A Qualitative Study into the Challenges, Design Considerations, and Sustainability Factors of Inter-school Wellbeing Networks, From the Perspectives of Primary School Educators in Ireland

Thesis Submitted for the Award of Doctor of Education

By Aisling Boylan
LLB; MBS; PgDip (Prof Legal Studies); PGCE

Dublin City University
Institute of Education

Supervisors: Dr Alan Gorman and Professor Martin Brown

August 2026

DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and have conformed to the regulations on the use and declaration of Generative AI, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: Aisling Boylan
ID No.: 21268502
Date: 6th August 2026

Reporting of Gen AI Tool Use in Research Theses

Tools: Clearly indicate the tool name and model (or version) you used and the date(s) of use. If you used a tool multiple times, provide the range of dates over which the tool was used and the model/versions used.	Google NotebookLM, was used between January 2026 and May 2026. Google Docs "Refine" feature, accessed through Google Drive, was used between September 2025 and May 2026. Grammarly v1.2.261.1889 was used between April 2026 and May 2026 for spelling, grammar correction and improving sentence coherence. Zoom AI transcription feature was used between July and September 2026.
Outputs: Specify what tool outputs were generated and used by you and for what purpose.	Google NotebookLM, was used to support engagement with academic literature through AI-generated podcast style discussions. Google Docs "Refine" was used to suggest alternative wording and sentence structures during the editing process. Grammarly was used for spelling, grammar correction and improving sentence coherence. AI-assisted Zoom transcriptions were used to produce initial interview transcripts to support the transcription process.
Prompts: Provide a record of the prompts you used here or link to an appendix where the prompts used are listed.	I asked NotebookLM to "Create a podcast discussion of this article" to listen to. I asked Google Docs to "Rephrase this sentence for clarity." I asked Grammarly to "Improve the flow and coherence of this paragraph." No prompts were entered by the researcher to zoom; transcriptions were automatically generated following online interviews.
Iterations: Provide some commentary on the number and type of iterations. This can be linked to your report on prompts and outputs above.	The tools were used iteratively throughout the drafting and editing process. Suggested outputs were reviewed critically by the researcher and selectively accepted, modified or rejected as appropriate. Transcripts were reviewed, checked and corrected manually by the researcher for accuracy prior to analysis.

Critical Reflection: If Gen AI tools have been used minimally, a very brief critical reflection on its role in the research submitted for examination can be included here. Otherwise, specify the parts of the thesis where critical reflection on the use and role of Gen AI tools is included.	Generative AI tools were used in a supportive manner to assist the researcher with literature engagement, interviewing, editing and proofreading. All interpretation, analysis and final written content presented in the thesis remain the independent work of the researcher.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people I would like to thank who have facilitated and inspired my EdD journey.

To my mum who has always emphasised the value of education and working to achieve my goals. Thank you for instilling in me that I can do what I put my mind to and to you and dad for all your support along the way.

To my supervisors Alan and Martin who have guided me through each step of this journey with professionalism, wisdom, generosity and patience. Those small words of encouragement along the journey meant more than you will know!

Thank you to my colleagues in school and in Oide for your support and encouragement. You kept me going during those more difficult days and long evenings!

Thank you to my EdD peers who offered clarity, friendship and inspiration to keep moving forward.

I would like to sincerely thank all the participants for giving their time to take part in this research and for sharing their insights and experiences. Thank you for your generosity and your commitment to improving outcomes for children.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration i
Reporting of Gen AI Tool Use in Research Theses ii
Acknowledgements iv
Table of Contents v
List of Tables viii
List of Figures ix
List of Abbreviations x
Abstract xii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION 1
1.1 Introduction and Background 1
1.2 Irish Policy Context: Wellbeing in Education 8
1.3 The Broader Irish Wellbeing Policy Context 9
1.4 The Development of Wellbeing as a Policy and Curriculum Priority in Irish Education 12
1.5 Defining the Educational Network Landscape 18
1.6 Irish Policy Context: Educational Networks 21
1.7 Wellbeing Enactment 27
1.8 Rationale for the Study 30
1.9 Research Questions 33
1.10 Nature, Scope and Approach of the Study 34
1.11 Research Aims and Expected Contributions 35
1.12 Conclusion 35
1.13 Thesis Structure 36

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW 38
2.1 Introduction 38
2.2 Literature Selection 38
2.3 Part A: Wellbeing in Education 39
2.3.1 Conceptual Foundations: Wellbeing 39
2.3.2 Wellbeing as a Wicked Problem 45
2.3.3 A Whole School Approach to Wellbeing 48
2.4 Challenges to Wellbeing Education 50
2.4.1 Challenges with Policy Enactment 50
2.4.2 Wellbeing of Educators 53
2.4.3 The Expanding Wellbeing Role of Schools 54
2.4.4 Professional Learning Supports in Wellbeing 55
2.4.5 Intersectoral Collaboration 59
2.4.6 Conclusion 65
PART B: Educational Networks to support challenges in Wellbeing Education 66
2.5 Introduction 66
2.5.1 Collaborative Learning Models 67
2.5.2 Networks For Whom and For How Long? 68
2.5.3 Networks For what purpose? 70
2.5.4 Characteristics of Effective Collaboration in Educational Networks 77
2.5.5 Networks by Whom? 87
2.5.6 Conclusion 89

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY 91
3.1 Introduction 91
3.2 Philosophical assumptions 92
3.3 Justifying a Qualitative Approach within a Broader Research Landscape 94
3.4 Research Methodology 95
3.5 Research Methods 101
3.5.1 Data Collection Methods 101
3.5.2 Designing and Structuring Interviews 103
3.5.3 In-Person v Online Interviews 105
3.5.4 Participant Selection 106
3.5.5 Recruitment 109
3.6 Ethical Considerations 109
3.7 Data Anlaysis 110
3.8 Limitations of this Study 118
3.9 Conclusion 119

CHAPTER 4 PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS 120
4.1 Introduction 120
4.2 **Theme 1: Conceptualising Wellbeing and Systems of Support** 121
4.2.1 Wellbeing as a Multidimensional Concept 121
4.2.2 Contextual Influences on Wellbeing Enactment 124
4.2.3 Whole School Approach to Wellbeing Enactment 126
4.2.4 External Supports 132
4.2.5 Schools' as Hubs for Wellbeing Support 137
4.2.6 Boundaries, Burnout and Emotional Labour 137
4.2.7 Theme 1- Conclusion 138
4.3 **Theme 2: Wellbeing Networks in Practice** 139
4.3.1 Wellbeing Network Experience 139
4.3.2 Benefits of a Wellbeing Network 143
4.3.3 Challenges and Barriers 144
4.3.4 Enablers and Sustainability 148
4.3.5 Theme 2- Conclusion 151
4.4 **Theme 3: Wellbeing Network Composition, Purpose and Accountability**
4.4.1 Composition of a Wellbeing Network- A Multi-Stakeholder Approach 152
4.4.2 Network Leadership 157
4.4.3 Shared Purpose of a Wellbeing Network 159
4.4.4 Structural Clarity 160
4.4.5 Evaluation of Wellbeing and Network Evaluation 162
4.4.6 Theme 3- Conclusion 165

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS 166
5.1 Introduction 166
5.2 Discussion of Research Questions 168
5.3 Wellbeing Network Design Principles 172
5.4 Key Implications of the Study 186
5.5 Limitations of the Study 188
5.6 Further Research 189
5.7 Key Contributions to Research, Policy, and Practice 190
5.8 Concluding Remarks 192

REFERENCES 193

Appendix A 241
Appendix B 242
Appendix C 243
Appendix D 245
Appendix E 247
Appendix F 250

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 Irish Policies Promoting Wellbeing

Table 1.2 Irish Policies Promoting Wellbeing in Education

Table 1.3 Irish Policies Promoting Educational Networks

Table 2.1 Sharing Continuum (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017)

Table 3.1 Choosing a Qualitative Research Approach (adapted from Creswell, 2007)

Table 3.2 Details of participants in the study

Table 3.3 Six Step Approach to Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Table 3.4 Illustrative Examples of the Analytical Process (Conceptualising Wellbeing and Systems of Support**)**

Table 3.5 Illustrative Examples of the Analytical Process (Wellbeing Networks in Practice)

Table 3.6 Illustrative Examples of the Analytical Process (Wellbeing Network Composition, Purpose and Accountability)

Table 4.1 Themes and Sub-themes

Table 5.1 Wellbeing Network Design Principles Overview

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Minkkinen's Structural Model of Child Wellbeing (2013)

Figure 2 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development (Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979), (DES, 2019).

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CDNT	Children's Disability Network Team
CoPs	Communities of Practice
CSL	Children's School Lives
CSN	Changemaker Schools Network
DCDE	Department of Children, Disability and Equality
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School
DoCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DoE	Department of Education
DoH	Department of Health
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DoEY	Department of Education and Youth
DCU	Dublin City University
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
EPV	Extra Personal Vacation
FSES	Full Service Extended Schools
GUI	Growing Up in Ireland
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HBSC	Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children
HPS	Health Promoting Schools
HSE	Health Service Executive
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ITEP	Initial Teacher Education Provider
LAOS	Looking at Our School
LEA	Local Education Authority
NCCCI	National Centre for City Connects Ireland
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PLC	Professional Learning Community

PLNs	Professional Learning Networks
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
RSE	Relationships and Sexuality Education
SET	Special Education Teacher
SHE	Schools for Health in Europe
SIP	School Improvement Plan
SMCW	Structural Model of Child Wellbeing
SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
TCI	Teaching Council Ireland
TESS	Tusla Education Support Service
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSECO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation
WSCC	Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child

ABSTRACT

A Qualitative Study into the Challenges, Design Considerations, and Sustainability Factors of Inter-school Wellbeing Networks, From the Perspectives of Primary School Educators in Ireland

Aisling Boylan

Promoting wellbeing is a national priority in Irish primary schools outlined in The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* and reinforced by recent *Children's School Lives* (CSL) data, showing a decline in positive emotions among 4th to 6th class pupils and increased anxiety in 2nd class pupils between 2019 and 2023. Simultaneously, Irish and international policy encourage education networks as platforms for reflection, collaboration and improvement. While both wellbeing enactment and networks are promoted in Irish education, practical guidance on network development and function is limited. Critically, the literature lacks principals' and teachers' perspectives on the opportunities and challenges that networks pose for supporting wellbeing enactment. This study addresses this gap by exploring educators' needs and wants from wellbeing networks.

The research examines how primary school educators understand and enact wellbeing in their school contexts, the potential role of networks and external partnerships in supporting wellbeing enactment and the challenges, design and sustainability factors of these networks.

A qualitative methodological design used semi-structured interviews with sixteen primary school educators from diverse contexts to prioritise participants' voices and capture their lived experiences regarding network support for wellbeing.

Findings suggest that wellbeing is a priority in all school contexts, with varying degrees of enactment and understanding at the whole school level. Disparities emerged across schools in accessing and obtaining support for pupil wellbeing, highlighting a need for stronger, consistent intersectoral relationships between health and education. A multidisciplinary approach to networks was identified as a solution to equitably deliver services and resources by collaboratively involving all individuals in a child's life. The study found existing networks lacked coherence and structure, resulting in unrealised potential. Sustainable network activity requires strong relational factors, a shared purpose and the essential structural supports.

This study enhances understanding of how network structures can support collective problem solving in wellbeing enactment.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction and Background

The wellbeing of students is an 'international policy priority in schools' (Lisec and Gillett-Swan, 2026, p.1), with schools holding a key role in its promotion (Curren *et al.* 2024). Schools have a history of addressing student wellbeing through various initiatives, such as comprehensive sex education, substance abuse prevention, and anti-cyberbullying programmes, particularly as digital technology became widespread (Foley, Stringer and Wheeler, 2025). However, the impetus on education systems to prioritise student wellbeing has become more pronounced since the COVID-19 pandemic, when students were unable to connect with their peers or receive full support from their teachers (OECD, 2024a). The pandemic hindered children's social development, leading to a need for social-emotional support and difficulties in forming friendships (Marsh and Blackwell, 2025). This relatedness is important, as strong friendships boost children's competence and agency (Hargreaves, Quick, and Buchanan, 2025). The pandemic has also served as a reminder that schools are more than sites of academic learning; they are vital parts of the 'social fabric of our communities,' supporting children to thrive socially, academically, psychologically and physically (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020, p.9).

Furthermore, the global landscape of schools has been restructured by globalisation and migration, offering richer learning but contributing to racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia, which perpetuate social disintegration and inequity (Pliogou and Tromara 2026). Primary education is key for early intervention to combat stereotypes and build inclusive cultures (Pliogou and Tromara 2026). In addition, children with a refugee background often have lower psychological wellbeing due to adverse experiences. Teachers play a vital role for these children as observers of their wellbeing and in fostering protective factors, such as positive teacher-pupil and peer interactions and helping them manage their self-regulation skills (Leeuwestein *et al.* 2026).

The past decade has also brought fundamental changes impacting children's mental and physical health. Children are increasingly reporting higher levels of anxiety, stress, and academic pressure (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020), alongside difficulties with sleep and reduced engagement in physical activity (Inchley *et al.*, 2020). Childhood obesity is a growing concern, affecting one in three children aged five to nine in European regions (WHO, 2025). The continually evolving digital environment, with the proliferation of social media platforms and the use of Artificial Intelligence, presents further concerns for students' mental and social health (Foley, Stringer and Wheeler, 2025). Cyberbullying, amplified by the omnipresence of the digital world, poses greater safety risks (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020). While anti-bullying measures are prominent on policy agendas in most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and reported rates declining, 23% of students still report being bullied 'at least a few times per month' (OECD, 2019b, p.47). Younger adolescents are more frequently victims of bullying than older adolescents (Inchley *et al.* 2020).

In Ireland, the Children's School Lives (CSL) longitudinal study provides important data pre and post COVID-19. Data reports a decrease in children's feelings of happiness from 4th to 6th class and a decrease in positive emotions about themselves between 2nd and 6th class, particularly for girls (Sloan *et al.* 2024). Furthermore, higher levels of anxiety and worry were recorded in 2nd class children in 2023 in comparison to 2nd class children in 2019 (Sloan *et al.* 2024).

Since 2018, there has been a decrease in reported high life satisfaction across all age groups, according to Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) data. This drop ranged from 6 per cent among 10–11-year-olds, to 9 per cent among 12–14-year-olds, and peaked at 13 per cent among 15–17-year-olds (Lunney *et al.* 2025). These were the largest drops since the first HBSC reports in 2002. Similarly, despite ranking first for educational skills, Ireland ranked twenty-four out of thirty-six for adolescent mental health (UNICEF, 2025).

Socio-economic differences also exist in children's wellbeing (Dempsey, Farrell and McCoy, 2025). Notably, the CSL study highlighted that children experiencing disadvantage report higher levels of worry, including anxiety about the future, compared

to those in non- Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School (DEIS) schools (Devine *et al.* 2024).

In addition to socio-economic factors, students with learning difficulties or disabilities face a higher risk of mental health issues (European Commission, 2024), including anxiety and low self-esteem (NCSE, 2014). For these students, schools are therefore vital in promoting a sense of belonging and student voice (Dempsey, Farrell and McCoy, 2025).

These international and Irish trends highlight the vital role of schools in supporting children's wellbeing. Schools have the potential to reach children at an early age, when they are developing behaviours and attitudes that may influence their future health (Higgins and Booker, 2023). Schools must prioritise physical, mental, and social factors to help students build emotional resilience, positive relationships, mental wellbeing, and healthy digital habits (Foley, Stringer and Wheeler, 2025). This requires continuous evolution and collaborative, innovative interventions to anticipate and enhance wellbeing (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020), such as inclusive curricula that celebrate diversity and integrate cultural perspectives; learning through play; fostering strong relationships; and establishing local, national, and global partnerships (Bell and Potts, 2025). Since factors beyond the school gates influence children's wellbeing, schools cannot operate in isolation. Schools must build strong networks with families, healthcare providers, welfare agencies, higher education institutions, and other local stakeholders to address challenges (European Commission, 2024).

This study explores the challenges, design considerations and sustainability factors of inter-school wellbeing networks in Irish primary education, drawing on educators' experiences of wellbeing and the role of networks and external partnerships in supporting wellbeing enactment.

This opening chapter establishes the study's context and rationale for both wellbeing in education and educational networks. It first addresses how wellbeing has been positioned as a global educational priority, focusing on supranational influence on Irish policy. It then explores how educational discourse internationally is promoting collaboration, networking and multi-agency partnerships to support wellbeing in education. Thereafter, the broader Irish policy context surrounding wellbeing and the national focus on wellbeing in education are discussed.

Subsequently, educational networks are defined and the Irish policy context for networks is examined to provide context and rationale. The chapter then links wellbeing and networks, discussing how networks can address challenges in wellbeing enactment. Finally, the chapter outlines the research questions, scope, approach, and expected contributions.

Wellbeing: A Global Educational Priority

Concerns regarding children's wellbeing have gained prominence internationally, and wellbeing has been positioned as a key educational priority by organisations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the OECD and the WHO.

UNICEF and UNESCO emphasise a holistic and rights-based approach to children's wellbeing. Monitoring children's wellbeing is necessary to achieve the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals related to child wellbeing (Requejo *et al.* 2022). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a pledge by nations worldwide to the welfare, rights, and sustainable environment of individuals, focusing specifically on children's learning and protection, and on tackling inequality and social exclusion, all of which impact student wellbeing (UNICEF, 2023). Furthermore, the UNESCO education strategy for health and wellbeing (2022–2029) prioritises promoting students' physical and mental health through school health systems, providing comprehensive sexuality education, and ensuring safe, inclusive learning environments free from bullying, violence, and discrimination (UNESCO, 2022a). School systems are considered a 'smart way for countries to improve health and education' providing 'an ideal and cost-effective setting for preventive interventions' (UNESCO, 2022b, p.9).

The OECD shapes how countries understand and measure wellbeing by providing a comprehensive framework, global measurement guidelines, and integrating wellbeing metrics into assessments such as PISA. This allows for cross-national comparison and policy-relevant evidence (OECD, 2026). The OECD's definition of wellbeing includes subjective wellbeing, which is considered essential to measure from age ten, as it tends to decline during adolescence (OECD, 2026). The OECD's definition of wellbeing will be explored in chapter two.

The WHO focuses more on defining and promoting wellbeing than on measuring it, emphasising protective and risk factors (WHO, 2014). Wellbeing is defined by individual functioning, including the realisation of one's abilities, mental health, resilience, and community contribution (WHO, 2005). The WHO's Health Promoting Schools (HPS) framework advocates a holistic, whole school approach to wellbeing structured around six components (Bessems, Bartelink and Prevo, 2020).

Global Influences on Irish Wellbeing Educational Policy

International discourse and agendas have shaped Ireland's understanding and implementation of wellbeing in educational policy and schools. Since the 1999 Primary School Curriculum, wellbeing has been an implicit curricular element, promoted through subjects such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Aistear (Nohilly and Tynan, 2022). However, recent curriculum redevelopment has shifted wellbeing to an explicit, distinct curricular area, allocating 'at least 10% of curricular time in its own right' (Farrell *et al.* 2024, p.49), and becoming an explicit policy focus. This change reflects the recognition that the education system is crucial for equipping children with the 'knowledge, skills and competencies to deal with challenges that impact on their wellbeing' (DES, 2019, p.5).

