

CHAPTER 5

Broader school context for wellbeing

The current chapter begins with a summary of two broad theories which are relevant to a consideration of student wellbeing in the context of the school environment and learning: Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *ecological systems theory* and Vygotsky's (1962) *social learning theory*. Section 5.2 focuses on the role of wellbeing in the learning environment. Section 5.3 presents information relating to the role of teachers in social and emotional learning and Section 5.4 looks at teacher wellbeing and the role of teacher wellbeing in student outcomes, as well as ways in which the wellbeing needs of teachers may be supported.

5.1 RELEVANT THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Ecology can be described as the interaction between individuals and their environment (Sallis, Owen, & Fisher, 2008). All learning and development for children and young people occurs in context. Each environment, along with the interactions that occur within it that the child or young person experiences on a regular basis will influence how they grow and learn. Theories of development which focus on the school environment stress the crucial role that this environment can play in the growth and development of the child from an early age (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1962). These theories highlight the need for teachers and school leaders to cultivate a positive school environment which focuses on the wellbeing of the child in order to facilitate positive developmental and learning outcomes.

Ecological systems theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *ecological systems theory* describes how children find themselves involved in various ecosystems from the time that they are born. These can range from the more intimate ecosystem of their home, to the larger ecosystem of their school and eventually society and their culture. Each of these ecosystems interacts with and influences the other ecosystems, and the growth and development of the child as a result. The two levels of this ecological model which contain the school environment are the microsystem and the mesosystem.

The *microsystem* refers to the most immediate environment of the child, i.e. "*the setting in which the child lives*" (Santrock, 2017, p. 26). This can include their daily home life, peer group, school, and community. The interactions that the child encounters in this ecosystem generally revolve around the child's personal relationships with their family members, friends, classmates, and teachers (Berk, 2000). How these individuals interact with the child will influence their development. The more supportive and nurturing the interactions between the child and these individuals are, the more positive their developmental outcomes may be.

Similarly, how children react to the people in their microsystem will also influence their development. The child is not merely a "*passive recipient*" of the interactions they encounter in this ecosystem (Santrock, 2017, p. 26). Rather, their behaviour contributes to how this ecosystem is constructed (Santrock, 2017). The child's personality traits and temperament, which are influenced by unique biological and genetic factors, can have a major impact on how the child is perceived and treated by those close to them. Bronfenbrenner refers to bi-directional influences, as the construction of each microsystem can be influenced in two distinct directions.

The *mesosystem* refers to the interactions between the various microsystems in which the child participates, i.e., "*relations between microsystems or connections between contexts*" (Santrock, 2017,

p. 26). It is a system of numerous microsystems which contains links between the child's home and school lives, their friends and their family, and their family and the wider community. Positive interactions between the child's various microsystems will lead to more favourable developmental outcomes, whilst more adverse interactions can affect the child's development in a negative manner.

In summary, both the environment and the social interactions that a child experiences within the environment play an important role in shaping their development and growth and by extension, their learning. Therefore, *ecological systems theory* can be seen to underpin the focus on wellbeing in the school environment.

Social learning theory

Vygotsky (1962) used his *social learning theory* to describe how individuals learn in social contexts and how a child's interactions with those around them can enhance their ability to learn in numerous ways. Traditionally, most classroom settings were based on a model of teaching centred on instruction, with the teacher holding information and then *transmitting* this information to students. Vygotsky's (1962) theory promotes a learning and classroom environment which allows students to play an active role in their own learning. It highlights the importance of the student voice and of having an open classroom environment where students can socially interact with their peers and their teacher.

