’s also true that what we focus on, and nurture, grows. Indeed the reason we are all here today is because we in IPPN and NAPD believe in the importance of emotional wellbeing in all of our schools, a belief that was ignited last January by Conor Cusack here, who spoke so eloquently and passionately about it. We said to ourselves that we had to do something about it. And everyone we have spoken with about it since then shares our belief that more needs to be done.

There are already many wonderful initiatives happening within our education system and we have heard about some of them here today. There is a worldwide shift in human consciousness – how we see the world, how we live our lives and how we relate to people. We do not have to, or indeed cannot, wait for the solutions to be there before starting to engage in emotional wellbeing.

Any one of us who has struggled with our own emotional wellbeing, has journeyed with a family member or friend through a dark place, watched a girl in fourth class eaten up by anxiety, the boy who self harms or the children emotionally affected by the economic circumstances of their lives, know that we cannot wait.

We have seen the benefits of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy. The focus placed on it, the training provided and the common approach taken by schools has brought about significant change in a few short years.

Imagine what would happen if we placed a similar focus on wellbeing in all our schools, if there were a national strategy, widely-available CPD for all teachers and principals, a common approach based on the guidelines that are already available.

Imagine what could be achieved! We must go out on that limb now.

Emotional wellbeing is not about:

- another initiative
- re-inventing the wheel
- educators being mental health experts
- the extreme cases (GP & cardiac surgeon)
- just the relationship you have with others
- just the emotional wellbeing of children/students
- the school solving another societal problem
- or adding to the workload of our educators.

What is it about then?

- Schools already have their rules, regulations and procedures, which are essential. What is even more essential is that they are applied with respect, compassion and kindness. Meaningful, sustained connections and relationships are necessary for this to occur
- a culture that is welcoming and having a shared belief that we belong to something special and great
- a culture where we examine how behaviour affects us and others
- a culture where the tradition of teaching and learning is always present
- a culture that is constantly looked at, thought about and then acted upon in a unified and co-ordinated way
- a culture where the relationship you have with yourself is acknowledged and supported by personal development
- a culture where emotional wellbeing is embedded in everything the school does.

As educators, we are comfortable discussing areas such as literacy and numeracy. These are quantifiable. Emotional wellbeing is much less so. In communication words only account for 7% of your message. So you must remember that most of the message comes from the core of your being as a person and from your firmly-held beliefs. To communicate from this place, you have to begin by knowing yourself, your emotions, your strengths and your beliefs as well as your vulnerabilities and dark places.

Only in understanding yourself can you connect with others on a human level. My primary relationship is with myself. All other relationships are mirrors of it.

I cannot emphasize enough that we simply cannot give to our children what we do not have ourselves. By this I mean that if we are not well in ourselves, we cannot hope to adequately support the emotional wellbeing of others.

I have spoken up to now about the school community. It may seem like a mammoth task. How do you eat an elephant, or in this case a mammoth? It's actually quite straight forward - bite by bite! You might be thinking 'how do I start the conversation in my school?'

As you know, every school is engaged in the process of School Self Evaluation and School Improvement Planning. What do you value as a school? If you value the emotional wellbeing of all the people in your school then why not prioritise this area as part of your School Improvement Plan? Bear in mind that there are superb guidelines, and a resource pack, available from NEPS on implementing wellbeing in schools.

IPPEN is committed to leading principals through this process and will provide CPD in this area for principals, just as PDST are doing for teachers. There is no doubt that training is crucial. But we must also consider - are we measuring what we value in our schools?

Are we measuring wellbeing? Already this has begun to happen in the Whole School Evaluation and the Management, Leadership & Learning inspection models and in the pilot programme on wellbeing Suzanne spoke about earlier. We welcome this and would support a greater emphasis being placed on this aspect of the school evaluation process.

Colleges of Education also have an important part to play in this process. Students need education in the pivotal role a teacher plays in establishing empathy, not only with children but with parents and colleagues alike. The responsibility that teachers bear for their own ongoing personal and professional development has to be established as a prerequisite for entering the profession.

It is essential that the recruitment process also reflects the importance of emotional intelligence, and particularly, strong interpersonal skills.

They say that it takes a community to rear a child. We live in a relational world, and we are educating our children to live in that world. Emotional wellbeing is a matter of huge importance to society.

We all need to develop resilience if we are to overcome adversity and get through challenging times. The attendance of the Taoiseach today is testament to his and the government's commitment to wellbeing. We hope that no matter who is in government next year, this commitment would continue, and indeed be strengthened.

We believe that this symposium is not an end in itself, but that it is a really positive start to an ongoing conversation. Your attendance here today confirms that you believe this to be important. In order for the focus to be kept on emotional wellbeing within our schools, to nurture it to be something long-term and sustainable, we are calling for a National Strategy and a Forum to be established to build on the work that is already happening in this area across agencies and across sectors.

I set out today hoping to convince you that you have the ability and that you have the strength to take the first and subsequent steps to put emotional wellbeing at the heart of your school community. If you need to be convinced or motivated that this is the right thing to do, then I believe Conor is the right man for the job!

When you hear what he has to say, I hope that you will go back to your school and start the conversation with your staff, students, board of management and parents. While it may be challenging, it's worth remembering that "A ship is safe in the harbour but that is not what ships are made for."

I leave you with the following:

"It's impossible" said Pride

"It's risky" said Experience

"It's pointless" said Reason

"Give it a try" whispered the Heart.