Reviewing and promoting wellbeing provision has been elevated to a national priority in Irish primary schools with a requirement on schools to have engaged with the six-step School Self-Evaluation (SSE) process 'to initiate a wellbeing promotion and review development cycle' by 2025 (DE, 2022b, p.6) using The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice. Hereafter, this will be referred to as the *Wellbeing Framework*. The *Wellbeing Framework* sets out the government's ambition and vision for promoting and implementing wellbeing in schools and education centres. This refers to 'primary and post primary schools, including special schools, and alternative education settings such as Youthreach, Community Training Centres, Hospital Schools, High Support Special Schools and Youth Encounter Projects' (DES, 2019, p.3). The six-step SSE process involves identifying wellbeing as a focus, gathering evidence by consulting the whole school community, analysing and making judgements on the evidence, writing and sharing the improvement report, putting it into action, and monitoring its effectiveness (DES, 2019). Despite the *Wellbeing Framework*'s comprehensive structure, translating this policy into effective school practice is challenging. This difficulty stems from a

combination of factors: competing demands (Dempsey and McCoy, 2024), competitive and academic school cultures, insufficient awareness of the benefits of promoting wellbeing, and school staff feeling inadequately equipped to address mental health issues (Higgins and Booker, 2022).

The *Wellbeing Framework* (DES, 2019), based on the WHO's definition (WHO, 2005), guides schools in the enactment of wellbeing across four key areas informed by the HPS framework (WHO, 1998): culture and environment, curriculum, relationships and partnerships, and policy and planning. These four areas will be considered in relation to enactment later in this chapter. The policies long-term success is intended to be measurable in OECD data (DES, 2019). Although a wellbeing evaluation framework was planned, its dissemination to schools is still pending (DES, 2019). This lack of dissemination has been identified as a weakness, and a national school climate survey has been suggested to measure the policy's impact (Dempsey and McCoy, 2024). Currently, schools use the framework's statements of effective practice for progress assessment, aligning with the SSE process (DES, 2019).

Following the *Wellbeing Framework*, there were significant policy developments in Irish education, including the *Bí Cineálta procedures to prevent and address bullying in primary and post-primary schools* (DoE, 2024a) and *The Child Protection Procedures for Schools* (Department of Education and Youth (DoEY), 2025). These will be considered further later in the chapter.

Global Influences on Educational Networks

In parallel, educational discourse internationally is promoting collaboration, networking and multi-agency partnerships to support wellbeing in education. Whilst the education sector has a pivotal role to play in wellbeing enactment, alone it cannot address the wellbeing issues that impact students (UNESCO, 2022a). There has been a call for a more integrated, systems approach and coordinated action to support whole school wellbeing enactment (UNESCO, 2022a). The WHO HPS Framework (WHO, 2024) emphasises the involvement of the whole school community, including staff, parents, education officials, external services and agencies, in promoting wellbeing. In this way, schools are positioned within a wider network to solve problems and enhance wellbeing in their own contexts.

UNESCO's 2022-2029 strategy prioritises promoting education links with sectors like child protection, health, and social protection, and enhancing collaboration among those involved in teacher training, curriculum development, and school health (UNESCO, 2022a). This necessitates breaking down the silos to work across policy sectors and research disciplines (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020).

The OECD advocates for developing teacher and leader networks to support continuous learning through peer dialogue and exchange of new ideas and practice (OECD, 2023). Analysis of innovative learning systems highlights the crucial ‘meso level’ role in promoting 'horizontal connectedness’ between schools and the wider world, reinforcing the principle that schools should not operate in isolation (OECD, 2015c, p.8). Strengthening this middle tier is key to network function (OECD, 2012). This necessitates multi-layer governance, suggesting that leadership is most effective when operating 'not only in the middle but from the middle' (OECD, 2015a, p.17). Such an approach positions teachers and leaders as vital change agents for system improvement amid increasing educational complexity (OECD, 2012). The OECD calls for ‘greater consistency in collaborative professionalism’ and higher quality collaborative practices that positively affect student learning (OECD, 2015a, p. 17), making inter-school and system-wide collaboration essential, not optional. Schools must enhance their social, cultural, and professional capital with others, as ‘isolation within a world of complex learning systems seriously limits potential’ (Schleicher, 2016, p.17).

Finally, the UN Transforming Education Summit highlighted an ‘ongoing and worsening crisis in teaching’ due to a teacher shortage, driven by attrition, poor working conditions, and limited professional development (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2024, p. ix). To mitigate this, the High-Level Panel recommended that governments strengthen teacher collaboration at the local, regional, and international levels. This involves forming partnerships connecting teachers with policymakers, researchers, and relevant organisations, specifically by creating local and international networks to facilitate best practice sharing, mutual learning, and research participation (ILO, 2024, p.4).

The current international focus on collaboration, partnerships, collective responsibility, and networked learning has impacted Irish educational policy. As a result, these concepts are now embedded in Irish policy documents, with the expectation that schools will

engage in network participation. This development will be examined in greater detail later in this chapter.

1.2 Irish Policy Context

Wellbeing in Education

The conceptualisation and enactment of wellbeing within Irish schools is shaped by educational discourse, definitions and measurement frameworks set by organisations such as the OECD as well as Irelands own national policies. This section focuses on the definition of wellbeing presented in the central Irish policy document. The following section will then explore the broader national wellbeing policy landscape and how wellbeing is positioned within educational policy.

The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice

The *Wellbeing Framework* represented a significant advance for Irish education, as its publication established the first formal definition of wellbeing specifically for schools:

> Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life (DES, 2019, p. 10).

This definition provides a starting point for engaging with the requirements of the policy and helps school staff understand the different elements of wellbeing (Nohilly *et al.* 2023). Conversely, in countries like Australia, the lack of a mandated policy and a single definition across jurisdictions leads to inconsistent definitions of wellbeing, causing ambiguity for educators (Lisec and Gillett-Swan, 2026).

The definition in the *Wellbeing framework* confirms that wellbeing can coexist with stress, acknowledging that everyone may experience vulnerability along their life journey (Dempsey and McCoy, 2024). Experiences of ill-being and individual vulnerabilities are elements of the human condition (Bourke *et al.* 2025). The definition of wellbeing within the *Wellbeing Framework* will be further discussed and contrasted with Minkkinen's (2013) Structural Model of Child Wellbeing (SMCW) and the OECD framework for measuring and evaluating student wellbeing in chapter two.

1.3 The Broader Irish Wellbeing Policy Context

Children's wellbeing has been increasingly cited in Irish policy documents, summarised in Table 1.1, with increased visibility at the government policy level, taking a whole system approach. Several policy documents have paved the way for the development of the *Wellbeing Framework* and for the DoE's commitment to wellbeing promotion (DES, 2019).

Table 1.1 Irish Policies Promoting Wellbeing

Policy/ Framework	Year	Key Policy Priorities	Relevance to this study
National Children's Strategy, Our Children-Their Lives	2000	A ten-year plan to enhance children's lives.	Marked a shift towards a 'whole child' perspective in policy and service delivery, recognising that a child's development is linked to their family, community, and wider society.
Growing Up in Ireland: National Longitudinal Study of Children	2006	To track the lives and development of children over time from infancy into adulthood.	The data identifies factors supporting and hindering children's wellbeing to inform evidence-based policy.
The Healthy Ireland Framework	2013-2025	Aimed to improve Ireland's mental health and wellbeing through cross-government, health service, and community collaboration.	A review of the strategy noted persistent concerns, including childhood obesity, cyberbullying, vaping, decline in youth mental health and the need to strengthen the whole-of-government approach and embed wellbeing in national policy.
Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People	2014-2020	Adoption of a holistic approach to child wellbeing and set five measurable wellbeing outcomes focused on physical, mental, emotional, and social health.	The report on this strategy highlighted downward trends in young people's mental health, a fall in the general happiness of children and life-satisfaction of eleven to seventeen-year-olds and an increase in school bullying.
Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for	2023-2028	To place children and young people at the centre of policy and	It prioritises breaking down the siloed nature of youth mental health services by facilitating

Children and Young People		address their most pressing issues.	cross-working between departments and its agencies.
First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families	2019-2028	To support children from birth to age five through holistic support services for them and their families.	The strategy recognises the impact of a child's circle of care (Minkkinen, 2013) and the child's immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which impacts on their wellbeing.

The *National Children's Strategy, Our Children-Their Lives* (Department of Health and Children, 2000) was the first National Children's Strategy, a ten year plan to enhance children's lives. This strategy provided 'an important blueprint for improving children's lives' (Nohilly and Tynan, 2022). It mandated specific actions for all children's service providers and a shift towards a 'whole child' perspective in policy and service delivery, recognising that a child's development is linked to their family, community, and wider society. Grounded in the UNCRC (UN, 1989), the policy prioritises children's voices and supports that help children reach their full potential.

During this time, an important outcome of the aforementioned strategy was the *Growing Up in Ireland (GUI): National Longitudinal Study of Children* established in 2006, which tracks the lives and development of three cohorts of children over time, from infancy to adulthood, representing an investment in research on children and families (Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE, 2019). Data is collected from children, their schools and parents and aims to identify factors that support or hinder participants' wellbeing to inform evidence-based policy (DCDE, 2019). The study focuses on physical and socio-emotional wellbeing and academic performance from age nine, adding economic and civic participation at age seventeen. Relevant findings show that a positive school climate protects mental wellbeing, while teacher conflict in younger children is linked to greater internalising difficulties (Nolan and Smyth, 2021). The EU advocates more longitudinal subjective wellbeing surveys to better analyse life transitions and causal relationships (Goswami, Fox, and Pollock, 2016).

Following on from this, the *Healthy Ireland Framework* (Department of Health, DoH, 2013), a national strategy from 2013-2025, aimed to improve Ireland's mental health and wellbeing through cross-government, health service, and community collaboration.

However, a review of the strategy (DoH, 2025, p.15) noted persistent concerns, including 20% childhood obesity and 'new challenges' like cyberbullying and vaping. The report also confirmed the decline in youth mental health, echoing earlier referenced HBSC data. Recommendations focused on equitable, point-of-need access to mental health supports, particularly for youth. It was also advised that the subsequent health and wellbeing framework be led by a central authority, such as the Department of the Taoiseach, to strengthen the whole-of-government approach and embed wellbeing in national policy.

Supported by GUI data, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014) adopted a holistic approach to child wellbeing, focusing on physical, mental, emotional, and social health, alongside critical factors like poverty, child safety, and education access. It set five measurable wellbeing outcomes, including children feeling connected and contributing to society. Further, this policy recognised that children's worlds were changing, emphasising the need to develop their digital literacy skills and online safety. The report on this strategy (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2022) again highlighted concerning downward trends in young people's mental health, which it states need to be understood and addressed, a fall in the general happiness of children and life-satisfaction of eleven to seventeen-year-olds and an increase in school bullying.

The *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028* (DoCEDIY, 2023), successor to *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: 2014–2020* acknowledges fragmented policies to date and prioritises breaking down 'the possible siloed nature of youth mental health services under different parent departments by facilitating cross-working between departments and its agencies' to identify service gaps and a coordinated approach (DoCEDIY, 2023, p.45).

Building on child wellbeing initiatives, *First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland (GoI), 2019) is a whole government and society approach that recognises the vital role of the early years in lifelong wellbeing. The strategy aims to support children from birth to age five through holistic support services for them and their families, 'to contribute to their learning, development, health and wellbeing' (GoI, 2019, p. 12). Its strategic goals explicitly

include fostering strong, supportive families and optimising children's mental health via improved access to health services (GoI, 2019). This recognises the impact of a child's circle of care (Minkkinen, 2013) and the child's immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). How these relate to a child's wellbeing will be discussed further in chapter two.

Mental health and wellbeing promotion increasingly became a central focus of health policy agendas in Ireland. All policy documents referenced are rooted in the UNCRC (UN, 1989), emphasising the rights and voice of the child. Further, the need for coordination between government departments and agencies is emphasised in all documents so that goals to support children's wellbeing can be achieved. This shows that wellbeing is not just a matter for education, but for all government departments that work with and support children (Nohilly and Tynan, 2022). This study seeks to establish the role networks and external partnerships play in supporting wellbeing enactment in schools. The next section will explore the evolution of wellbeing within Irish educational policy.

1.4 The Development of Wellbeing as a Policy and Curriculum Priority in Irish Education

Educational policy in Ireland has increasingly focused on wellbeing, paving the way for the development of the *Wellbeing Framework* and establishing wellbeing as a core focus from early childhood through post-primary education (Nohilly and Tynan, 2022). The Irish education system views the enhancement and integration of student wellbeing within curricular and policy frameworks as crucial to a child's overall educational experience (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024). However, the introduction of wellbeing into the system followed a fragmented timeline, starting with the early years sector, then expanding to the Junior Cycle programme, and eventually reaching primary education. A summary of these policies is presented in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2- Irish Policies Promoting Wellbeing in Education

Policy/ Framework	Year	Key Policy Priorities	Relevance to this study
Aistear: The early childhood curriculum framework	2009	A national curriculum framework for children from birth to six years.	Encompasses both psychological and physical wellbeing as one of its four interconnected themes.
Framework for Junior Cycle	2015	To outlines the key educational changes for young people in the first three years of post-primary education.	Established Wellbeing as a core principle and a dedicated area of learning for students.
Curriculum Specification for Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education	2024	To outline the curriculum specification for Social, Personal and Health Education for young people in their final two years of post-primary education	The curriculum includes strands such as health and wellbeing, relationships and sexuality, and Into Adulthood. However, wellbeing is not a distinct area of learning.
Primary Curriculum Framework	2023	To support the development of the primary curriculum.	Wellbeing is included as one of the five broad curricular areas and 'Being Well' is identified as a Key Competency within the framework.
Circular 67/2025	2025	To provide guidance on the redeveloped primary school curriculum and enactment.	Wellbeing was prioritised as one of the first three curricular areas schools must enact over a two-year period.
Well-being in Primary Schools: Guidelines for mental health promotion	2015	To offer practical guidance on how primary schools could promote mental health and wellbeing.	It introduced a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Policy/ Framework	Year	Key Policy Priorities	Relevance to this study
Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying in Primary and Post-Primary Schools.	2024	To prevent and address bullying in primary and post-primary schools.	The policy has helped integrate wellbeing into school practices.
Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying	2022	To set out the Department of Education's road map to prevent and address bullying.	It offered four key principles: prevention, support, oversight and community to support children's wellbeing.
Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying Implementation Plan	2023-2027	To outline sixty-one actions as part of a whole education approach to prevent and address bullying.	The actions include schools and the wider education system and society, including academia, digital platforms and technology in education working together.
The Child Protection Procedures	2025	To provide direction and guidance for schools in meeting statutory requirements under the Children First Act 2015.	The four key areas of wellbeing are referenced, emphasising that child protection and welfare considerations must permeate all aspects of school life.
DEIS Strategy	2026-2035	A whole-system framework to combat educational disadvantage and promote wellbeing.	Positive mental health is a priority area in the scheme. Each school will gain a Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing Coordinator to lead a whole school approach.

Early Childhood

The introduction of *Aistear: The early childhood curriculum framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, 2009) for children from birth to six years was an early step, encompassing both psychological and physical wellbeing as one of its four interconnected themes (NCCA, 2009).

Post-Primary - Junior Cycle

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES, 2015) in 2015 established Wellbeing as a core principle and a dedicated area of learning for students in their first three years of post-primary school. The Wellbeing Curriculum integrates PE, Civic, Social and Political Education, and SPHE, with guidelines encouraging collaborative planning to ensure a cohesive and comprehensive programme (NCCA, 2021). The broader *Wellbeing Framework* guides the embedding of wellbeing across both primary and secondary schools (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024).

Post-Primary - Senior Cycle

In contrast, wellbeing is not a distinct area of learning in the Senior Cycle programme, which covers the final two years of post-primary education. The curriculum includes strands such as health and wellbeing, relationships and sexuality, and Into Adulthood (NCCA, 2024). This omission has been described as a 'missing link' between the Junior and Senior Cycles, impeding schools' efforts to achieve a holistic vision of wellbeing (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024, p. 13).

Primary and Special Schools

Wellbeing has transitioned from an implicit to an explicit curricular area within the redeveloped curriculum for primary and special schools. In 2023, it was explicitly included as one of five broad curricular areas and 'Being Well' was identified as a key competency in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2023). This commitment was reinforced by circular 67/2025 (DoEY, 2025a), which uniquely prioritised Wellbeing as one of the first three curricular areas schools must enact over two years.

Within the curriculum specification, Wellbeing serves as the overarching term for SPHE and PE. The rationale for this curricular area includes supporting academic achievement through social skill development, fostering social-emotional competence, promoting positive behaviour, reducing incidents of bullying and mental health difficulties, and developing physical skills (Nohilly *et al.* 2023). While PE is known to promote wellbeing, it also offers opportunities for children to navigate experiences of ill-being, such as losing a competitive situation, physical discomfort and failure to achieve (Bourke *et al.* 2025). A broad range of PE experiences can support a child in navigating difficult situations,

developing emotional regulation and self-awareness, and coping with the normal stresses of life (Bourke *et al.* 2025).

Wellbeing's inclusion as an area of learning has been influenced by countries such as Scotland, New Zealand, Australia, and Finland, where it is part of the mandatory or state curriculum (Nohilly and Tynan, 2022). Incorporating SPHE and PE aligns with practises in these countries.

In 2015, the publication of *Well-being in Primary Schools: Guidelines for mental health promotion* (DES *et al.* 2015) introduced a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing, framed within the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) three-tired continuum of support to address the needs of pupils. This moves wellbeing beyond a focus on the pedagogical level (Higgins and Booker, 2023). The guidelines conceptualised positive mental health holistically, incorporating emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual wellbeing. A whole-school approach was comprehensively defined to include students and staff, parents, and the wider community; the curriculum and pedagogical practice; the school environment; and the school's ethos, organisation, and management structures (DES *et al.* 2015). This policy document was instrumental in the development of the subsequent *Wellbeing Framework*. While the 2015 guidelines offered practical advice specifically for primary schools, the later *Wellbeing Framework* (DES, 2019, p.5) has a broader scope, targeting 'government departments, non-government organisations and all those with an interest in wellbeing promotion in education.'

Further supporting the wellbeing agenda in education are key developments in specific policy areas. The *Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying in Primary and Post-primary schools (*DoE, 2024a), as well as the preceding reports and plans, have been central to integrating wellbeing into school practices. The Bí Cineálta procedures replaced the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (DES, 2013). The *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying* 2022 (DoE, 2022c) came first and set out the Department of Education's roadmap to prevent and address bullying, rooted in four key principles of prevention, support, oversight, and community. This was followed by the *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying Implementation Plan* 2023-2027 (DoE, 2023a), which contains sixty-one actions as part of a 'whole education approach' to preventing

and addressing bullying (O'Higgins Norman *et al.*2022, p.328). This includes schools and 'the wider education system and society' (O'Higgins Norman *et al.*2022, p.333) including academia, digital platforms and technology in education. Finally, the *Bí Cineálta Procedures* were published in 2024. These frameworks consistently align with and reinforce school efforts in wellbeing by outlining strategies to prevent and address bullying across the four core areas defined in the *Wellbeing Framework*.