According to *social learning theory*, the roles of the teacher and the student are shifted, and the role of the teacher is to provide opportunities for guided discussion and collaboration, and to provide feedback. Although the teacher is the topic expert, their role is not to *transmit* knowledge but to facilitate the creation of an environment where guided interactions and discussion can occur. The aims are to promote deeper knowledge construction on the part of students, allow Socratic student discussions, and to build an active learning community within the classroom setting (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

The far-reaching impact of Vygotsky's work is reflected in the primary curriculum in Ireland which recognises the child as an active agent in his or her learning; notes that learning should involve guided activity and discovery methods; and, that the child's existing knowledge and experience for the base for learning (DES, 1999b). Detailed discussion of the review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum is provided in Chapter 7. Also, at post-primary level, 'learning to learn' is one of the eight principles of Junior Cycle education, emphasising the importance of supporting students to become independent learners (DES, 2015a).

5.2 THE ROLE OF WELLBEING IN EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The teacher-as-facilitator as described by Vygotsky is of course only part of the overall human exchange in which teaching and learning takes place. Some research has examined student characteristics in the context of what makes 'good' learners, but these risk to reinforce older notions of teaching-as-transmission (e.g., focusing on student adherence to rules and students' efforts to be compliant, Wentzel, 1991, cited in Sylva, 1994, p.154). Other research has attempted to identify individual student characteristics that are associated with positive learning outcomes. For example, Dishion (1990) reported a positive association between social adjustment and academic achievement in a sample of 204 Fourth-grade male students and their families. The difficulty with this strand of research is that it fails to consider the underlying reasons for variations in social adjustment and risks to place the cause of poor learning outcomes on individual students. This perspective is inconsistent with an ecosystems one.

We suggest instead that it is more helpful to consider what students themselves consider to be characteristics of effective learning environments and good teachers. In a survey of young people aged 15 to 19 years carried out by Pearson in 2016, the top five qualities of effective teachers were noted as:

1. The ability to develop relationships with their students
2. Having a patient, caring, and kind personality
3. Having knowledge of the learners (including awareness of their cognitive, social, and emotional development)
4. Possessing a dedication to teaching (including dedication to students' successes)
5. Engaging and motivating students to learn (Peterson-DeLuca, 2016).

These qualities of effective teachers which were highlighted by young people themselves, indicate the important role of teacher characteristics in promoting an effective learning environment.

The OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS; OECD, 2019) provides empirical data on the characteristics of effective learning environments across a large number of countries, highlighting the extent to which there is variation in teaching practices across countries. The 2008 cycle of the study showed that post-primary teachers in Ireland were less likely to employ student-oriented practices (such as group work) and enhanced activities (such as extended project work) than their counterparts in many other countries (Gilleece et al., 2009). Ireland has not participated in subsequent cycles of TALIS so more recent data on the usage of active teaching methodologies is not available from this source.

In addition to considerations of effective learning environments, it is important to consider how the skills associated with good wellbeing can be promoted in learning environments and fostered among students. Loveless (nd) identifies a number of strategies that teachers can employ to promote wellbeing and a positive learning environment including: making learning relevant; developing a code of conduct for behaviour; developing a positive actions curriculum to teach positive behaviours for physical, social, and emotional wellbeing; helping students to develop intrinsic motivation; reinforcing positive behaviours; and, modelling positive communication and interactions by responding in a positive way to students and others. It is important to also note that what makes a learning environment effective varies according to local contexts and needs, for example, for some children and young people, basic needs such as provision of food in school, may also impact on physical wellbeing. Findings from TALIS showed that based on teacher reports, teacher-student relations in Ireland compared favourably to those in other countries, with the mean score in Ireland significantly above the corresponding OECD average (Gilleece et al., 2009).

In taking an *ecological systems theory* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) approach to considering the role of wellbeing in the learning environment, it is important to consider the role of teachers within this environment and how interactions with teachers and other students can impact on wellbeing and learning. Through the various strategies that they employ, teachers can promote both wellbeing and learning simultaneously, helping students to develop important behaviours and skills to support their wellbeing. In line with *social learning theory* (Vygotsky, 1962), teachers are in a position to create a classroom environment which allows students to play an active role in their own learning. A more detailed account of the role of teachers in social and emotional learning is presented in Section 5.3.