A further significant wellbeing-related development was the publication of *The Child Protection Procedures* (DoEY, 2025b), revised from the 2023 version and informed by a High-Level Independent Review of the Department of Education's 2023 Child Protection Policies and Processes (Buick, 2021). They provide direction and guidance for schools in meeting statutory requirements under the Children First Act 2015, while also supporting best practice as outlined in Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017). The procedures clarify the important distinction between child protection, protecting children who are or are likely to suffer from abuse, and child safeguarding, ensuring safe practices and responses and creating environments that help children grow and reach their potential (DoEY, 2025).

The four key areas of wellbeing are again referenced, emphasising that child protection and welfare considerations must 'permeate all aspects of school life and be reflected in the school's policies, procedures and practices' (DoEY, 2025, p.15).

In January 2026, a grant was announced for primary schools to facilitate the implementation of the wellbeing specification, funding 'hands-on learning experiences and more inclusive, engaging environments' (DoE, 2026, p.1). Approved resource categories, including PE, emotional and sensory regulation, social wellbeing, literacy, and personal health, promote a holistic view of wellbeing. While providing practical support, the funding's longevity is unclear, despite being part of a 'long-term plan' (DoE, 2026, p.1). The requirement for purchased items to be 'long-term', 'durable,' and 'reusable' (DoE, 2026, p.2) suggests the need for careful resource management to ensure longevity.

Finally, the ten-year DEIS Strategy to 2035 (DoEY, 2026a) is a whole-system framework to combat educational disadvantage and promote wellbeing. It aims to provide enhanced support to schools with a 'very high concentration of children and young people impacted by intergenerational poverty and disadvantage' (DoEY, 2026a, p. 30). This level of

disadvantage is linked to increased risk of adverse childhood experiences and trauma, affecting about half the children in schools consulted for the DEIS Plus Scheme.

The first implementation plan (2026-2028) emphasises collaboration across government and the education sector. Drawing on the CSL study, the policy acknowledges that disadvantaged children report higher levels of worry and anxiety compared to non-DEIS students (Devine *et al.* 2024). The CSL report also connects disadvantage to rising costs of living, homelessness, housing insecurity, drug addiction, food poverty, and trauma (Devine *et al.* 2024).

Positive mental health is a priority area in the scheme. Each school will have a Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing Coordinator to lead a whole-school approach. Additionally, Education Wellbeing Practitioners, supervised by NEPS psychologists, will offer prevention and early intervention for mild or emerging needs (DoEY, 2026b). Further supports include extending the Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot for select children. The policy also mandates trauma-informed training for all school staff to build confidence in supporting children and understanding intergenerational disadvantage. However, these expanded responsibilities may blur professional boundaries, which will be discussed in chapter two.

The priority placed on student wellbeing in Irish educational policy is evident, with a commitment to involve all stakeholders in a child's life. Policy recognises the inextricable link between a child's schooling experiences and their overall wellbeing. Having established the policy context for wellbeing enactment in Irish primary schools, the next step is to clearly understand the role of networks in the enactment process. This chapter will begin by offering a working definition, with a more detailed examination of the concept following in chapter two.

1.5 Defining the Educational Network Landscape

The educational sector has seen a shift over the last decade, moving from internal, school-based networks to interschool networks encompassing diverse contexts (Daly and Stoll, 2018). Both practitioner-initiated networks and system-funded networks have proliferated in jurisdictions around the world (Sinnema *et al.* 2020). While the term ‘network’ is well-established in fields like psychology and business, its definitional malleability allows it to serve as an umbrella term for various social interactions, often

used interchangeably with terms such as partnership, clusters, communities of practice, and collaboration (Brown *et al.* 2020). Despite its prominence in Irish educational policy, a formal definition of educational networks is lacking, and data on their structure and effectiveness remain scarce.

At its most basic, a network is a group of interconnected people who establish mutual connections that sustain it (European Commission, 2018). These networks exhibit variations in size and structure and are frequently rooted in voluntarism (O'Hara *et al.* 2020).

To bridge policy and practice in this study, formal networks are defined as public and private organisations, departments, and agencies established to support collective goals (Provan and Kenis, 2008), such as enhancing wellbeing enactment. These networks can span different educational levels (primary, secondary, and university) and operate at local, national, or international scales, connected by an 'invisible tie' that sustains their relationships (Barrero-Fernández, Mula-Falcón and Domingo, 2023, p. 261).

Unlike clusters and partnerships, networks are characterised by established connections, reciprocal relationships, and a clear focus on shared goals (European Commission, 2018). Informal, serendipitous networks evolve 'haphazardly from the interactions of individual actors' (De Lima, 2010, p. 11) and involve the collaboration of schools without structured agreements in place to guide their collective actions.

Networks may also bring together local community groups, non-governmental agencies, and local authority members to support improvement, recognising that the contexts in which schools operate have changed (Brown *et al*. 2015). They may be underpinned by support from researchers and external agencies, such as inspectorates (Brown *et al.* 2020), which is important for the value and sustainability of networks. For goal-driven networks to operate effectively, they must be led effectively and open to guidance from external stakeholders (Brown *et al.* 2020).

Educational networks draw on the collective intelligence of various actors across different levels and sectors of the education system (European Commission, 2018). This diversity of ideas, perspectives, and solutions (Denee, 2024) is brought together to enhance educational outcomes (O'Hara *et al.*, 2021). These outcomes are not limited to

achievement but can also focus on student wellbeing or equity (Poortman, Brown and Schildkamp, 2022). They facilitate dialogue, knowledge exchange, solve complex problems, support professional learning, and foster partnerships (European Commission, 2018). The significant demands placed on student learning in the 21st century necessitate continuous knowledge updates and proficiency in diverse areas. These include educators who operate effectively in multicultural environments, facilitate the integration of children with special needs, collaborate in teams, assume leadership roles, and establish strong partnerships with parents (Schleicher, 2016). Collectively, networks function as catalysts for systemic innovation and change, thereby boosting 'professional capital' (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) and expanding schools' capacity (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020).

Ultimately, networks drive systemic innovation, boosting ‘professional capital’ (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) and expanding school capacity (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020). A more networked system demands the breaking down of social hierarchies and established structures to empower educational organisations to provide mutual support (Ehren *et al*. 2017, Chapman, 2019a), necessitating increasingly permeable school boundaries.

Evaluating the effectiveness and outcomes of networks can be complex, as it is often difficult to attribute specific impacts directly to network activities due to the complex web of interactions and connections involved (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010). As De Lima (2010, p.2) notes:

> There is nothing inherently positive or negative about a network: it can be flexible and organic, or rigid and bureaucratic; it can be liberating and empowering, or stifling and inhibiting; it can be democratic, but it may also be dominated by particular interests.

For instance, Prenger, Poortman, and Handelzalts (2017) reported that limited support from colleagues hindered the sharing of learnings from networks within school settings. Similarly, Brown *et al.* (2020) found that cooperation was often constrained by competition among schools for students and resources. The purpose and characteristics of effective collaboration in educational networks will be explored further in chapter two. This research primarily aims to explore the challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors that influence the success of networks in promoting wellbeing.

1.6 Irish Policy Context: Educational Networks

To understand this study's background and rationale, it is necessary to explore the emergence of networks and collaboration in the Irish policy context, particularly key policy measures that have impacted interschool collaboration. A summary of the key policies is presented in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3- Irish Policies Promoting Educational Networks

Policy/ Framework	Year	Key Policy Priorities	Relevance to this study
Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning	2016	To enhance student learning and foster teachers' own professional development.	Networking is highlighted as vital for sharing ideas and solving collective challenges.
Looking at Our School	2016	A quality framework to enhance student learning and foster teachers' own professional development.	It advised school leaders to establish professional networks and encourage teacher participation in networks.
Looking at Our School	2022	A Quality Framework that provides a shared understanding of what effective and highly effective practices look like.	It reaffirms networking as a core expectation of effective practice and expands the expectation to include building international networks.
The Action Plan for Education	2017	To enhance child outcomes and solidify Ireland's leadership in education.	This plan championed school networks for sharing good practice, establishing stronger community-school ties and fostering collaboration with HEIs and relationships between enterprise and education.
DEIS Plan	2017	For education to become a pathway to better opportunities for those in communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion.	As part of The School Excellence Fund, the DEIS Plan introduced formal school clustering in acutely disadvantaged areas.

Policy/ Framework	Year	Key Policy Priorities	Relevance to this study
Teaching Council Ireland- Féilte Bursary Scheme	2024	To fund inter-school professional learning and collaboration.	This funding supported policy goals for network formation and recognised networking's role in teacher learning beyond school improvement.
The School Leadership in Ireland and the Centre for School Leadership: Research and Evaluation Report	2018	To identify the needs and professional learning practices of school leaders.	It established networks and cluster groups as a highly cost-effective method for school leaders to engage in professional learning, share experiences, and receive support to counteract isolation.
Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice	2019	To define wellbeing in education and outline the role of schools in promoting wellbeing.	It encourages the establishment of professional networks for principals and teachers to promote wellbeing and build school capacity.
Learning to be a school leader in Ireland framework	2021	To guide professional learning for Irish school leaders.	Cross-school networking was identified as a common practice for both aspiring and established leaders.
Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying Implementation Plan	2023-2027	To outline sixty-one actions as part of a whole education approach to prevent and address bullying.	It encourages school clusters as a whole-education strategy for bullying prevention.
Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy	2024-2033	To promote the development of essential literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills, knowledge, and dispositions.	It emphasises the crucial collaborative role of all the key influences in a child's life, including early years educators, teachers, leaders, parents and community groups.

In Ireland, policy is developed centrally, with a number of policy actors within what could be considered a middle tier (King, Brennan and Gorman, 2024). This includes the DoE, support services such as Oide, providing professional learning support for teachers and

leaders, NCCA, National Council for Special Education (NCSE), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Education and Training Boards and Teacher unions.

The NCCA's *Primary Curriculum Framework* redevelopment, ongoing since 2011, involved extensive consultations, from supranational to micro levels (Walsh, 2023), illustrating how educators' collaboration with the middle tier has driven educational policy development. This process sought feedback from teachers and leaders on the draft framework, positioning them as key contributors to the reform (Walsh, 2023).
Elevating teacher and leader voices recognises that this dialogue cannot remain at single school levels and must occur across networks and systems (O'Hara *et al.* 2021).

Historically, individual schools have been the primary unit of analysis for effectiveness and improvement (Chapman, 2019a). A recent trend involves 'a growing layer of regional governance approaches,' which encompasses both informal innovation clusters and more formal clusters among HEIs (OECD, 2020a, p.3). This is linked to a shift in policies that encourage collaboration through networking beyond individual schools, with a focus on improving teachers' knowledge, practice, skills and capabilities within their own context. Networks are becoming embedded in policies related to teacher professional learning, equity in education, wellbeing in schools, school leadership and improving innovation, quality and excellence in schools.

Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning (TCI, 2016) promotes collaborative, reflective, and socially situated constructivist teacher learning, in contrast to traditional top-down methods. This reflected research indicating that 'school-embedded' professional learning, such as collaborative research on problems of practice, professional learning communities, and networking, has a greater impact than 'non-school embedded' activities like workshops, in-service training, and conferences (Schleicher, 2016, p. 43).
The *Cosán Action Plan* (DE, 2021), which is expected to be initiated by 2027, acknowledges that teacher professional learning blends formal, informal, school-based, and external dimensions. Within Cosán's 'practice and collaboration' process, networking would likely fit and is highlighted as vital for sharing ideas and solving collective challenges.

Professional collaboration is considered integral to teachers' work, according to the *Looking at Our School* (LAOS) quality framework (DES, 2016), as it enhances student learning and fosters teachers' professional development. The framework specifically advises school leaders to establish professional networks with their peers and contribute meaningfully to the professional learning community. Furthermore, supporting and encouraging teachers' participation in networks is highlighted as a highly effective practice, signalling the increasing recognition of networking's role in school improvement. While LAOS (2016) mentions building relationships with parents and the wider community, it does not explicitly include their involvement in a network.

Echoing the 2016 framework, *Looking at Our School* (LAOS) 2022 (DoE, 2022a) reaffirms networking as a core expectation of effective practice. Notably, LAOS 2022 expands this expectation to include building international networks. This may be achieved through initiatives such as Erasmus, which help establish contacts and learn new subject areas or languages (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020). This represents a clear progression from a focus on local to global networking.

A key policy promoting networks for school improvement is *The Action Plan for Education* (DES, 2017), designed to enhance child outcomes and solidify Ireland's leadership in education. This plan championed school networks for 'gathering and sharing examples of good practice,' establishing stronger community-school ties for better outcomes, and fostering collaboration with HEIs and relationships between enterprise and education (DES, 2017, p.19). Furthermore, the introduction of Speech and Language services strengthened school networks by providing external support. Directly linked to this Action Plan was The School Excellence Fund, particularly targeted at DEIS schools to support new, innovative approaches for tackling educational disadvantage, thereby positioning educators as proactive agents in addressing school challenges.

As part of *The School Excellence Fund*, the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) Plan* (DES, 2017) introduced formal school clustering in acutely disadvantaged areas identified by the inspectorate to encourage shared learning and stronger connections among schools, the community, and government services. Monitoring required annual reports, engagement with the inspectorate, and collecting quantitative and qualitative data to track changes in teacher knowledge, skills, and attitudes (DES, 2017). A key difference

with the DEIS Plus scheme (DoEY, 2026b) is that schools are assigned specific support teams to support clusters.

'Creative Clusters', also funded by the School Excellence Fund, typically involve three to five schools collaborating with education centres to foster innovation and share best practices (DE, 2018). However, the DES dictates the specific focus areas, which may limit creativity and meaningful action. Notably, the focus on strengthening collaboration between teachers was identified as 'a leading feature of Irish schools' during an analysis of the Irish education system (OECD, 2020a, p.20).

Similarly in 2024, the Teaching Council (TCI) funded inter-school professional learning collaboration, encouraging networking with HEIs, support centres, and across sectors (primary, post-primary, further education). Activities, such as professional learning communities or joint professional development, had to focus on wellbeing, inclusive practice, leadership, Gaeilge, or TCI/DoE policy. This funding supports policy goals for network formation and recognises networking's role in teacher learning beyond school improvement, though formal oversight or evaluation mechanisms are currently absent.

The *School Leadership in Ireland and the Centre for School Leadership: Research and Evaluation* Report (DES, 2018, p.86) established networks and cluster groups as a highly cost-effective method for school leaders to engage in professional learning, share experiences, and receive support to counteract the isolation inherent in their role. However, the report also noted deficiencies, specifically insufficient deployment of clustered approaches. A key consideration identified was the need to develop 'collaborative sustainable clusters,' suggesting that prior interschool collaboration may have been temporary, lacking meaningful long-term impact or integration into routine practice. Furthermore, the report stressed the increasing necessity for school leaders to understand and collaborate with external social, community, and health support systems to address students' social supports and services outside of school.

The *Wellbeing Framework* (DES, 2019) also advocates for strong links with Department support services, as well as community-based statutory, voluntary, and other external agencies. To promote wellbeing and build school capacity, the policy encourages the establishment of professional networks for principals and teachers, collaborative teacher

networks, and communities of practice. The *Action Plan for Education* (2019, DESb) highlighted the need for stronger inter-governmental partnerships to advance areas such as child wellbeing, largely through the implementation of the Wellbeing Framework.

The *Learning to be a School Leader in Ireland* framework (Centre for School Leadership, 2021) guides professional learning for Irish school leaders and notes that cross-school networking is a common practice for both aspiring and established school leaders, particularly for principals. The framework also highlights the established tradition of recruiting school leaders and teachers as support service associates.
Associates operate at the system level, emphasising a system in which expertise is shared across boundaries, with potential for system leadership through networks, as highlighted in Chapman and Pino-Yancovic's research (2026).

The *Learning to Be a School Leader in Ireland* (Centre for School Leadership, 2021) links high-quality professional learning to enhanced school leadership, which in turn improves student outcomes, wellbeing, and experiences. It encourages leaders to share and learn from peers both within and outside the education sector. This focus on collaboration is supported by a survey, which found that 50% of school leaders expressed a desire to network with new colleagues, suggesting a predisposition towards collaboration and mutual support.

The *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying Implementation Plan* 2023–2027 (DoE, 2023a) encourages school clusters as a whole-education strategy for bullying prevention. These clusters, involving schools and community/representative groups, aim to 'progress wellbeing related initiatives and to share good practice and innovations with a particular focus on preventing and addressing bullying, racism, sexism and sexual harassment and the promotion of equality, diversity, inclusion and wellbeing' (DE, 2023-b, p.35).

Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024- 2033 (GoI, 2024) strongly emphasises the crucial collaborative role of all the key influences in a child's life, including early years educators, teachers, leaders, parents, community groups, youth organisations, childminders, and care settings, in fostering children's literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy. The strategy advocates for sharing best practice and innovative

methods among primary schools, early years educators, and external partners like parents and the wider community.

These policy documents acknowledge that schools alone cannot meet children's wellbeing needs. Interschool networks are a core feature, encouraged not only for collaboration and school improvement but also for teacher and leader development and for addressing common challenges. However, a significant gap exists: there is no practical guidance on how educators should establish, manage, and sustain these networks, particularly those focused on wellbeing enactment. Given that Ireland's system balances strong central oversight with considerable autonomy for schools (OECD, 2020a), such guidance is necessary.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors of inter-school wellbeing networks, from the perspectives of primary school educators.

1.7 Wellbeing Enactment

This study explores the opportunities and challenges of networks in supporting wellbeing enactment, as perceived by educators in the Irish primary school setting. Whilst the *Wellbeing Framework* refers to the implementation of the policy in schools, this study adopts a policy enactment perspective to explore how it is interpreted, decoded, and translated into practice by practitioners (Maguire, Ball and Braun, 2012). Policy-makers often assume the best possible environments for implementation; however, policy may be enacted differently, even in broadly similar schools, and this enactment process is dynamic and shifting (Maguire, Ball and Braun, 2012). Schools are complex, dynamic, multi-level systems with many factors that can influence enactment (Higgins and Booker, 2023).

Educators are key actors in this process. 'Policy-making is not just a case of someone in authority identifying a problem and devising a solution to be implemented by others; it is a causal chain of reciprocal interaction' (Harford, Bruton and Fleming, 2026, p.12). This is important for this study, which considers how school leaders and teachers understand and enact wellbeing in their specific school contexts. Challenges in translating the *Wellbeing Framework* into effective school practices have been reported, including: competing demands (Dempsey and McCoy, 2024), competitive and academic school

cultures, insufficient awareness of the benefits of promoting wellbeing, and school staff feeling inadequately equipped to address mental health issues (Higgins and Booker, 2022).

Policy enactment is subject to 'multiple interpretations based on the specificities of local contexts, and the nature of the work of educators, of their professionalism and of the procedures deployed to lead and manage' (Bell and Stevenson, 2015, p. 149). This acknowledges that schools may respond differently and have varying capacities to cope with policies (Maguire, Ball and Braun, 2012). The following chapter will consider the dimensions of school contexts that shape how policies are enacted: situated, professional, material, and external (Maguire, Ball, and Braun, 2012). School factors such as ethos, culture, staffing, resources, and budgets influence this dynamic, non-linear process (Maguire, Ball, and Braun, 2012).

Wellbeing Networks to Support Wellbeing Enactment

This study will explore how educational networks can support the enactment of the *Wellbeing Framework.*

Irish educational policy, as detailed earlier in this chapter, has established networks as effective for addressing challenges, teacher learning, promoting equity, and improving innovation and quality in schools. The *Wellbeing Framework* specifically promotes networks under 'Relationships and Partnerships' as central to enactment, framing them as a mechanism for professional development through shared learning, ‘giving a voice to creativity’, and building shared ownership of wellbeing promotion (DES, 2019, p.15).

Given that children’s wellbeing is multidimensional and fluid, requiring responsive, inclusive approaches, networks can potentially enhance wellbeing enactment. Networks can support a whole school approach through the four key areas of the *Wellbeing Framework*: culture and environment, curriculum, relationships and partnerships, and policy and planning (DES, 2019). The following section explores these four areas and current enactment challenges, as reported in qualitative studies in Irish primary schools (Higgins and Booker, 2022; Dempsey and McCoy, 2024), to examine the role of networks in supporting wellbeing.

Culture and Environment

The Culture and Environment of a school encompasses its mission, ethos, school and classroom climate, and the quality and use of its building and grounds (DES, 2019). Wellbeing is more than a curriculum experience; it requires a holistic student experience. Through the Wellbeing curriculum, students learn 'for' and 'about' wellbeing; learning 'for' wellbeing is fostered by a positive school culture and climate (NCCA, 2025). Educators are crucial in fostering a positive school climate, boosting self-esteem, and supporting emotional stability (OECD, 2015b). Barriers to enactment include overly competitive or academic cultures, a lack of awareness of the benefits of wellbeing promotion and staff feeling ill-equipped to address mental health issues (Higgins and Booker, 2022). The potential of networks to support a whole school approach to wellbeing and the essential link between children's schooling experiences and their wellbeing will be further explored in chapter two.

Curriculum (Teaching and Learning)

Learning 'about' wellbeing is through curriculum experiences that develop knowledge, skills, understanding and awareness that nurture children's own wellbeing (NCCA, 2025). An integral part of learning 'about' wellbeing is child empowerment, supporting students to make informed decisions about their wellbeing, which is part of the policy agenda in many countries around the world (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020). Educators cite several barriers, including an overloaded curriculum, additional policies and initiatives, and a preferential focus on subjects like Literacy and Numeracy. This prioritisation is largely due to the emphasis on professional learning and standardised testing within these specific subjects (Higgins and Booker, 2022). Teachers reported needing professional learning in areas like critical challenges, behaviour, and anxiety (Sloan *et al.* 2024). Network actors working together may leverage internal expertise and be better placed to access specific professional learning opportunities (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010). Teachers also reported challenges with the content of the SPHE curriculum and wellbeing programmes to support children's wellbeing (Sloan *et al.* 2024). Networks may help schools pool resources and address structural gaps in skills and experience (Chapman and Muijs, 2014).

Relationships and Partnerships

Relationships and partnerships involve students, staff, parents, community groups, and external supports (DES, 2019). Enactment challenges include limited interaction and communication with external agencies like NEPS, Child and Adult Mental Health Service (CAMHS), and local Primary Care clinicians (Higgins and Booker, 2022). Further, poor communication between staff and management hinders whole school wellbeing enactment. (Higgins and Booker, 2022). Chapter two will explore how networks may improve multi-agency working (Cummings *et al.* 2007).

Policy and Planning

Policy and planning encompass all relevant policies and plans pertaining to wellbeing and continuing professional learning (DES, 2019). Challenges regarding the enactment of the *Wellbeing Framework* include a lack of awareness of the national, mandated policy among staff (Higgins and Booker, 2022), insufficient resources, including time for teachers to support its enactment (Dempsey and McCoy, 2024). A lack of follow-up support to ensure necessary enactment was also referenced (Higgins and Booker, 2022). Networks offer the potential to move educators from individualised recipients of policy to collectively engaging in creative, entrepreneurial enactment, understanding, and translating the *Wellbeing Framework* into effective school practices.

1.8 Rationale for the study

Multiple factors motivated this research, with a specific focus on the role of networks in supporting the enactment of wellbeing. These motivations are rooted in both personal and professional experience and broader policy considerations.

Personal Rationale

Prior to beginning this thesis, the researcher's secondment to Oide, providing tailored professional learning support to teachers and leaders in wellbeing, influenced this thesis's focus and highlighted challenges in enactment. This role involved assisting schools with the *Wellbeing Framework* through the SSE cycle, curriculum delivery, promoting positive culture via restorative practice, Anti-bullying education, and Child Protection. Leading the Restorative Practice team in Oide has also provided the opportunity to organise two communities of practice and to witness firsthand the benefits of a collaborative professional learning model. This model has supported facilitators and

associate facilitators to reflect, exchange practical experiences and discuss challenges to help refine practice.

Despite previous difficulties accessing professional learning, the researcher discovered a valuable resource in the Dublin City University (DCU) Changemaker Schools Network (CSN). This network connects forty-six primary schools across the island of Ireland (DCU, 2025), comprising coordinators, school leaders, teachers, and academic researchers. Participation in the CSN facilitated collaboration, the sharing of best practice, awareness of innovative practice, and the opportunity to be part of network research, significantly mitigating feelings of isolation and overwhelm during busy and turbulent periods. This experience emphasised the importance of networks in creating supportive learning environments that foster professional connections and knowledge sharing, ensuring the best outcomes for students. Consequently, this study seeks to explore the opportunities and challenges educators encounter in networks, specifically focusing on the context of wellbeing.

Furthermore, the researcher's participation in the Erasmus Plus project, *'Preparing today the leaders of tomorrow,'* collaborating with four schools in Turkey, Barcelona, Portugal, and Poland, prompted further interest in networking. Students and teachers visited primary and secondary schools in these countries, and the opportunity facilitated the sharing of good practices across schools, which could be adapted to different school contexts. This provided students with transferable skills, including critical thinking, by exposing them to diverse cultures (Botez, 2018). For teachers, witnessing these transformative student experiences strongly motivated engagement in wider networking.

This doctoral journey has provided the opportunity to explore the literature on wellbeing and networks and to address the dearth of data on wellbeing enactment and networking in Irish primary schools. The data provided will clarify the challenges of enactment and how networks can help, supporting the development of policies, resources, and funding for wellbeing network activity.

Policy Rationale

This study is timely as wellbeing in education is evolving apace in Ireland. Schools are continuing to enact the *Wellbeing framework* and will begin enacting the Wellbeing

Specification from September 2026. Circular 67/2025 (DoEY, 2025a, p.3) has uniquely prioritised wellbeing as one of the first three curricular areas schools must enact over two years, emphasising that it is 'essential for children's overall growth and development.' Further, as the redeveloped curriculum aims to provide a foundation for each child to thrive and flourish, early enactment of the Wellbeing Specification supports the curriculum vision of inclusion, engagement and the holistic development of children (DoEY, 2025a).

Whilst the *Wellbeing Framework* is a seminal policy document, its enactment in primary schools is under-researched, particularly regarding the contextual circumstances and conditions that influence it. Key studies in the primary school space include: Higgins and Booker (2023), Dempsey and McCoy (2024) and Dempsey and McCoy (2026). There is a notable lacuna given that wellbeing in education is a national priority and the *Wellbeing Framework* is mandatory. Earlier research in primary schools in Ireland reported a lack of awareness about the *Wellbeing Framework* and difficulties translating the policy into effective school practices (Higgins and Broker, 2022). This study is therefore timely as all schools have now initiated a wellbeing promotion and review development cycle as required by 2025. It seeks to explore how school leaders and teachers understand and enact wellbeing in their specific school contexts. This data gathered will help clarify the role that networks and external partnerships can play in supporting enactment at a whole-school level.

Despite teacher and leader participation in networks being regarded as a highly effective practice in LAOS (DoE, 2022a), data has highlighted that only 44% of teachers across OECD countries have participated in collaborative forms of professional learning, including peer/self-observation, coaching and networking, which is lower than participation in more traditional courses and seminars (OECD, 2020b). This suggests school based collaboration is still not commonplace and indicates an opportunity to explore what teachers and leaders want and need to be able to network. Extensive literature exists highlighting the general role of networks in knowledge sharing, building trust, collective problem solving, and systemic improvement (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016; Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010), but less is known about the challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors of inter-school networks, from the perspectives of primary school educators. There is limited practical guidance on network development and function within the Irish context. Without knowing what teachers and

leaders want and need, the potential of networks for collectively solving wellbeing-related problems is not being realised. This runs counter to the *Wellbeing Framework's* statements on effective practice, which call for using networks for professional development to build shared ownership of wellbeing promotion (DES, 2019, p. 15).

Although Irish policies encourage both a systems view of wellbeing (*The Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028* (DoCEDIY, 2023) and the formation of networks (The *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying Implementation Plan* 2023–2027 (DoE, 2023a), they do not provide specific guidance on how to achieve this. Internationally, it has been recognised that teachers play a key role in 'collectively shaping and providing collaborative learning opportunities to their peers,' yet many systems do not recognise and support teachers' role in this process (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020, p. 28). This results in a lack of structural supports to facilitate engagement in sustained collaborative practices within and across schools (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020). This was illustrated in the previous section considering current enactment challenges. This research seeks to explore what supports and conditions are needed to design and ensure genuine, impactful collaboration in wellbeing networks.

1.9 Research Questions

This research will probe what teachers and leaders in primary schools in Ireland want and need from a wellbeing network. Specifically, it will address the following overarching research question and two subsidiary questions.

Overarching research question

What are the challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors of inter-school wellbeing networks, from the perspectives of primary school educators?

Subsidiary research questions

- How do school leaders and teachers understand and enact wellbeing in their school contexts?
- What roles do networks and external partnerships play in supporting wellbeing enactment in schools?

While the overarching question focuses on designing and sustaining wellbeing networks, the subsidiary questions focus on wellbeing enactment. The first subsidiary question

focuses on capturing the state of play, how wellbeing is understood in primary schools and the second considers how networks and external partnerships may support wellbeing enactment. The resolution of these questions will shed light on the necessary considerations for designing a wellbeing network, the difficulties it faces, and what helps sustain it over time.

1.10 Nature, Scope and Approach of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to explore the challenges, design considerations and sustainability factors of networks in supporting wellbeing enactment, as perceived by teachers and leaders, in the Irish primary school setting.

Given the exploratory and emergent nature of this study, a qualitative inquiry methodology underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm and social constructivism was deemed most appropriate to answer the research questions. This methodology was chosen because it allows for the collection of rich accounts of personal experience, recognising meaning-making as co-constructed through participants' voices and shaped by their professional contexts and experiences. This fits the 'specific contours' of the research questions (Lim, 2025, p. 204) and offers a unique lens to focus on perspective, experience, context and voice to uncover the 'what', 'where', 'who', 'when', 'why' and 'how' that make up social interactions and behaviours in schools and networks (Lim, 2025). This depth of understanding is necessary to formulate solutions that are 'culturally sensitive and socially relevant' and inform policy (Lim, 2025, p. 201).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to align with the research aims and to prioritise the voices and perspectives of the research participants, capturing their thoughts, priorities, and lived experiences (Creswell, 2012). The study focuses on sixteen teachers and leaders from thirteen diverse primary school settings across Ireland, including National Schools, a Gaelscoileanna, a Special School, a Community National School, and an Educate Together School. Five of these schools have DEIS status. A thematic approach is used to analyse the data gathered.

This endeavour represents an important step towards understanding the voice of professionals to support their growth and improve educational outcomes through targeted,

meaningful, and transformational learning opportunities at a time when support structures are needed to navigate challenges.

1.11 Research Aims and Expected Contributions

This study aims to explore the enactment of wellbeing through interschool networks from the perspectives and experiences of primary school leaders and teachers in Ireland. Specifically, it examines how they understand and enact wellbeing, the supporting role of networks and external partnerships and the challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors of wellbeing networks. The research seeks to identify the structural and relational supports needed, since the mere existence of a network does not improve pupil outcomes; rather, it is its operation and what it enables schools to do that ultimately matter (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016).

By bringing together relevant literature and perspectives, the study aims to offer valuable insights and a deeper understanding of how wellbeing enactment is supported through networks. It also offers policy implications that could inform the review of existing government wellbeing policies. Additionally, the study proposes design principles for educators and policymakers to foster network development and sustainability. Finally, it highlights opportunities for future research to explore further the challenges, design, and sustainability of wellbeing networks.

1.12 Conclusion

Chapter one established wellbeing as a key global educational priority. It explored the influence of supranational organisations and global trends on Irish wellbeing policy and educational networks. The chapter examined the WHO definition of wellbeing within the *Wellbeing Framework* (DES, 2019), highlighting its multidimensional nature and laying a foundation for further analysis of the concept. Additionally, the chapter considered the broader Irish wellbeing policy landscape and the development of wellbeing as a national educational focus. The chapter reviewed the global and Irish educational networking landscape to provide context and rationale for the study. The link between wellbeing and networks was then discussed to clarify the study's focus. It briefly defined wellbeing enactment and identified challenges with enactment in Irish primary schools from the literature that networks might help address. Finally, the chapter outlined the study's rationale, research questions, scope, approach, and expected contributions.

1.13 Thesis Structure

This final section provides an overview of the thesis structure to locate this chapter within the wider study. The remaining chapters in this thesis are structured as follows:

Chapter 2- Literature Review

This chapter is split into two parts. Part A offers a comprehensive review of existing research on wellbeing in education, framing it as a complex, multifaceted issue. The chapter examines Minkkinen's (2013) Structural Model of Child Wellbeing (SMCW), and the OECD's conceptualisation of student wellbeing. It explores key challenges and debates within the wellbeing education literature. Part B differentiates networks from other collaborative learning models, discussing the various purposes of networks and the characteristics of effective collaboration. These insights have informed the design and structure of the interview schedule (Appendix E).

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter outlines the researcher's philosophical assumptions, the chosen qualitative methodology and paradigm, and how these informed the study's design. It also reviews the research design, including methods and sampling procedures, followed by a discussion of key ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with an examination of the data analysis process.

Chapter 4- Presentation and Analysis of Findings

Chapter 4 reports the findings from sixteen semi-structured interviews conducted with school leaders and teachers from thirteen primary schools across Ireland. This chapter is structured around the three key themes identified from the thematic analysis: Conceptualising Wellbeing and Systems of Support; Wellbeing Networks in Practice and Wellbeing Network Composition, Purpose and Accountability.

Chapter 5- Discussion and Conclusion

Chapter 5 discusses the three research questions sequentially and presents eight core design principles for wellbeing networks. These principles aim to address the challenges and considerations identified in this study, informed by both the findings and existing literature. The chapter also explores the main implications, acknowledges limitations,

suggests opportunities for future research, and highlights key contributions to research, policy and practice.

CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into two parts. Part A begins by examining the role of wellbeing in education, exploring wellbeing as a multidimensional concept. Part A draws on several key models to define wellbeing for children and young people: Minkkinen's (2013) Structural Model of Child Wellbeing (SMCW), the OECD's conceptualisation of student wellbeing, and the World Health Organisation's (WHOs) definition as utilised in the *Wellbeing Framework* (DES, 2019). It then explores key challenges within the wellbeing education literature, including the importance of a whole school approach rooted in a systems-based understanding of wellbeing and the need for a shared vision. The chapter considers the impact of curriculum overload caused by time constraints and multiple wellbeing initiatives, as well as whether teachers see the wellbeing enactment as their responsibility or that of trained professionals. A lack of confidence and skills in teaching wellbeing, combined with limited professional development opportunities, is identified as a significant barrier to effective implementation. Finally, Part A of the chapter concludes by highlighting how schools often address wellbeing in isolation, emphasising the need for an integrated, systems-based approach.

In Part B of the chapter, the role of educational networks to support wellbeing enactment will be examined.

2.2 Literature Selection

To identify scholarly articles of interest, EBSCOhost, Proquest, ERIC, Taylor & Francis Online, ResearchGate, JSTOR, Elsevier, DCU Library E-Books, DORAS, Google Scholar, and Sage databases were utilised. For Part A of the chapter, a key term search for peer reviewed literature included 'wellbeing', 'wellbeing', 'well being', 'wellness', 'wellbeing in education', 'whole school wellbeing', 'issues', 'problems', 'challenges', 'difficulties' and 'limitations'. For Part B of the chapter, a key term search for peer reviewed literature included 'school network', 'educational network', 'professional learning network', 'interschool network', 'social network,' professional learning communities', 'networked learning,' 'network learning communities,' 'collaborative

networks,' 'network governance' and 'network leadership.' Sources were then compared on Scopus. The focus was on authoritative literature, referenced by others.

2.3 PART A: Wellbeing in Education

As outlined in chapter one, schools must now go beyond academic goals to actively promote student wellbeing (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021). It has been suggested that wellbeing is a prerequisite for learning rather than an outcome of education (Spratt, 2016). While it has been argued that promoting wellbeing exceeds educators' capacity given life's external factors, education is crucial for developing students' ability to live well and reach their potential, benefiting both the individual and society (Curren *et al.* 2024). Education for wellbeing is delivered through school policies, curriculum-based approaches, links to the community, and the delivery of services within schools, such as school meals and vaccinations (UNESCO, 2022b). It has been suggested, however, that wellbeing education could violate students' autonomy if schools impose a 'presupposed understanding of wellbeing' (Siegel, 2015, p. 121). Siegel (2015) encourages students to propose their own ideas of wellbeing and to evaluate them. His suggestion, however, overlooks the possibility of an evidence-informed, broad approach to wellbeing that education can facilitate (Curren *et al.* 2024). It can promote self-regulation, social competence and understanding that underpins the self-governance he envisages (Curren *et al.* 2024).

2.3.1 Conceptual Foundations: Wellbeing

Defining wellbeing is complex due to its intricate nature and resistance to a singular definition (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024). It spans various disciplines, including education, health, and psychology, each with unique approaches to understanding and measuring it (Nohilly and Tynan, 2022). Its use across disciplines to portray a sense of health, wellness and happiness leads to definitional ambiguity (Bautista *et al.* 2023). Furthermore, debates over spelling (wellbeing, well being, or well-being) question its ontological stability (Farrell *et al.* 2024).

It is often used as a catch-all term for single constructs such as measuring quality of life, leading to problems with measurement (Bautista *et al.* 2023). Different definitions also exist across its various domains, such as emotional, physical, and economic wellbeing (Bautista *et al.* 2023), making it a broad and dynamic field.

This study focuses on children's wellbeing, defining children as individuals under 18 years, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989). The stages of childhood, according to the OECD (2021a), include early childhood (pregnancy to age five), middle childhood (ages six to twelve), and late childhood (ages thirteen to seventeen). The literature reviewed for this study primarily addresses middle and late childhood due to a lack of stage-specific data available for early childhood.