5.3 THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Teachers play a key role in the creation and maintenance of the learning environment in the classroom. There are numerous ways in which teachers' behaviour can help create an environment that promotes social learning. For example, the tasks a teacher sets; the feedback they provide; the role they adopt in relation to instruction; and, the level of opportunity they provide for students to interact with one another are highly relevant.

In the Irish context, findings from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2009 (Cosgrove, Gilleece, & Shiel, 2011) showed a positive association between civic and citizenship knowledge and two measures of student participation in school. Students' perceptions of the value of participation at school and their perceptions of the openness of classroom discussion were both positively associated

with civic achievement (having controlled for student and school demographic and other background variables). Findings from TALIS show that the mean score in Ireland for classroom disciplinary climate was significantly above the OECD average and a majority of teachers in Ireland reported that students took care to create a pleasant learning environment (Gilleece et al., 2009).

Teachers also play a large role in developing their students' social and emotional skills and competencies. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has developed an integrated framework for social and emotional learning (SEL) which promotes the child's interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive functioning (CASEL, 2017). This framework consists of five core competencies: self-awareness; self-management; responsible decision making; relationship skills; and, social awareness. CASEL (2017) suggests that teaching students about self-awareness gives them the ability to recognise how their emotions, values, and thoughts can influence their behaviour. Furthermore, they indicate that it allows students to view and assess their own strengths and limitations from a place of optimism and confidence. According to CASEL, one purpose of teaching self-management is to give students the skills to regulate their behaviours, skills, and thoughts in challenging and everyday situations. The development of these skills can enable students to motivate themselves to work towards both personal and academic goals, control their impulses, and manage their stress. CASEL proposes that developing students' decision making skills means that they will be able to evaluate the consequences of their actions with reference to their own wellbeing and that of others, and thus make constructive choices. CASEL asserts that developing students' ability to listen, cooperate, and compromise with their peers, communicate constructively, resist peer pressure, and negotiate conflicts in a mature and constructive manner is vital to enable them to make and maintain positive and healthy relationships. Lastly, CASEL considers that developing students' social awareness enables them to empathise with and take the perspective of people from diverse backgrounds and understand the social and cultural norms that can dictate people's behaviours (CASEL, 2017).

SEL improves children's ability to deal effectively with everyday tasks alongside any challenges they may encounter by integrating their skills, attitudes, and behaviours (CASEL, 2017). These skills can be taught in many ways across many different settings. Research has indicated that SEL works best when children are exposed to SEL approaches in all environments in which they spend their time, such as the classroom, throughout the school, in their home, and in their wider community and CASEL supports this approach. A recent meta-analysis of 213 SEL programmes involving over 270 thousand participants from kindergarten to high school (aged 5-18 years), indicated a positive impact of school-based SEL programmes on social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Therefore, the school is clearly one key environment where children can learn the social and emotional skills they need to navigate their lives in a mature and constructive way.

Overall, it seems that the school environment plays an integral role in the development and growth of all children. Here, they are not only taught academic knowledge but also the emotional and social skills they need to navigate the world safely and confidently. It is in the school environment also that the child can put their social skills into practice, interacting with peers and teachers and applying these interactions to their learning. Therefore, it is important that the school environment that each child experiences is open, warm, friendly, and social. That positive social interaction is encouraged, and children are guided to learn together in a constructive manner. The positive development of the child is dependent on the environments that they grow up in – it is important therefore that the school environment is one that nurtures growth.