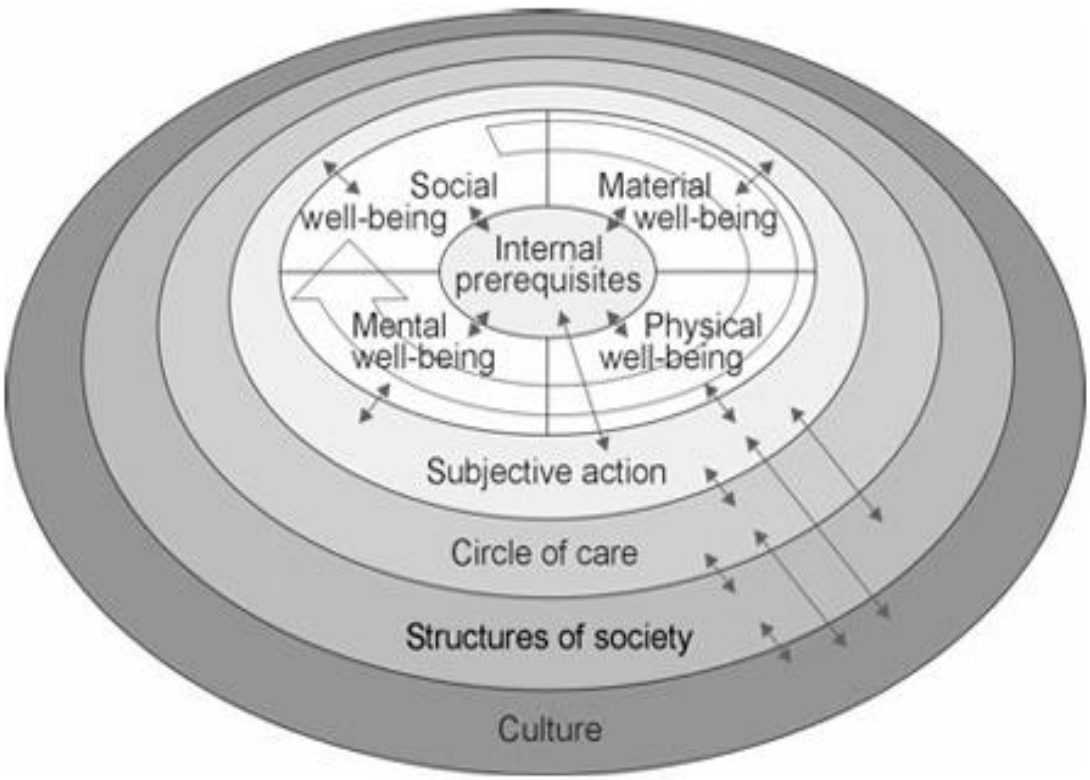
Child Wellbeing

Understanding the background and rationale for this study requires acknowledging the variations in how child wellbeing has been conceptualised across different frameworks internationally. This section will begin by exploring Minkkinen's (2013) *Structural Model of Child Wellbeing* (SMCW) developed within the Finnish context. Following this, the OECD's framework for measuring and evaluating student wellbeing will be reviewed before finally considering the definition and measurement of wellbeing within the Irish context. These models help to illustrate the multifaceted and multi-dimensional nature of the concept and to explain it in a comprehensive way.

Minkkinen's (2013) Structural Model of Child Wellbeing (SMCW)

Child wellbeing is not a stable state but a fluctuating situation, given the phases of development children pass through, as well as changing life situations and challenges (Minkkinen, 2013). Within the SMCW, child wellbeing has been defined as 'a dynamic process wherein a person's physical, mental, social and material situation is more commonly positive than negative, and as an outcome of intrapersonal, interpersonal, societal and cultural processes' (Minkkinen, 2013, p.549). Given that wellbeing is multidimensional, it is important to take the different dimensions into account. These interconnected dimensions reflect the different areas of a child's life and can be viewed as umbrella concepts that take into account more detailed domains (Minkkinen, 2013). Minkkinen's (2013) model, illustrated in Figure 1, identifies four core dimensions: physical, mental, social, and material wellbeing. Surrounding these dimensions is a system of subjective action. The broader environment or 'societal frame' is divided into layers that include the circle of care, societal structures, and culture, all of which influence the child and are influenced by the child. The arrows in the model reflect the interactions between the dimensions.

Figure 1 Minkkinen's Structural Model of Child Wellbeing (2013)



Four Interconnected Dimensions of Wellbeing

Physical wellbeing in this model encompasses domains such as health, the absence of disease, and proper physical functioning. Mental wellbeing concerns the child's emotional and cognitive state, including their subjective feelings of happiness and life satisfaction, based on the hedonic perspective of wellbeing. Social wellbeing centres on safe and supportive relationships between the child and the people they are close to in their life. The fourth dimension of the model is material wellbeing, which refers to the child having the nourishment, housing and material items they need. The model emphasises that a child's wellbeing cannot be separated from their material reality.

Subjective Action

The model refers to subjective actions that children engage in to produce wellbeing and derive fulfilment, such as thinking, playing, physical exercise, and spending time with family and friends. This relates to the eudaimonic perspective of wellbeing. A key strength of the model is its emphasis on child agency and how children contribute to their

own wellbeing as constructive social actors in their lives. This depends on their personal capability to act and use resources. This perspective is grounded in the socio-cultural perspectives of Vygotsky (1962) and Leont'ev (1978), which emphasise the role of human activity in mediating between the individual and their social environment, highlighting children's active role in their wellbeing.

The Societal Frame of Child Wellbeing

The societal frame is divided into the circle of care, the structures of society, and culture, which provide the environmental and social prerequisites for wellbeing. Firstly, circle of care is the primary source of love and support for a child, including child-to-child care. Secondly, social structures refer to the institutions that impact a child's wellbeing, such as healthcare, education, and laws, as well as a child's opportunity to participate in decisions affecting them. Finally, culture represents shared values and attitudes toward children. The model's origins are rooted in the *Bioecological Model of Human Development* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), will be explored later in this chapter, as the societal circles align with his ecological concepts of the micro, exo, and macrosystem. However, the SMCW distinguishes itself by viewing the child as an active, constructive social actor rather than a passive recipient, reflecting a core principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989).

Overall, the model provides an ecological and holistic approach to children's wellbeing, facilitating the comprehensive analysis of its various aspects.

OECD Student Wellbeing Conceptualisation

The OECD, has 'become a dominating force in policy-making in Ireland' as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) performance is often associated with the quality of an education system (Harford, Bruton and Fleming, 2026, p.6) The OECD defines students wellbeing as 'the quality of people's lives and their standard of living, which is a multi-dimensional construct that comprises both objective, material components and subjective, psychological facets' (OECD, 2025a). This definition, similar to Minkkinen's (2013), acknowledges wellbeing as multi-dimensional and covers both objective and subjective components of wellbeing.

In 2015, the OECD adopted a comprehensive framework to measure wellbeing, which informed PISA 2015, the first large-scale study to investigate student wellbeing and its relationship with achievement (OECD, 2019a). This shift is significant because traditional success metrics, such as standardised tests, only partially explained a student's progress (Stankov, 1999). Collecting data on positive attitudes and behaviours, such as interest and motivation, alongside negative outcomes, acknowledges that academic proficiency is insufficient for students to 'live a happy and fulfilling life' (OECD, 2017, p. 35).

Student wellbeing data provides ‘rich information’ for policy makers, who are increasingly considering citizens’ subjective wellbeing due to its link to work performance (Marquez and Main, 2021, p. 284). Monitoring wellbeing is crucial for enhancing students’ life chances and is connected to economic growth (OECD, 2019a). Furthermore, monitoring adolescent wellbeing helps policy makers evaluate intervention effectiveness, subsequently informing budgetary decisions (Schleicher, 2015).

The 2015 study employed a framework based on four interconnected domains of wellbeing: cognitive, psychological, physical, and social (OECD, 2017). Assessing wellbeing through multiple domains captures a more complete composition than a single aspect of wellbeing (Bautista *et al.* 2023).

Cognitive wellbeing refers to students' proficiency in academic knowledge, problem solving and critical skills. Psychological wellbeing refers to students' views of their lives, sense of purpose, emotional states, self-awareness, and resilience. Physical wellbeing refers to a student's health status and adoption of a healthy lifestyle. Social wellbeing relates to the quality of students' relationships with family, teachers, and peers, as well as their feelings of social connectedness.

Dimensions of Wellbeing

PISA 2018 further organised the domains, distinguishing between three dimensions of wellbeing: *self*, *school environment* and *out-of-school environment* in addition to a student's perceived quality of life as a whole (OECD, 2019a). This focus on wellbeing is narrower and more context-specific than the 2015 framework. It also highlights that the OECD's measurement of wellbeing is not static but continually evolving in line with educational priorities. Wellbeing is a 'composite of constantly shifting meanings, assumptions and understandings' (Farrell *et al.* 2024, p.50).

The 2018 framework recognises and connects student wellbeing closely to their interconnected environments (OECD, 2021a). Firstly, *self*; how a student feels about themselves and their life and how healthy they are. Secondly, *the school environment*, the school environment a student is exposed to and thirdly, the *out-of-school environment*, a student's circumstances outside of school and their living environment (OECD, 2019a). This recognises the importance of the school environment in enhancing student wellbeing to include developing a growth mindset, a positive school climate to foster a sense of belonging and in reducing bullying (Govorova, Benítez and Muñiz 2020). This study focuses on how schools can enhance student wellbeing, specifically through inter-school networks.

Subjective Wellbeing

In addition to the four domains, PISA 2015 asked students to complete a life-satisfaction scale to measure subjective wellbeing, serving as a summary indicator across the four domains (OECD, 2017). This helps provide a more comprehensive view of wellbeing and to ascertain the extent to which OECD countries are responding to students' needs (OECD, 2019a). Subjective indicators, such as life satisfaction, are heavily influenced by a student's personality and cultural norms and can thus be difficult to measure (OECD, 2017). There is debate in the literature about their reliability, given that individuals may interpret a question seeking to evaluate one's sense of wellbeing differently (Bache, Reardon, and Anand, 2016). Article 12 of the UNCRC states the right for children to be heard and taken seriously (United Nations, 1989). This highlights the importance of the subjective perspective and gives weight to the voice of the child, valuing them as an active agent capable of establishing their own view (Cho and Yu, 2020).

Comparing and Contrasting Wellbeing Definitions For Children and Young People

Both the SMCW and the OECD framework measure child wellbeing holistically. However, the SMCW model is theoretical, primarily drawing from sociology and psychology to offer a comprehensive model and clarity within the field of child wellbeing research. The OECD, in contrast, is a measurement framework that provides a guide to policy makers to ‘design, implement and monitor effective child well-being policies’ to detect problems and vulnerabilities before they arise (OECD, 2021a, p.8). Further, the

SMCW model views the child as agentic in contributing to their own wellbeing as constructive social actors in their life, whilst OECD, through the collection of subjective data, is focused on monitoring students' wellbeing.

The definitions of wellbeing discussed thus far, including the WHO definition within the *Wellbeing Framework*, referred to in chapter one, all recognise that wellbeing is multidimensional and 'a fluid way of being' or 'a fluctuating situation' (Minkkinen, 2013, p.548) as opposed to a stable state.

Physical and social wellbeing are explicitly identified in all models, suggesting an emerging consensus in defining wellbeing. Social wellbeing in the *Wellbeing Framework* definition identifies 'connection and belonging,' (DES, 2019, p. 10) and 'a sense of belonging' in the OECD (2017, p.118) model. In contrast, in the SMCW model, it is referred to as a 'circle of care.' All models reference Bronfenbrenner's *Bioecological Model of Human Development* (1979) emphasising a systems based understanding of wellbeing. The *Wellbeing Framework* also recognises the agency of students in constructing their wellbeing, similar to Minkkinen (2013). References to elements of meaning, purpose, and connection in the *Wellbeing Framework* align with the eudaimonic perspective of wellbeing, present in the 'subjective action' element of the SMCW and referenced under 'psychological wellbeing' in the OECD framework (OECD, 2017).

The SMCW model and *Wellbeing Framework* recognise that wellbeing is produced through contexts such as school culture and relationships, whilst the OECD recognises that school context influences wellbeing, both of which are important for a child's wellbeing.

2.3.2 Wellbeing, a Wicked Problem

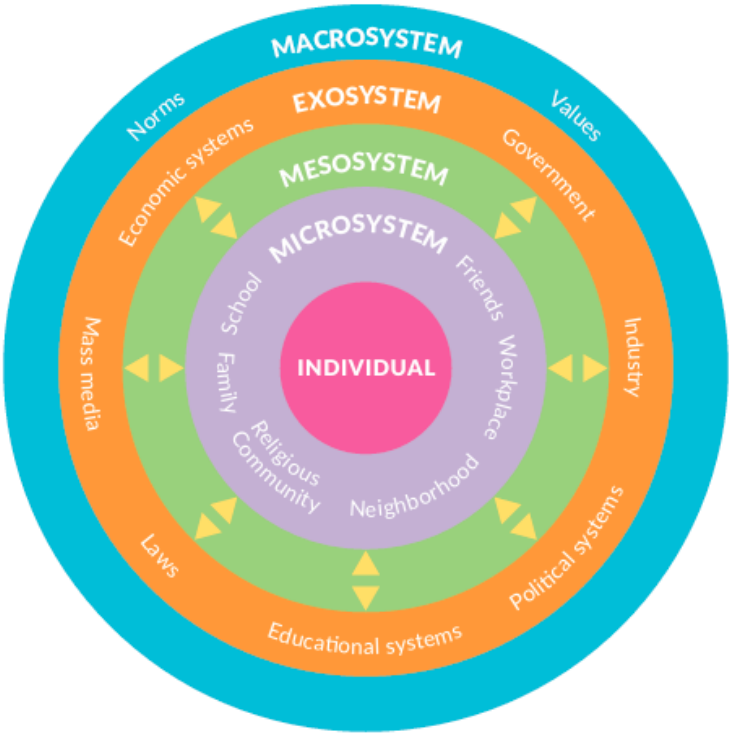
Wellbeing presents a particularly 'wicked problem,' a term for complex challenges that resist definitive solutions and demand continuous re-evaluation as circumstances change (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024; Bache, Reardon and Anand, 2016; Rittel and Webber, 1973). Instead of a single root cause, wicked problems are shaped by multiple factors (Head and Alford, 2015, p. 715), meaning that they have no single, enumerable solution (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Solutions for wicked problems are judged not as 'true-or-false,' but as 'good-or-bad' (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p.162). Its complexity and multidimensional nature make promoting wellbeing difficult. The policy process involves

various actors and organisations, often with divergent views on what should be addressed and how (Bache, Reardon and Anand, 2016).

Nevertheless, addressing wellbeing requires 'collaborative, interdisciplinary efforts and commitment to the exploration of wellbeing and diverse solutions to its enhancement' (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024, p.2). For instance, including children's voices has been identified as critical to developing the *Wellbeing Framework* in Irish Primary schools (Dempsey and McCoy, 2024). Given the complexity and multidimensional nature of wellbeing as a wicked problem, addressing it effectively requires a systemic approach that considers the multiple layers of influence on an individual's development. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (1979) provides a useful framework for understanding these interconnected influences and designing appropriate wellbeing strategies.

Bronfenbrenner's *Bioecological Model of Human Development* (1979), referred to in chapter one of this study and illustrated in figure 2, explains how the environment shapes human development. The model, referenced within the *Wellbeing Framework*, emphasises a systems-based understanding of wellbeing realised in a community (DES, 2019) rather than isolated wellbeing interventions (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024).

Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development (Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979), (DES, 2019).



There are a number of layers within Bronfenbrenner's model that will be explored here in relation to the child; firstly, the microsystem, the child's immediate environment, which includes interpersonal relationships with friends, family, school, and community, which influence a student's development. Secondly, the meso system involves interactions between people within the microsystem, such as the school and parents. Thirdly, the exosystem consists of the environment and systems outside of the immediate school environment, such as political, legal and economic systems that directly influence a child through their microsystem. For schools, this may look like access to mental health agencies. The macrosystem refers to broader systemic factors, such as norms and values, that influence a person's wellbeing. Finally, the techno-subsystem refers to media influences, the internet and social media. Wellbeing is influenced by all layers of Bronfenbrenner's model, acknowledging that it occurs throughout a child's life across a variety of settings (DES, 2019). Wellbeing interventions must consider the different systems that collectively shape children's experiences (O'Brien, O'Brien, and Goodwin, 2024).

Nohilly *et al.* (2023) found that Bronfenbrenner's 1979 model, used within the *Wellbeing Framework,* does not account for the chronosystem, which allows for change over time. They acknowledged that the skills and strategies children develop over time can enhance their wellbeing. This is particularly significant given the opportunities children are exposed to through the Wellbeing curriculum during their educational journeys to enhance their knowledge, skills, competencies and dispositions (Nohilly *et al.* 2023).

O'Brien, O'Brien, and Goodwin's (2024) research mapped wellbeing actions from the teacher's perspective onto Bronfenbrenner's Framework. It shows stakeholders, such as educators and policymakers, how wellbeing can be integrated practically and contextually across the whole school, emphasising the multidimensional nature of wellbeing promotion. At the microsystem level, examples include establishing a wellbeing ethos and committees; at the mesosystem level, parental involvement in wellbeing activities; at the exosystem, access to mental health professionals; and at the macrosystem, the allocation of time, space, and resources for effective wellbeing initiatives.

Within the *Wellbeing Framework*, a whole-school approach involving all members of the school community is key to wellbeing promotion. This can support the integration of systems across the school community (DES, 2019). A whole school approach will now be explored in greater detail.

2.3.3 A Whole School Approach to Wellbeing

As part of a whole-school approach to wellbeing, a shared vision for wellbeing is necessary in all schools (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024). Cefai, Simões and Caravita (2021) define a whole school approach as comprising three key layers: classroom, school, and intersectoral.

The classroom layer refers to curriculum, climate and teacher professional learning opportunities. Wellbeing requires integration within the daily classroom practice as part of curricular and extra-curricular activities (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021). Further, establishing a classroom climate that promotes supportive interpersonal relationships, fosters intrinsic motivation and a sense of belonging, ensures safety, and encourages active participation (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021). Schools with positive climates and positive teacher modelling have been shown to increase student attachment to healthy

norms of behaviour (LaRusso, Romer and Selman, 2007). Social connectedness has also been linked to high student achievement and engagement (Gray and Hackling, 2009).

The school layer refers to the school environment, which should incorporate wellbeing as a key part of its ecology and culture. This is characterised by collaborative relationships among students, staff, parents, and professionals, as well as a sense of connectedness and belonging (Cefai, Simões, and Caravita, 2021). A whole school approach also promotes pupils and parents as active partners in wellbeing promotion (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021).

Finally, the intersectoral layer refers to intersectoral partnerships with professionals and agencies. Community partnerships can facilitate the provision of resources and support schools with wellbeing promotion as well as enable access to external agencies, providing students with additional support that may be required (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021). A coordinated approach, however, is needed (Weare and Nind, 2011). This will be considered further later in this section.

A whole school approach to wellbeing will now be explored through two models.