5.4 TEACHER WELLBEING

Currently, the Department is placing a strong emphasis on the active promotion of student wellbeing in both primary and post-primary schools. The publication of documents such as that of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (DCYA, 2014) and the *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines* (NCCA, 2017a) has

demonstrated the dedication of the DES to improvement in this area. These documents aim to highlight the importance of student wellbeing with regards to their physical, social, and emotional growth; their learning; and, their development. However, when focusing on the promotion of student wellbeing, the wellbeing of teachers should not be overlooked as teacher wellbeing is widely acknowledged as a critical factor in student wellbeing; moreover, taking an ecological systems approach to understanding student wellbeing in school contexts necessitates a consideration of teacher wellbeing.

Recent developments related to teacher wellbeing include the publication of the *Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning* (The Teaching Council, 2016a) and the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023* (DES, 2018b) which have drawn attention to the importance of promoting the self-care and wellbeing of teachers alongside the wellbeing of their students. Prior to the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023*, the guidelines for mental health promotion and *Well-being in Primary Schools; Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention* (DES, HSE, & DOH, 2015b) and *Well-being in Post-primary Schools* (DES, HSE, & DOH, 2013) were in place and these also emphasised the importance of teacher self-care and the need for supports for teacher wellbeing.

By international standards, Irish teachers tend to be largely satisfied with their employment, see e.g., Clerkin (2013). Based on data from PIRLS 2011, teachers at primary-level in Ireland expressed higher levels of career satisfaction than teachers in most other countries (Clerkin, 2013). At post-primary level, teachers in Ireland participating in TALIS 2008 had above average levels of self-efficacy (see Gilleece et al., 2009). Although both of these studies were conducted about a decade ago, they suggest that levels of wellbeing amongst Irish teachers compare favourably to those of teachers on average internationally. The wellbeing of teachers is an important factor to take into account when aiming to promote whole-school wellbeing. The level of wellbeing that a teacher is experiencing can have a direct effect on their ability to cope with stressors in the workplace and create a positive learning environment for their students (Hattie, 2009). Much of the previous research in the area of teacher wellbeing has tended to focus on the factors leading to stress in teachers, teacher retention problems, and teacher burn-out (Roffey, 2012). Recently however, the DES has begun to focus more specifically on the active promotion of teacher wellbeing, to improve the health and happiness of teachers, and to prevent the development of this work-stress and burn-out symptoms that can have a negative impact on the quality of teaching that students are experiencing throughout the country. Kennedy, Flynn, O'Brien, and Greene (2020) present evidence in the Irish context that participation in evidence-based classroom management training is associated with reductions in self-reported levels of teacher burnout and improvements in teacher wellbeing and self-efficacy.

There is some evidence of difficulties with recruitment and retention of teachers in Ireland, particularly at post-primary level (TUI, 2019). Improving and promoting teacher wellbeing is one element of ensuring that the profession is attractive to teachers. Teacher wellbeing is important not only for teachers but also in contributing to safe and secure learning environments for students. Nurturing the wellbeing of teachers is not only important in its own right, but it is also a key step in the promotion of student wellbeing and positive student outcomes.

Teacher wellbeing and student outcomes

The idea that teacher wellbeing may be linked to student outcomes is supported in the literature. In a study by Briner and Dewberry (2007), which involved 24,100 staff in 246 primary and post-primary schools across the UK, three dimensions of teacher wellbeing were analysed: feeling valued and cared for; job stimulation and enjoyment; and, feeling overloaded. It was found that around 8% of the variation in both primary and post-primary students' scores on Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs) was attributable to teacher wellbeing. Average teacher wellbeing scores were also found to be associated with student SAT scores across all subjects. The authors advised caution when interpreting these findings, as this relationship may be bi-directional, that is teachers' feelings of efficacy and wellbeing could be increased

as a result of student achievement in addition to student achievement increasing as a result of improved teacher wellbeing. Despite this potentially circular relationship, it is relevant to note the associations between student outcomes and teacher wellbeing.

Zee and Koomen (2016) conducted a review of the impact of teacher self-efficacy on classroom processes, student academic adjustment, and teacher wellbeing and reported a positive relationship between teacher self-efficacy and aspects of teachers' psychological wellbeing. Of the 165 articles included in the review, a small number reported indirect effects of teacher self-efficacy on both student academic adjustment and teacher wellbeing. The effect of teacher self-efficacy on student academic adjustment may be mediated through style of teaching instruction. The impact of teacher self-efficacy on teacher wellbeing may be mediated through aspects of the classroom environment. The authors state that high self-efficacy can help teachers to stay motivated and satisfied thus improving psychological wellbeing. They also argue that conclusions relating to the impact of teacher self-efficacy on student outcomes have been largely based on theoretical work to date and, as a consequence, more empirical evidence is needed to uncover the relationships between teacher self-efficacy and student outcomes and the influence of classroom processes on this relationship. The work of Kennedy et al. (2020) cited above is an important contribution in this regard.

Moving beyond the impact of teacher wellbeing on outcomes relating to student academic achievement, a recent paper by Harding et al. (2019) reported a positive relationship between teachers' mental health and wellbeing and students' mental health and wellbeing. Better teacher wellbeing was also associated with lower psychological distress in students. Reporting these results from a survey of over 3,000 students aged 12 to 13 from 25 secondary schools in England and Wales and their teachers, Harding et al. postulate that teacher presenteeism and teacher-student relationships may mediate the relationship between teacher wellbeing and student wellbeing. Although the effect sizes reported by Harding et al. are small, their research highlights that the impact of teacher wellbeing on student wellbeing should also be considered in addition to considering the impact on students' academic achievement. Harding et al. (2019) also highlight the reciprocal nature of teacher-student relationships and they cite earlier research by Spilt, Koomen, and Thijs (2011) who suggest that positive teacher-student relationships are important for teachers to feel a sense of relatedness to or connectedness with their students.

In the Irish context, findings from TALIS 2008 noted positive associations between classroom disciplinary climate and teacher security of employment (permanent employment and full-time work), after controlling in a multi-level model for various teacher and school characteristics (Gilleece et al., 2009). Positive teacher-student relations were also positively associated with a positive classroom climate after controlling for other variables.

Reporting findings from the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study, Smyth (2015) highlights the importance of teacher-student relationships and their effect on children's self-image. Using longitudinal data from the GUI child cohort at 9 and 13 years of age, Smyth (2015) reports that negative relationships with teachers at primary level have a negative impact on children's views of themselves as learners. These negative views that children hold about themselves as learners can increase during the transition from primary to second-level education. At post-primary level, results from PISA 2012 indicate the important association between strong teacher-student relationships and increased student engagement with and at school (OECD, 2013a, 2013b).

Supporting teacher wellbeing

One factor which has been argued to be important for the development and maintenance of teacher wellbeing is that of social capital. Social capital has been defined as "*networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups*" (OECD, 2001, p. 41). Coleman (1994) suggests that social capital makes possible the achievement of goals that would otherwise be unattainable, due to the fact that individuals are more likely to share information with

one another and be caring towards each other in communities with high levels of social trust. It has been estimated that teachers are involved in about a thousand interpersonal contacts every day and depending on the quality of these contacts, they can either contribute to a “*toxic work environment*” or improve and sustain the teachers’ sense of wellbeing (Holmes, 2005, cited in Roffey, 2012, p. 10). Teachers’ social capital in the context of the school is centred on the quality of the connections that teachers have with other individuals within the school community. When teachers feel that they have quality connections within the school environment and feel positively connected to those around them, they will achieve a level of social capital which enhances their wellbeing, and enables them to achieve their goals (Roffey, 2012).