The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model, developed in 2014 for schools across the United States, is presented as a best-practice framework for promoting a culture of health and wellbeing (Willgerodt, Walsh, and Maloy, 2021). It emphasises a 'student-centered' and 'community-grounded approach' demonstrating interprofessional collaboration between health and education sectors to promote wellbeing (Willgerodt, Walsh and Maloy, 2021, p.61). The holistic model includes ten components to include engagement of family, health services, counselling, psychological and social services and is implemented in schools in a variety of ways, such as guiding the development of procedures and policies. Similar to Bronfenbrenner's *Bioecological Model of Human Development* (1979), the WSCC model acknowledges the multiple layers of relationships and influences between the individual and the system, and their connection to academic success (Willgerodt, Walsh, and Maloy, 2021). The model recognises the need for input and perspective from a variety of sectors and disciplines, for example, nurses are embedded within the school system. Willgerodt, Walsh, and Maloy's (2021) study, however, emphasises the necessity of data that describe community

partnerships and of including the perspectives of nurses and other key professionals in research.

The Well Schools network, involving over 1,000 primary and secondary schools across England, Wales and Scotland, also focuses on a whole school approach, fostering a culture and ethos to support the wellbeing of students, staff and leaders (Hennessey *et al.* 2025). The aim is to improve educational outcomes. The networks framework has three pillars: Well Led, Well Prepared, and Well Equipped, which are mapped against Public Health England's eight principles for promoting wellbeing in school. The network offers an 'Umbrella framework' that allows the principles of the network to be organised and evaluated (Hennessey *et al.* 2025, p.12).

There are, however, challenges to a whole school approach and to wellbeing promotion, which will be expanded upon in the following sections. These challenges include: challenges with enactment; curriculum overload and educators' wellbeing; teacher buy-in; confidence and skills to teach wellbeing; opportunities to upskill; and the need for intersectoral collaboration at national, regional, and local levels.

2.4 Challenges to Wellbeing in Education

2.4.1 Challenges with Policy Enactment

A key barrier to enacting wellbeing, as found in O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin's, (2024) study of Irish teachers, is translating policy into practice, the challenge of enactment from macro to micro. As highlighted in chapter one, policy is more than written text; it is interpreted, decoded, and translated by practitioners (Spratt, 2016; Maguire, Ball and Braun, 2010), leading to varied enactment across schools (Maguire, Ball and Braun, 2010). Leaders and teachers are key players in realising policies within their specific contexts (Bradfield and Exley, 2020).

The school principal's commitment signals the integration of wellbeing priorities into school policy and practice (Rasberry *et al.* 2015). Leaders need a clear vision for integrating wellbeing into policy, school culture, social norms, and practice (Street, 2018). Managing teacher concerns is necessary during policy enactment (King, 2014).

Increasingly, policies require input from the wider school community. School leaders must build relationships both within and beyond the school for collective agreement, adding complexity to the enactment process (Gorman and O'Higgins Norman, 2024). A leader's values and perspective will ultimately impact how a policy is received and implemented, shaping what is prioritised and addressed (Farrelly, O'Higgins Norman, and O'Leary, 2017). For instance, a leader with values of non-discrimination and equality would prioritise addressing homophobic bullying (Farrelly, O'Higgins Norman, and O'Leary, 2017).

A context specific approach is required within schools when considering how the *Wellbeing Framework* is enacted. This acknowledges the 'precarious networks of different and overlapping groups of people, artefacts and practices' (Ball, Maguire, and Braun, 2012, p. 162) and the supports and resources needed for successful enactment.

Understanding Context

Braun *et al.* (2011) propose four contextual dimensions: situated, professional, material, and external, for considering the unique and layered contexts within schools. These dimensions can help shape, support, or undermine the enactment of wellbeing policies.

Situated Context

The situated context relates to the school's history, location, and student intake. This may relate to the level of disadvantage or community needs. A school in a DEIS context may prioritise trauma- informed approaches, for example, whereas a school in a non-DEIS context may respond and focus on levels of anxiety.

Professional Contexts

Secondly, professional contexts refer to staff beliefs, experiences, interpretations and leadership structures for managing policy, which will determine how wellbeing policies are received. Supporting staff in developing an understanding of the purpose of the *Wellbeing Framework* and the need for the policy is a key starting point for its adoption in the Irish context. This may include sharing research about the link between wellbeing and learning (Purnell *et al.* 2020). A recommendation is that policymakers streamline content-heavy policies into actionable guides for teachers (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin 2024). Effective leadership, that is resistant to staff changes, is also necessary if teachers

are to feel empowered and to ensure staff readiness to focus on wellbeing enactment (Runions *et al*. 2021).

A further tension is that policies, such as the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (DES 2013) referred to in Gorman and O'Higgins Norman's study 2024 can often be presented by government in a top-down fashion that offers a standardised approach, and whilst distributed leadership is the ideal, this application in practice presents a number of challenges, with principals often shouldering most of the responsibility. The establishment of a team of champions within a school, including those who are 'in the trenches', can help facilitate the distribution of leadership and responsibility (Miller and Bice, 2014, p. 23). New roles may need to be created to recognise required wellbeing roles and support for the long-term plan for wellbeing (Hennessey *et al.* 2023). A 'dialogic relation of trust' is required, whereby middle leaders are empowered by school leaders to promote cultures of collaboration and innovation, moving beyond being viewed as 'task masters' (Cunnane, Gorman and Furlong, 2025, p. 11 and 12).

Instead of standardised policy, flexible frameworks are recommended, allowing schools to adapt to their unique contexts. The *Bí Cineálta Procedures* (DoE, 2024a) reflects this shift, giving schools space to determine suitable prevention strategies, investigation steps, and support approaches for bullying behaviour, while offering implementation guidelines.

Material Contexts

Braun *et al.* (2011) include budget, staffing, buildings, and technology as material contexts influencing policy. Prioritising wellbeing demands resources for initiatives to create safe, calm environments, as well as funding for professional learning. A school in O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin's (2024) study, sourced philanthropic funding to hire an assistant psychologist and family support worker. Non-DEIS schools in this study viewed their status as a 'significant barrier' to wellbeing promotion, due to their lack of access to the same training and staffing schedules (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024).

External Contexts

External contexts, such as broad policy demands (like evaluation/inspection frameworks) and local supports (e.g., Oide, NCSE), are crucial for policy enactment. The DoEY's August 2025 'Promotion of Wellbeing in Schools Evaluation' (DoEY, 2025c) oversees a school's whole school approach to wellbeing, aligning it with four key areas. This evaluation includes a learning walk to assess the reflection of the wellbeing vision in school culture and a stakeholder wellbeing workshop (DoEY, 2025c).

2.4.2 Wellbeing of Educators

The wellbeing of educators will determine how wellbeing policies are received. There is a symbiotic relationship between the wellbeing of adults and children; thus, the wellbeing of adults should form part of a whole school approach to wellbeing (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021). Adults who are part of a child's primary social system have a strong impact on a child's mental health through their role modelling, attitudes, behaviours, and interpersonal relationships with the child (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021). This includes school staff and parents.

Wellbeing Challenges for School Leaders

Principals are key actors in supporting a whole school approach to wellbeing enactment. Communicating effectively, developing interpersonal relationships, sharing expectations, and cultivating trust are key skills for principals in positive relationship development (Grissom, Egalite, and Constance, 2021). Caring school leadership supports the wellbeing of both teachers and students and promotes a sense of collective responsibility and teacher collaboration (Louis, Murphy and Smylie, 2016).

Irish primary school principals have reported working under high levels of stress, frequently combining leadership duties with teaching commitments, leading to role overload that negatively impacts job satisfaction (Darmody and Smyth, 2016). This stress is also likely to affect the wider school environment and teachers (Darmody and Smyth, 2011). Due to the negative impact of the role on health and wellbeing, investment in Irish principals is recommended, including mandatory pre-service training, a mentoring service with retired principals, and periodic mental health days (McHugh, 2023). The OECD (2020b) recommends mentoring newly appointed school leaders through networks

of principals. Such investment is critical, as principals are pivotal in supporting student welfare, teacher wellbeing, and community engagement (McHugh, 2023).

Wellbeing Challenges for Teaching Staff

Teachers feeling overloaded was identified as one of the main barriers to promoting school wellbeing in the country-specific results of Ireland in the Schools for Health in Europe (SHE) Network monitoring report (Bartelink, Bessems and Prevo, 2020). This challenge is multifaceted, potentially stemming from increased demands and the need for dedicated time for wellbeing enactment (Dempsey and McCoy, 2026). A lack of time and existing pressures to support students' wellbeing outside the traditional educator role were also cited as barriers to a whole-school approach in Wales (Brown *et al.* 2023), highlighting a recurring issue of curriculum and systemic pressures.

2.4.3 The Expanding Wellbeing Role of Schools

There has been increasing responsibility for children's wellbeing placed on schools, evidenced through increased curricular timing allocations in Irish primary education. Within the *Wellbeing Framework* schools are positioned as providing a 'powerful context' for the healthy development of the child, minimising wellbeing risk factors such as absenteeism, bullying and relationship difficulties and enhancing protective factors such as a sense of belonging, positive relationships and opportunities for social and emotional learning (DES, 2019, p. 12). Further, the increased identification of children with wellbeing difficulties in schools has led to greater teacher self-awareness and responsibilities (O'Connor and Nohilly, 2024).

However, this can significantly blur educators' roles. It raises the question of whether schools should be responsible for addressing health problems as opposed to education problems (Farrell *et al.* 2024). O'Farrell *et al.* (2025) highlighted that teachers often see themselves not only as educators but also as emotional buffers, behaviour managers, and social workers. This professional demand, known as 'emotional labour,' requires staff to remain patient, composed, and enthusiastic daily, regardless of their personal feelings (O'Farrell *et al.,* 2025, p.14). The need for a more integrated, systems-based approach and coordinated action to support whole school wellbeing will be discussed later in Part A of this chapter. A more integrated, systems-based approach requires external professionals to be seen not merely as problem-solving experts but as 'agents of change' working

collaboratively with all stakeholders (Kitching, 2018, p.8). This emphasises the essential need for collective responsibility for wellbeing across the entire school community (Kitching, 2018), requiring that staff be supported in understanding how a whole-school approach aligns with their daily roles and identities as educators (Jourdan *et al.,* 2014).

The expanding wellbeing role of schools has seen a variety of wellbeing programmes and resources available, which often results in a 'scattergun approach' to wellbeing promotion (Kirkham, 2023). Educators may experience 'intervention burnout' due to the haphazard implementation of too many short-lived wellbeing programmes (Runions *et al*. 2021, p.15). Further, the assumption of 'wellbeing as a tool' through activities provided by schools such as yoga, wellness check-ins and mindful colouring highlight the 'relocation of responsibility for well-being onto individuals and away from deep-rooted structural and political inequalities and social determinants of well-being (individualisation)' (Farrell *et al.* 2024, p. 58).

A whole-school approach to wellbeing enactment requires space within the school day and in teachers' minds (Runions *et al*. 2021). A study in Pennsylvania highlighted the importance of 'wellness councils' with protected time to assess wellbeing, discuss enactment, and develop guiding policies, which fostered staff accountability (Hoke *et al*. 2024). Providing opportunities for formal collaboration within school can help develop a culture of learning (Grissom, Egalite and Constance, 2021). In Higgins and Booker's (2023) study, one factor that facilitated a whole school approach to wellbeing was the opportunity to become part of a network.

To support wellbeing enactment, staff wellbeing must not be overlooked; staff should not feel like a 'cog in the machine' (O'Brien, O'Brien & Goodwin, 2024). Strategies to support staff wellbeing include emotional resilience training and professional learning communities to encourage reflective practice (Lalucan, 2025).

2.4.4 Professional Learning Supports in Wellbeing

School systems may be viewed as a 'smart' way for countries to make improvements in wellbeing education as they offer cost-effective settings for preventative education and interventions (UNESCO, 2022b).

Professional learning and development is part of a whole school approach to wellbeing (DES, 2019; Scottish Government, 2021) that helps educators feel competent to engage in practice and provide wellbeing support (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021). Professional learning should help educators understand children's social and emotional development, identify signs of mental health difficulties in children, and implement appropriate mental health programmes (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021). This should include an understanding of the 'overlap and bi-directional importance' of mental health and academic achievement (Dempsey and McCoy, 2026, p.23). Further, professional learning to address bullying and to develop skills in relational, child-centred, collaborative, and constructivist pedagogy is required (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021). It cannot be assumed that relationship building comes 'naturally' to all teachers (Graham, Powell, and Truscott, 2016, p.378). Finally, teacher education should also support staff in working collaboratively with parents, colleagues, and professionals (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021).

Professional Learning and Development in Ireland

Continuing professional development of teachers was considered a priority by 58.3% of countries that are part of the Schools for Health in Europe (SHE) Network Foundation (Vilaça *et al.* 2019). Educators must have an understanding of the whole school approach and actively participate in related discussions, demonstrating commitment and engagement (Vilaça *et al.* 2019)

Studies show Irish teachers lack the confidence and skills to teach wellbeing and require more opportunities to upskill in this area, specifically in addressing mental health issues (O'Brien, O'Brien & Goodwin, 2024; Higgins & Booker, 2023). O'Connor and Nohilly (2024) recommend continued professional learning in mental health and wellbeing to enhance teachers' ability to identify issues and respond appropriately. This may include guidance on identifying and supporting students experiencing academic stress (McCoy and Byrne, 2024), high perfectionist anxiety (Luthar and Latendresse, 2005), and the diverse range of factors impacting pupil wellbeing (Sloan *et al.*, 2024). Beyond mental health, the NCCA (2019) notes the need for increased guidance on age-appropriate, sensitive, and inclusive language and boundaries for teaching wellbeing topics. Cefai, Simões, and Caravita (2021) stress that professional learning must start in initial teacher

education and continue through ongoing, school-based professional learning, mentoring, professional networks, and learning communities.

Professional learning in Ireland, managed and funded by the DoE's Teacher Education Section, ranges from informal to formal, including mentoring, research, courses, and collaboration (Rawdon *et al*. 2020; DoE, 2025a). The DoE funds Oide, Ireland's largest support service, and Education Centres to deliver professional learning often linked to national priorities and local needs (DoE, 2025a; Oide, 2025). Educators in Higgins and Bookers (2022, p. 655) study referred to 'regular and obligatory' professional learning in literacy and numeracy, insisting that all staff receive professional learning in whole-school mental health and wellbeing promotion. Similarly, King, Brennan, and Gorman (2024) have highlighted that the time allocated to professional learning in Irish primary schools is often limited to curricular reform.

Earlier studies reported that teachers were unaware of the *Wellbeing Framework* requirements (Nohilly and Tynan, 2022; Higgins and Bookers, 2022). School based support has since been provided by Oide to support in reviewing and reflecting on whole school wellbeing within schools as part of their school self-evaluation. However, this support was available only to schools that applied and was not mandatory. Professional learning supports were also provided to support the enactment of the *Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (DoE, 2024a) and the *Child Protection Procedures for Schools* (DoEY, 2025b).

The NCSE, funded by the DoE, supports the wellbeing of students with special educational needs through a regional team structure (NCSE, 2025a). Supports include seminars, workshops, and in-school guidance to enhance teacher capacity (NCSE, 2025b). Additionally, the NCSE advises educators, parents, and guardians and offers policy recommendations to the Minister for Education and Skills on special education (NCSE, 2025a).

NEPS, the Department of Education's psychological service, provides evidence-based training for school staff (primary, post-primary, and special) covering behaviour, learning, and social-emotional development, aligned with four key wellbeing areas (DoE, 2025b).

Professional learning can occur within networks, particularly professional learning networks. This will be considered further in the second part of this chapter.

Professional Learning and Development Considerations

A lack of funding for ongoing staff development was reported as a barrier to a whole school approach to wellbeing in Wales, sometimes prompting staff to seek quicker solutions (Brown *et al.,* 2023). It is necessary to design professional learning funding that addresses immediate school needs, school-based initiatives, and personal learning interests (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020; OECD, 2021b).

Policy makers should provide flexible funding for professional learning, including sustained collaboration, coaching, mentoring, and networking, which provides rich learning and exchange opportunities (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017; Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020). While free online and offline self-directed learning options are growing, the most effective forms of professional learning, mentioned previously, often require investment (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020).

The 2024 Féilte Bursary, highlighted in chapter one, supported collaboration and knowledge sharing by funding school wellbeing projects such as anti-bullying policy reviews and Restorative Practices (TCI, 2024; TCI, 2025). One staff member noted that the bursary 'facilitated networking opportunities, bringing our schools closer together' (TCI, 2025, p. 28). However, the limited, non-guaranteed funding and selection of only twenty-seven schools restrict the long-term sustainability and overall impact of this collaborative professional learning.

To increase opportunities for participation in professional learning and collaboration, policymakers, in addition to funding considerations, have a role in evaluating and redesigning school timetables and how time is used (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner, 2017). Teachers' professional learning outside work is not free and has indirect costs (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020). The ILO (2024) recommends that professional learning for teachers be free of cost and during school time. However, time alone is insufficient; effective collaboration requires supportive structures, a positive culture, and teacher leadership (Boeskens *et al.*, 2020). Schools with staff shortages and

high turnover may face challenges in providing staff with continuity and opportunities to engage in collaborative learning opportunities (Boeskens *et al*., 2020). Despite teachers driving collaborative learning, systems often fail to support the design and implementation of collaborative practices within and across schools (Boeskens *et al.*, 2020). This study aims to explore the specific barriers and needed supports for networking across schools.

2.4.5 Intersectoral Collaboration

Whilst the education sector has a pivotal role to play in wellbeing enactment, alone it cannot address the wellbeing issues that impact students (UNESCO, 2022a). Schools need support from the whole system to break down barriers (Cooper and Lhussier, 2026). Effective wellbeing enactment requires coordinated efforts (Weemer *et al.* 2023), reflecting intersectoral responsibility at national, regional, and local levels (Gray *et al.* 2022). Intersectoral collaboration must go beyond vaccination and traditional screening to develop health and education policy that 'will protect and foster the real needs of the new generation in the post pandemic world' (Soultatou, Vardaros and Bagos, 2023, p.7). However, this bridge-building between sectors is challenging, often encountering conflicting philosophies, priorities, policies, and practices (Weemer *et al.* 2023). Therefore, establishing an agreed vision for wellbeing from the outset is crucial, recognising that health and wellbeing are not competing priorities (UNESCO, 2025).

Community engagement and expanding local social networks are regarded as catalysts for wellbeing enactment in schools (McMullen *et al.* 2020). Schools must understand how community involvement supports the enactment of wellbeing (McMullen *et al.* 2020). This collaboration involves schools working with community agencies, including government, health, non-profits, businesses, religious groups, and universities (Olson, Hegbloom and Egan, 2021; McMullen *et al.*, 2020), to share services, resources, and expertise for school programmes and community-based learning. Strong, reciprocal partnerships are essential (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020), such as universities offering expertise while schools provide local knowledge (Weemer *et al.*, 2023). However, smaller schools and regions may struggle to build this capacity (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020).