Fitting well with the sentiments of both Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner, Roffey (2012) highlighted similarities between the ways in which both teacher and student wellbeing can be supported. She also highlighted the synergy between the promotion of the wellbeing of the teacher and the promotion of the wellbeing of their students. The improvement of the teacher’s wellbeing can improve the outcomes of their students through improved quality of teaching and increased enthusiasm, empathy, and patience. Fostering a sense of belonging has been shown to be crucial for both academic outcomes and health in students and teachers (Blum, 2005; Rowe, Stuart, & Patterson, 2007). Feelings of belonging allow teachers to feel they are needed and important. Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) explained how both students and teachers need to believe that they have an investment in the school in order to promote connectedness within the school environment. Teachers can also benefit from having their strengths recognised by school leaders, much the same as students can benefit from recognition from their teachers (Noble & McGrath, 2012). Having senior management and school leaders making teachers feel valued, respected, and cared for can increase their wellbeing, and positively influence the way that teachers interact with each other and down the line with their students (Roffey, 2012). These findings underline the importance of fostering wellbeing within a whole-school approach. Also, other research confirms the complex and multi-directional relationships between various factors associated with positive wellbeing which suggests that any TPL programme aimed at enhancing student wellbeing is likely to be sub-optimal unless these complexities are taken into consideration. For example, Marzano (2003) found that positive teacher-student relationships can improve teachers’ wellbeing by improving their perceptions of their job. These positive relationships can also improve the social and emotional wellbeing of students (Murray-Harvey, 2010). Related to this, the fundamental role of good communication practices has been identified as a critical requisite for the enhancement of wellbeing. For example, positive communication within relationships can increase job satisfaction and thus wellbeing for teachers (De Nobile, 2008). Both positive downward communication and positive horizontal communication between colleagues was found to lead to improved outcomes for both teachers and students.

Overall, it is clear that sustaining teacher wellbeing is very important in its own right, ensuring that teachers are healthy, happy, and enjoying their jobs. Improving the wellbeing of teachers in turn enables teachers to perform well in the classroom and provide high quality education and a stable learning environment for their students. Further, the fact that levels of teacher wellbeing can actually have a direct impact on student outcomes has been highlighted in the literature (Michie & Cockcroft, 1996; Briner & Dewberry, 2007). Therefore, it seems that improving and sustaining teacher wellbeing is not only important for teachers themselves but also for their students. It has been suggested that one factor that is crucial for the improvement of teacher wellbeing is the development of social capital and quality relationships within the school environment (Roffey, 2012). Alongside this, it has also been suggested that teacher wellbeing and student wellbeing can be improved in many similar ways, and that there is a symbiotic relationship between the wellbeing of the teacher and the wellbeing of the student. The improvement of the wellbeing of teachers can directly improve the wellbeing of students through fostering a sense of belonging, improving teacher-student relationships, recognising strengths and communicating positively within relationships (Roffey, 2012).

5.5 CONCLUSIONS

As described in the current chapter, the wellbeing of children and young people is impacted by the various environments in which they live and not exclusively by the school setting. As outlined in the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023* (DES, 2018b) and other recent Government policies and guidelines, four key areas are identified for health promotion in schools: culture & environment; curriculum (teaching & learning); relationships & partnerships; and, policy & planning. All four areas impact children and young people both within the school setting and beyond. In particular, relationships and partnerships between school staff, children and young people, and their families are important in the broader context of wellbeing. Community partnerships, peer relationships, and external supports are important for the wellbeing of children and young people both within the school context and the wider contexts in which they live. Student-staff relationships are also important and can impact the wellbeing of children and young people and school staff themselves. The culture and climate of the school is important and fostering a positive school culture and climate can impact on the growth and development of children and young people and consequently impact on their wellbeing. The provision of TPL to support the wellbeing of children and young people is also highlighted as a priority with respect to school policy and planning, and self-care and supports for teachers are noted in a number of recent guidelines and policy documents. Taking all of this into account, student wellbeing is impacted by a number of factors and the promotion of wellbeing in schools needs to be considered at a holistic whole-school level. While a more extensive account of teacher wellbeing is beyond the scope of the current review, the impact of student wellbeing on teacher wellbeing and vice versa, and the impact of the school and wider environment on both must be acknowledged.