There has been a call for a more integrated, systems-based approach and coordinated action to support whole-school wellbeing enactment (UNESCO, 2022a). School programmes addressing mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and suicide, for instance, can potentially provide a return on investment of US$21.5 for every US$1 invested over a period of 80 years (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Food Programme (WFP), 2023). Within the SHE report (Vilaça *et al.* 2019) involving 24 member countries, the most frequently cited facilitating factor for the implementation of health-promoting schools was collaboration between the education and health sectors. However, financing true multi-sectoral collaboration poses a grave challenge (Gray *et al.* 2022). The health sector may not consider student wellbeing its business and may be unwilling to fund education systems, perhaps as a result of uncertainty about value and limited evidence of effect (Gray *et al.* 2022). Facilitators of successful collaboration include recognition of differing organisational cultures, clear channels for intersectoral communication, and explicit responsibilities for different actors to account for the differing values in health and education (Gray *et al.* 2022).

Intersectoral collaboration in Ireland

The DoE in Ireland provides funding through the national health promotion budget, and there are support services within schools and referral systems for students with special educational needs when the expertise required exceeds the scope of the school (Bessems, Bartelink and Prevo, 2020). Via three streams, the Health Service Executive (HSE) provides healthcare services for children: Primary Care, Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs), and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Primary care includes psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, and speech and language therapists supporting children with non-complex needs. Secondly, the CDNTs support children with a wide range of disabilities. Thirdly, CAMHS provide assessment and treatment for children and families experiencing mental health difficulties through a multidisciplinary team, ensuring a range of experience, disciplines and perspectives are provided in the assessment, treatment and care of children (Mental Health Commission, 2023). CAMHS compliment the work of the primary care service and CDNTs. However, research has shown that services providing Disability Services, Primary Care interventions, and CAMHS are working in silos, which can create disjointed work processes and communication barriers (Mental Health Commission, 2023). Tusla,

the child and family state agency, is responsible for child protection, welfare, and family support, and for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children (Tusla, 2026).

National discourse in Ireland concerning education is increasingly referencing the mental health of children and young people (Farrell *et al.* 2024). Teacher participants from Irish primary and secondary schools in O'Connor and Nohilly's (2024) study reported that their experience of accessing mental health services for students was that they were largely under-resourced and inaccessible as a result of lengthy waiting lists. These far-reaching consequences for children who remain untreated may also impact their social interactions, relationships, educational attendance, achievement and behaviour (Mental Health Commission, 2023). International comparisons of staffing of CAMHS teams show that Sweden had the largest workforce at 112 per 100,000 population in the 0-18 age group, New Zealand reported the second-highest rate at 109 per 100,000 population, Scotland at 96, and Ireland at 65 per 100,000 (Mental Health Commission, 2023). In Ireland, the number of consultant psychiatrists per 100,000 was 7, compared with 18 in Sweden. Whilst there has been an increase in approved posts in Ireland by 2022, recruitment difficulties mean that a number of these posts remain unfilled, placing continued pressure on existing staff and ultimately impacting retention levels (Mental Health Commission, 2023).

Some teachers in O'Connor and Nohilly's (2024, p.221) study reported a lack of access to services unless a case was 'extreme or severe'. This was echoed by parents (Mental Health Commission, 2023). Furthermore, schools and families have reported a lack of clarity about how children can access the services they need (OECD, 2024b). Communication issues in connecting with experts were also recorded as a barrier, as was distance to treatment and the costs involved if a parent chooses to seek treatment privately (O'Connor and Nohilly, 2024). This is significant as evidence highlights that a large proportion of adult mental health problems originates in childhood and adolescence, with half of lifetime cases starting by age fourteen (Kessler *et al.* 2005). Further, teachers report that this is the wellbeing domain in which they feel least qualified to address (Nohilly and Tynan, 2022). O'Connor and Nohilly's (2024) study recommended a regular on-site health professional, who may be shared across schools, and members of in-school management forming a pastoral care team. This could facilitate accessible pathways to specialist care when needed and equip children with the right emotional tools to overcome barriers that

would otherwise follow them into adulthood (Hill *et al.* 2024; Hickey, 2025). Beyond the school gates, integrated service provision is necessary to support children's wellbeing (Mental Health Commission, 2023).

In response to challenges accessing health services for children, schools are developing their own strategies. The 'Sky Is The Limit' programme is a five-year-old, school-based, holistic model, coordinated by the school's assistant psychologist (Hickey, 2025). This model provides therapeutic and family support, emphasising integrated community approaches to wellbeing. The programme has led to improvements in students' psychological/emotional, social, and physical development, sense of belonging, happiness, improved attitudes towards learning, and ultimately, learning outcomes. A clinical care team offers counselling, creative arts therapy, and mindfulness to support children and families affected by trauma and adverse childhood experiences. Staff also gain continual learning opportunities, and community ties are strengthened (Hickey, 2025). Other schools are being 'creative' about funding counselling supports for students, using School Completion grants, private funding, and principals relying on their own networks for counsellor recommendations (McElvaney, Judge, and Gordon, 2017).

The Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot addresses rising concerns about children's mental health and long waiting lists (DoE, 2023b; OECD, 2024b), mirroring early intervention efforts in countries like Japan, the United States, Belgium, and Wales (OECD, 2025c). Irish primary school children increasingly present with anxiety, family issues, bullying, and self-harm (McElvaney, Judge, and Gordon, 2017). Selected children, guided by the Continuum of Support and in collaboration with the NEPS psychologist, access up to six in-school counselling sessions (DoE, 2023b). The DoE assures this pilot is not a substitute for HSE Primary Care Psychology or CAMHS (DoE, 2023b). Although the programme is limited and targets a small number of children, it signifies the DoE's commitment to child mental health (Hickey, 2025). Concern has previously been expressed, however, for children with complex mental health needs who present as 'high achievers' or 'well behaved,' who may 'fall between the cracks' because their internal distress does not manifest as disruptive behaviour (McElvaney, Judge, and Gordon, 2017, p. 20).

The pilot aligns with the finding that schools are ideal for early-intervention mental health services due to their near-universal access (Finning *et al.* 2022, p.1592). School-based

counselling should not just target children, but also parents in their parenting role (McElvaney, Judge, and Gordon, 2017).

As part of the whole school approach to mental health in Wales, counselling is provided for 11-18 year olds, in school or community settings. This acknowledges that counselling can supplement school support for learners' social and emotional needs (Welsh Government, 2020). Unlike Ireland, young people, professionals, or adults with a duty of care can make referrals (Welsh Government, 2020). In England, counselling is the most common form of mental health support, with sustained benefits observed after 12-36 weekly sessions (Finning *et al.* 2022). This has led to arguments for expanding in-school counselling to primary schools to improve access and lessen pressure on mental health services (Finning *et al.* 2022).

A second strand of the Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot in Ireland has introduced Education Wellbeing Teams, including a NEPS psychologist, to support school clusters with wellbeing initiatives (DoE, 2024c). Health and education policymakers must cooperate to sustain these wellbeing efforts (Gray *et al.* 2022). Successful, replicable pilots require joint funding for formalisation and scaling up (McGuire *et al.* 2019).

Intersectoral Collaboration Globally

In Greece, teachers and health professionals work together at the grassroots level to implement health-promoting projects (Vilaça *et al.* 2019). However, school health services are rarely permanently based in a sustainable mode within a school setting and are rarely available to the whole school community, which limits their impact (Soultatou, Vardaros and Bagos, 2023). In Russia, health-promoting schools worked with the health sector and medical and pedagogical universities through a national network, supported by national legislation and guidelines (Vilaça *et al.* 2019). In Iceland, wellbeing is a core pillar of the curriculum; local government funds health-promoting schools, and coordinators receive extra time and pay (Vilaça *et al.* 2019).

Beyond Europe, in Australia, multidisciplinary learning support teams work together in a collaborative and consultative manner within the school site to ensure wellbeing supports and individualised learning for students with diverse needs (Bryceson and Sheridan, 2022). There is a shared understanding between teams, consisting of teachers,

leaders, school counsellors and psychologists, that they each only perceive part of the student's needs. Collaboration and expertise are recognised as necessary for identifying and solving problems to meet the needs of the whole child. This study focused on the learning support teams within three school sites, examining consultation processes, structures, relationships and expertise. The importance of effective school and leadership structures to facilitate the allocation and execution of roles such as managing meeting agendas, data collection, and triaging concerns was highlighted. Clearly articulated roles, responsibilities and shared goals were noted. Furthermore, the appropriate expertise, respectful and transparent communication, and the use of data- and evidence-based interventions were significant in informing decision-making and problem-solving (Bryceson and Sheridan, 2022).

Lever *et al.* (2024) study examined the use of the WSCC model in schools in United States to support mental health. School-based wellness teams in the study were composed of key stakeholders, including teachers, nurses, students, parents, and administrators. They were guided and supported by district-level wellness teams in implementing practices to support mental health. Key stakeholders collaborate to conduct needs assessments and set targets for promoting wellbeing in schools (Lever *et al.* 2024).

When looking to other countries to learn from best practice it is important to keep in mind that there is no one size fits all approach to wellbeing promotion, it is necessary to understand a country's contextual factors and monitor these regularly (Bartelink *et al.* 2024). This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's *Bioecological Model,* highlighting how wellbeing is shaped by multiple, interconnected systems that may differ across countries.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals could potentially be an impetus for intersectoral action, leading to improved resource allocation. This will necessitate stronger partnerships, new ways of collaborating and the alignment of policies and investments (McGuire *et al.* 2019). In this post-pandemic world, a robust education and health policy is required to protect and foster the needs of the new generation (Soultatou, Vardaros and Bagos, 2023). Education and health sectors working together have the potential to positively impact skills and employability, a passport for wellbeing for students (Gray *et al.* 2022).

2.4.6 Conclusion

This section critically examined existing literature on wellbeing in education. A key theme emerging is the need for a whole school approach that integrates wellbeing into culture, curriculum, relationships, partnerships, and policy, moving beyond isolated efforts. A disconnect between policy and practical enactment was highlighted in the Irish literature, and the importance of a context-specific approach was noted.

A whole school approach must be systems-based, acknowledging the complex, interconnected influences on a child's wellbeing, including home, school, relationships, pedagogy, and governance. Addressing wellbeing in education challenges requires a comprehensive, systemic approach that integrates supportive policies and professional learning to equip staff to teach 'for' and 'about' wellbeing (NCCA, 2025).

Supporting educators to solve wellbeing-related problems requires additional structures and communication channels to move beyond siloed responses, to recognise different perspectives and diverse approaches to solutions, and to acknowledge the interdependency of educators' work.

Part B of this chapter will explore how educational networks can offer solutions by fostering collaboration, knowledge sharing, and collective problem-solving (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). Networks can improve the whole system, opening communication, providing diverse expertise (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016), and enabling proactive examination of issues from multiple institutional angles. This can help create a shared vision across schools, making wellbeing in education an impactful, sustained reality for the school community rather than just a theoretical aspiration.

PART B: Educational Networks to support challenges in Wellbeing Education

2.5 Introduction

The previous section explored the complexities of wellbeing in education and the key challenges in this field. It emphasised the need for a systemic, whole-school approach, while also highlighting the disconnect between wellbeing policy development and its practical implementation, including curriculum overload, increasing demands on leaders and teachers, and barriers related to confidence and professional learning. The discussion also explored the impact of schools addressing wellbeing in isolation, and the need for intersectoral collaboration among a diverse range of disciplinary experts, including health sectors and HEIs. At present, in Ireland, there is a lack of a shared vision for children's wellbeing across sectors, fragmented communication, difficulties accessing services and resource siloing. Building on these insights, this next section will focus on networks as a mechanism to support enhanced collaboration, problem solving, knowledge and resource sharing.

It is widely accepted that meeting students' wellbeing needs requires multidisciplinary and collaborative practices (Thielking *et al.*, 2018). Educational networks offer a solution that accounts for the highly contextualised nature of challenges and problems within education (Sinnema *et al.*, 2020). Increasingly, schools are operating in networks to provide localised school to school improvement models (Ehren *et al.*, 2017). This is leading to a move beyond traditional school boundaries, developing a concept of 'educational community' as a result of formal collaborations between schools and interdisciplinary agents (Díaz-Gibson, Civís-Zaragoza and Guàrdia-Olmos 2014, p. 179). Networks are marking a shift towards a horizontal- lateral framework from a vertical-hierarchical organisation (Azorín, 2020). In this polycentric regime, the locus of authority for defining and monitoring school quality does not rest solely with the government; schools and key stakeholders also play prominent roles in addressing local problems and learning from one another (Ehren *et al.*, 2017). This emphasises network participants' ability to engage and overcome potential barriers, such as inequality and exclusion, to improve situations (Hernández *et al.*, 2013). In this way, networks are a vehicle for a more equitable society, as they can facilitate partnerships within, between, and beyond schools (Chapman, 2019a). Collaborative, consistent, and clear leadership is needed within and between the parts (ibid, 2019a).

This section will begin by distinguishing networks from other collaborative learning models before exploring who educational networks may be intended for and the different purposes for which they may be established. The characteristics of effective collaboration in educational networks will be presented, followed by attention to the entities responsible for establishing these networks. The section will conclude with a summary of the key insights and connections to wellbeing networks.

2.5.1 Collaborative Learning Models

School networks have emerged alongside collaborative learning models such as Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) (Brown and Flood, 2020), Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (Harris *et al*., 2018) and Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Wenger, 1998). All the approaches emphasise peer interaction, dialogue, reflection, and collaborative inquiry to develop solutions and strategies to address the everyday issues of practice faced by teachers and leaders (Bourke, 2021). The key distinction between networks and other approaches is that whilst networks form around a shared purpose, they do not necessarily focus on mutual learning, as explicitly stated in the titles of PLNs and PLCs, or on deepening practice within a CoP (Bourke, 2021). They may function purely to share resources, information or create connections (Bourke, 2021).

Professional learning activities have been presented along a continuum ranging from more formal to less formal (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020). Teacher networks are categorised as less formal, as groups of teachers often initiate them, are often hidden from policymakers' view, and may not be intentionally designed as learning activities (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020). Whilst a network may begin as informal, it may evolve into more formal learning over time as structures are established through protocols or professional standards (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020).

As previously noted in chapter one, networks are defined in this study as public and private organisations, departments, and agencies established to support collective goals to improve an aspect of quality (Provan and Kenis, 2008), such as, in this study, wellbeing enactment across schools. This definition indicates that educational networks are not always made up solely of schools collaborating but 'joint activities between actors from different organisations' who are working together more formally for a common purpose

(Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010, p.6). This emphasises a systematic approach through structured collective action for improvement.

Both formal and informal networks are a feature of the global educational landscape in North and South America, Africa, Asia, Europe, Australasia and the Middle East (Brown *et al.*, 2024; Armstrong, 2015). This includes collaborative networks to improve communities and schools in Northern Ireland (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017) and communities of learning to support inter-school collaboration as a vehicle for achievement challenges in New Zealand (Wylie, 2016; Sinnema *et al.*, 2020). In Spain, networks have been developed bottom up through areas of interest such as health promotion and physical education (Azorín & Muijs, 2017). In the United States, networks support the implementation of the WSCC model, involving 150 stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and community partners (Purnell *et al.*, 2020).

Networks may differ greatly in terms of their involvement of different groups or stakeholders.

2.5.2 Networks For Whom and For How Long?

Educational networks may involve only leadership teams, only groups of staff or a mixture of both (Sinnema *et al.* 2020). They may include members of the community (Purnell *et al.*, 2020; Constantinides and Eleftheriadou, 2023), families (Hernández *et al.*, 2013), school governing bodies (Ehren *et al.*, 2017) and policy makers (Harris and Jones, 2010). They may involve primary and secondary schools collaborating or mainstream and special schools (Azorín & Muijs, 2017). Networks may include experts from services such as health (Díaz-Gibson *et al.*, 2017), including mental health professionals (Lever *et al.*, 2024). Researchers from HEIs may also be key participants in networks, providing leadership and ongoing advice and support (Shevlin & Brown, 2023). The participation of actors from different layers of the system highlights the importance of intersectoral collaboration. Participation of the different actors helps collaboration become embedded within the culture of the system (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016).

Within large networks, the density of collaboration, in terms of the number of connections between schools within the network, can differ (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010). Networks involving a large number of schools may result in too many interests to be

reconciled, and network functioning may be limited (Feys and Devos, 2015). A balance must be struck between high levels of connectivity and the complexity of managing the connections (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010). A 'centre-periphery model' may emerge in networks that become too large, with certain actors or organisations forming the core, driving the network and exerting greater control over the information flow, whilst other actors are more 'peripherally connected' (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010, p. 22).

Networks often attract individuals seeking new experiences and additional resources, many of whom are already well connected and aware of emerging opportunities (Hargreaves, 2025). Since networks usually involve only a small number of staff from each school, some members will not be directly involved. For those within, participation can generate enthusiasm as they are perceived as 'in the vanguard of change', but more cautious colleagues might feel left behind (Hargreaves, 2025, p. 2). In Prenger *et al.*'s (2019) study of twenty-three PLNs in the Netherlands, transfer of skills and knowledge from the network back to the school context had been initiated but had not yet become organic. It is crucial to consider how lessons learned through networks are shared within schools to build a 'critical mass of activity' and facilitate knowledge mobilisation, which supports sustained innovation across classrooms and schools (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010, p. 318). Opportunities for knowledge mobilisation are essential to help staff understand, engage with and cocreate new practices (Brown and Flood, 2020). This sharing can happen through workgroups or resource exchanges, where network members 'broker the skills and knowledge they have learned besides professionally developing themselves' (Prenger *et al.,* 2019, p.450). Establishment of a professional learning community (PLC) within the school by teachers in the network can create a meaningful two-way link between the network and the school. It may also be supported by a school-university partnership (Brennan and Pennycook, 2025). It is essential to ensure that staff outside the network and their practices are not undervalued and that network members remain receptive to diverse ideas, even if they differ from the network's stance (Hargreaves, 2025).

Networks can also be distinguished in terms of the timescale for network activities. Some networks are short-term and established to address immediate concerns (Muijs, 2015). Alternatively, networks may focus on more fundamental changes that would take time, such as changes in school culture (Muijs, 2015). Other networks may fall somewhere in

between, blending short-term impact with longer-term development (Muijs, 2015). Regardless of their duration, networks are formed with a purpose dependent on the varied needs and contexts of the schools involved.

2.5.3 Networks For what purpose?

Network collaboration can serve a range of goals, offering significant benefits such as fostering connections, sharing ideas and resources, influencing policy, driving school improvement, learning from each other, supporting smoother transitions, and facilitating multi-agency collaboration.

Fostering Connections and Social Cohesion

Networks may operate solely to connect organisations. Schools in challenging circumstances, facing considerable stress and with few links to other schools or the community, may struggle to balance their school's core values, such as inclusiveness, with societal demands for competition or performance (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010). Muijs, West & Ainscow (2010) relate these challenges to the Durkheim (1972) notion of 'anomie' resulting from discrepancies in the values individuals and society hold and the lack of integration and regulation strong ties can provide. Networking may offer integration and regulation through partner schools, alleviating organisational anomie by emphasising shared goals and mutual support, reducing isolation (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010). One participant in the DCU CSN highlighted learning from different schools and educators in the network and receiving advice on how they handle challenging situations (White *et al.*, 2025). In rural school districts, collaboration via networking has been shown to combat anomie and the feeling of being peripheral, often caused by geographical remoteness from expertise (Muijs, 2015). Additionally, networks can create support systems that enable leaders to share common challenges in roles that can be quite isolated (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017).

Networks can strengthen connections and collaboration beyond the school by actively engaging parents and community members (Azorín & Muijs, 2017). Network effectiveness is enhanced when efforts and goals are aligned with community priorities (Duffy & Gallagher, 2017). Excluding the community voice in initiatives for children can lead to an incomplete understanding of key needs, priorities, and opportunities, resulting in partial or ineffective solutions (Dyson *et al*., 2012). By incorporating the perspectives

of the wider community, including local businesses and sports clubs, networks can achieve greater alignment when working toward whole-school goals (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016). In the Azorín & Muijs (2017) study, parents and community members were invited to participate in learning workshops on emotional intelligence, which was the network's area of interest. This helped share the schools' improvement and innovation priorities.

In societies divided by religious, political, or national identities, networks can play a crucial role in fostering connection, social cohesion, and positive interdependence between schools. In Northern Ireland, where separate school systems exist for Catholic and Protestant communities, the '*Shared Learning'* initiative was introduced to bridge these divisions through regular and sustained contact. This initiative brings primary and secondary schools together in networks, through locally tailored programmes. It promotes shared learning among students and encourages collaboration between teachers and school leaders from different backgrounds (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017).

Duffy and Gallagher's (2017) study highlights how the shared collaboration model has placed collaboration at the core of schools' priorities, encouraging them to work together to bridge institutional boundaries and create more connected spaces within the education system. The study also illustrates how networks can foster trust and cooperation between schools and external agencies. For example, the *Shared Education* initiative involved the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in delivering lessons as part of a community safety strategy (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017). This partnership was particularly significant given the historically strained relationship between the PSNI and many nationalist communities in Northern Ireland.

The shared education model has been enshrined in legislation (Northern Ireland Shared Education Act, 2016) and policy, Sharing Works - A Policy for Shared Education (DENI, 2015), highlighting a shift towards formalising network relationships. Networking has extended beyond the status of a project and is shaping the future course of education (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017).

Share Resources

Networks may operate to facilitate the sharing of resources or information, and in an age of austerity, sharing human and physical resources more efficiently is becoming

increasingly necessary (Brown, 2019). When educators work in isolation, knowledge, expertise, and resources can remain dormant or underused, and innovative ideas may not be tested or shared (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). This is of particular importance within the teaching profession at present, given the global teacher recruitment and retention crisis, which may point towards a crisis in engagement and motivation (Hargreaves, 2025). Networks may also positively impact teacher motivation (Hargreaves, 2025).

Social capital theorists explain how educational networks facilitate the flow of resources within the network, thereby increasing the flow of information (Muijs, 2015). Putnam (2000) distinguished between bridging and bonding capital, both of which have powerful social effects. Bonding social capital focuses on within-group connections and strong group loyalty, which develops trust and belonging (Putnam, 2000), helping network members come 'out of their silos' and share advice, best practice and support within networks (Bourke, 2023). Bridging social capital is outward-looking, connecting diverse social groups horizontally. Collaboration can thus help link schools to external assets and information (Muijs, 2015). Bridging social capital can generate 'broader identities and reciprocity' and is 'good for getting ahead' while bonding social capital is 'good for getting by' and 'bolsters our narrower selves' (Putnam, 2000, p.22). Bridging is vital for knowledge generation and the influx of new ideas (Demir, 2021). Further, Grootaert *et al.* (2004, p. 4) identified a third form of social capital, linking social capital by connecting people vertically to resources across 'power differentials.' Access to linking social capital is particularly central to wellbeing in providing access to external assistance (Grootaert *et al.*, 2004).

In Barcelona, eighteen educational collaborative networks were set up to focus on improving three educational challenges: school success, responding to families at risk of exclusion, and student absenteeism (Díaz-Gibson *et al.*, 2017). Networking involved coordination with members, as well as with the government and social education services; relationships based on high trust. This study noted resource optimisation as a result, along with the development of a community resource inventory to avoid overlaps and gaps.

In Muijs and Rumyantseva's (2013) study, a network of colleges competing with one another acted as complementors in the procurement of services, such as insurance. They

acted as a buying coalition, which led to cost savings. The schools also developed a joint quality assurance system in preparation for inspections by the national inspection agency, as well as organising days for shared professional learning activities and opportunities to observe each other's practice (Muijs and Rumyantseva, 2013). Schools may also come together in a network to apply for and secure funding or to save costs on resources (Muijs and Rumyantseva, 2013).

Finally, in their study, O'Hara *et al.* (2020) found that, with the exception of psychological support services and community workers, school leaders were resistant to sharing human resources or infrastructure, such as school buildings. One participant commented that they would not be willing to share their best teachers, a concern shared by a principal in Wylie's (2016) study. This suggests competitive tensions within schools and implies limitations on what could be shared. Another participant expressed concern that sharing resources might compromise their DEIS funding. Networks thus challenge us to conceptualise the barriers between schools, communities, and stakeholders as permeable rather than closed (O'Hara *et al.*, 2021b).

Greater Political Influence

Collaboration between schools within a network may yield greater political influence than a single school. In Bourke's (2023) study, she found that collective school networking among DEIS schools in Ireland exerted greater pressure on the social and political landscape than individuals acting in isolation (Bourke, 2023). The network leveraged their linking social capital by connecting across power differentials to key political resources, becoming 'system players' thinking about the children across their schools as opposed to those in their individual schools (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016, p.18). Similarly, in Muijs and Rumyantseva's (2013) study, schools found that the network facilitated greater access to local politicians and ministers with greater potential to influence local and national policy than when acting individually. The network also opened up dialogue between schools and key members of staff on the exam board, who, as a result, offered training to the schools in the network.

School Improvement

Beyond political influence, educational networks can play a critical role in school improvement and may be established with the goal of building capacity for change and

improving student outcomes (Muijs, 2015). This may be stimulated by local or national government or through bottom up activity (Muijs, 2015). This includes schools with particular strengths or expertise supporting other schools to develop practice in identified areas. Shanghai, China consistently ranks among the highest-performing regions in the OECD's PISA (OECD, 2010; OECD, 2013). As part of the Empowered Management Programme, two-year partnerships are set up between schools with strong capacity and those seeking to develop specific areas of practice (OECD, 2020b). This includes teachers and school leaders from both schools working together, classroom observations, discussions of effective practice with constructive feedback, and building teacher-researcher capacity to share and develop new ideas (OECD, 2020b).

However, it is important to note that evidence of the direct impact of networks on student outcomes is inconsistent, and policy in some countries has preceded evidence of impact, emphasising the need for further research in this field (Prenger *et al.,* 2019). Sammons *et al.* (2007) note that any improvements in student attainment should be interpreted with caution, as other influences at national and local levels, such as the involvement of inspection bodies, may be linked to rapid improvements in attainment levels.

Policy in New Zealand, *Investing in Educational Success,* has signalled a focus on collaboration as a vehicle for improving student achievement, with investment in teaching and leadership roles across school networks (Constantinides and Eleftheriadou, 2023). A number of principles have been outlined to support this system change, including support for schools in establishing networks and cross-sector collaboration (Constantinides and Eleftheriadou, 2023). Constantinides and Eleftheriadou's (2023, p. 354) review of the implementation of the policy, however, showed 'a notable lack of attention to a coherent system design' with misalignment across policy and school level, which affected buy-in and individual understanding of how their work contributed to the network's goals and vision. The vision of collaboration as a vehicle for improvement may be supported by focusing on developing cultures and conditions that will foster change. This includes community infrastructure across schools and organisational support to create the conditions for networking to work in practice, including clear roles and responsibilities for network members and professional development for formal network leadership roles to support system leadership (Constantinides and Eleftheriadou, 2023).

Creating networks is thus more than simply a legislative task. Carefully considering the genuine involvement of all actors, their social ties, and the promotion of a collaborative culture, along with the use of incentives, will help determine the shape, diffusion, and success of policies (Sinnema *et al*., 2020; Azorín & Muijs, 2017).

Learning From Each Other

Chapman and Hadfield (2010) highlight how networks provide structures that bring groups of practitioners together, fostering peer support and sustained professional dialogue. These collaborative environments enable educators to share insights, learn from one another, and refine their practice (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010). From a constructivist perspective, such engagement helps prevent schools from becoming insular, as exposure to external influences broadens their understanding of educational realities (Muijs, 2015). This aligns with Vygotskian theories of learning, which emphasise the foundational role of cooperation, collective activity, and scaffolding in enabling individuals to achieve more than they could independently (Vygotsky, 1978). One participant in the CSN reported that being part of the network and meeting other teachers facilitated a change in philosophy, from plans that were considered 'top-secret,' developed individually, to more collaborative, flexible, and shared planning styles (White *et al.* 2025). However, a potential limitation of networks is the heavy reliance on the internal expertise of network members as a primary source of professional learning, which may constrain access to diverse perspectives and external innovations (Sinnema *et al*., 2020). Connecting outwards is an important consideration for educational networks to prevent the circulation of old ideas and practices within groups with strong internal ties (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). This will be considered further later in the chapter.

Smoother Transitions

Primary and secondary schools may form a network to provide more seamless transitions for students across these phases (Muijs, 2015). In Northern Ireland, networks have led to better transition arrangements for students moving from primary to post-primary schools in West Belfast, with the creation of a professional forum for exchanging ideas, experiences, and resources (Brown *et al.*, 2015). Processes supporting student transitions involved schools' self-evaluating their current practices, which were quality-assured through area inspections. Follow-up reports were provided for individual schools and the network, offering the 'big picture' findings (Brown *et al.*, 2015, p. 47). This polycentric

process led to greater cohesion, communication, and cooperation among the different institutions, reducing competition and suspicion among schools for students (Brown *et al.* 2015). Further, whilst it is difficult to establish improved student performance, respondents in this study noted that improvements in GCSE and A-Level results could be attributed to the PLN's work (Brown *et al.* 2015).

Multi-Agency Working

Networks may be established to advance multi-agency working, in which schools provide a full-service, holistic offering to students by engaging with health, social, and psychological services (Cummings *et al.* 2007). Achieving this independently is often challenging for individual schools. The Full Service Extended Schools (FSES) initiative in disadvantaged areas of England involves clusters of schools partnering to deliver services (Cummings *et al.,* 2007). The FSES provided a strategic framework that connected schools to services and maintained funding, offering coordination, support, and advice to these clusters. It created a 'zone in-between' typical school offerings and external services, with professionals working onsite part-time, enabling quicker access to outside agencies than through referrals. Multi-agency teams included primary care trust, education, welfare, and adult learning services, managed by school-based coordinators. However, the study noted that developing joint working practices between school staff and agencies took time, as they had to align different professional cultures. A cost-benefit analysis showed that despite high costs, the long-term benefits for children, families, and communities' wellbeing and life chances justified the investment. The FSES approach positively influenced student achievement, especially for those facing difficulties. Whilst some schools developed their approach to joint service delivery, there was a tendency for schools to pursue their own goals, feeling their efforts were not always aligned with the wider strategy (Cummings et al. 2007, p. 35). Most schools collaborated with partners on specific issues but maintained responsibility for managing their FSES activities. This underscores the potential to connect school initiatives with broader regeneration and development strategies to address needs beyond individual schools.

In Ireland, the City-Connects model is illustrative of a systematic approach for schools to connect students living with high levels of poverty and marginalisation to the supports they need (Walsh and Higgins, 2021). It is led by DoEY and Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), in conjunction with the National Centre for City Connects Ireland

(NCCCI), at Mary Immaculate College and Boston College, highlighting support for the integrated model. It reflects a move towards a networked approach as a city connects coordinator connects students to local services, with individual student support plans devised with teachers and parents (North East Inner City, 2026). It is a network of support around individual children rather than connecting school initiatives with broader regeneration and development strategies.

2.5.4 Characteristics of Effective Collaboration in Educational Networks

It is important to note that collaboration in educational networks is not always successful. The often critical discourse in research into networks is on their effectiveness and outcomes. Research has shown that the impact of networks differs depending on the context, structure, nature and operation of the network (O'Hara *et al.* 2020). The literature has identified several characteristics of effective networks that are important to consider, as this information can help design networks in line with their purpose and goals.

A Shared Commitment to Measurable Outcomes

A shared commitment to measurable outcomes can support improving the effectiveness of networks (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). Networks enable schools to set goals based on their unique needs and focus on what matters most to them. Local initiatives, for example, ensure that network activity is responding to locally identified needs, taking into account the context of specific schools (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020). It is, however, important that network goals are co-constructed by network members (Chapman and Pino-Yancovic, 2026). This is because schools co-constructing solutions and knowledge around network needs can result in stronger learning than would be possible from buying into programmes (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010) or from the aspirations of local authorities (Chapman and Pino-Yancovic, 2026). In Chile, 92% of respondents found the network's purpose relevant to their schools' needs. However, only 60% had actively participated in defining that purpose, highlighting that these networks are not yet fully co-constructed by their members (Chapman and Pino-Yancovic, 2026). When networks are focused on achieving collective goals, such as supporting student wellbeing, they create greater opportunities for collective action, such as inquiry groups across schools or joint innovation projects (Chapman and Pino-Yancovic, 2026).

In networks where schools with strong capacity support schools in developing specific areas of practice, establishing clear goals and mutual wins is particularly important from the outset (Muijs, 2015). 73% of principals in O'Hara *et al.* (2020) study noted the importance of reciprocity being transactional, with schools learning from each other through sharing and collaboration. This means that the network is of mutual benefit to each school. Further, establishing clear roles within the network will provide clarity and facilitate greater depth in content-related work (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026). In Azorín & Muijs' (2017) study of Spanish schools, schools are required to design a programme of actions for network actors, including aims, justifications, working groups, resources, and details on the monitoring and evaluation of network activities. This helps ensure that network actors work together on an equal basis, eliminating the risk of domination by one or more actors (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010).

In terms of measurable outcomes, evidence of student outcomes, for example, from whole school wellbeing surveys could highlight areas for improvement and equally show when progress has been made. Such evidence of positive impact can help fuel collective efficacy as well as ownership and engagement within the network (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). Measurable outcomes will be developed further later in the chapter.

Trusting relationships

Trusting relationships, focused on a shared and compelling agenda, facilitate a push-and-pull dynamic that can move the network's work forward (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). High trust levels are essential to creating a safe environment, which is a prerequisite for learning and growth, encouraging network members to learn from each other rather than becoming defensive (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). A study of Chilean networks showed that 38% of members did not discuss failures or unsuccessful practices, indicating that mistakes were not a source of learning, which hindered the adjustment of future practices (Chapman and Pino-Yancovic, 2026). This omission may be partly attributed to educators not having cultivated the capacity for, or clearly focused on and identified, specific activities and practices within their schools that require improvement (Chapman and Pino-Yancovic, 2026).

Trust is necessary for engaging in challenging conversations and holding network actors to account if shared agreements have been breached (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016).

Trust can indeed be strengthened through diverse perspectives across schools (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.* 2026). A stable composition of network members was highlighted as critical in fostering a trusting environment, whereas rotating participants, whilst providing broader insights, may disrupt network stability (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026).

In contexts where school competition is high, trust may be lacking, prompting schools to seek partnerships outside their catchment areas (Muijs and Rumyantseva, 2013). In Muijs and Rumyantseva's (2013) study, competitive pressures between schools created conditions in which collaboration was desirable. Building trust over time enabled schools to withstand competitive pressures and to build a network that strengthened their competitive positions. The network acted as a collective force, regulating competition and resulting in 'civilised competition' between schools. Where competition is low and principals already know each other, a high degree of trust may be present from the outset (Muijs, 2015).

Additionally, networks of schools that have collaborated informally in the past are more likely to survive (Feys and Davos, 2015). In Bourke's (2023) study, bonding social capital was essential to building relationships based on trust. A shared understanding of the DEIS school context helped members develop initial relationships. Over time, bonding social capital fosters trust, which in turn enhances collaboration, cohesion, and a shared purpose toward common goals (Bourke, 2023).

A recommendation from Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan's study (2016) is not to undervalue or underestimate the time spent building trusting relationships, as this can accelerate improvement in the long run.

Opportunities and Structures to Engage in Professional Learning and Collaborative Inquiry

Chapman and Hadfield (2010) distinguish between social and professional networks. Interactions within a social network may involve amicable conversations around a shared interest and lead to knowledge exchange. In a professional learning network, however, processes such as knowledge sharing and knowledge creation may lead to the development of new practices (Poortman, Brown, and Schildkamp, 2022).

Networks offer several ways to enhance professional learning, including leveraging internal and external expertise (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010). Firstly, networks can increase access to local, national, and international expertise, perhaps through economies of scale that make hiring external expertise economically viable. Secondly, networks can strengthen the capacity for innovation and self-inquiry into practice. Thirdly, networks can support and structure professional development that effectively translates into classroom teaching changes. Networks can accomplish this by enhancing the quality of professional development while facilitating the transfer of knowledge and practices (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010).

Engaging in collaborative inquiry (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016) may serve as a mode of professional learning within networks. This involves using credible evidence, such as student achievement data and classroom observations, to identify a problem of practice that will stretch the group's existing knowledge and capacity (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). Following that, it entails designing and testing changes in practice to solve the problem, and embedding what works or refining and discarding ideas based on evidence gathered. This focuses network activity on doing rather than solely talking and encourages learning from failures and improvements over time (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016).

Networks are thus 'fertile ground' for developing practitioner innovation and inquiry, as well as the practice of network members (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010, p. 317). The structural strength of a network is not based on activities alone; rather, it is derived from the interaction between relational structures that bring people together, building trust, knowledge, and professional purpose, as well as operational structures such as planning meetings and working groups (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010, p. 311).

The literature suggests a balance between external input to a network and internal learning among network members. Effective networks do not only focus on improving their internal work, however, but also on ‘identifying and strategizing to continuously change the systems and structures that maintain the status quo and constrain their improvement work’ (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016, p. 15). This illustrates how networks can act as 'powerful vehicles' and 'collective agents of change' within education systems (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016, p. 15).

Sinnema *et al.* (2020, p. 13) note the importance of formally establishing 'boundary spanning activities' to facilitate greater sharing of knowledge and expertise in networks, based on their study of New Zealand networks that found low levels of between-school collaboration. Skills and knowledge largely remained siloed within individual schools. 'Boundary spanning activities' include joint analysis of student achievement data to identify common patterns, collaborative inquiry to generate new insights, and sharing resources to address challenges. Boundary spanning structures are also important for school leaders across the network to increase coherence within the network (Sinnema *et al.,* 2020).

Network Leadership

Networks are often underpinned by legal structures that formalise relationships between institutions (Ehren *et al.,* 2017). In some networks, a separate governing body is established to coordinate the partnership and provide support services to individual schools. It may also assume some of the leadership and responsibilities previously held by individual schools (Ehren *et al*., 2017). This highlights a polycentric system with multiple centres of power (Ehren *et al.*, 2017).

Educators themselves may also lead networks. However, they cannot be led using traditional top-down methods, as the functions of the network leader are multifaceted and the challenges are diverse (Harris, Azorín, and Jones, 2023).

Network leaders hold a wide range of responsibilities, including connecting, coaching, catalysing, and consulting, all of which are essential for ensuring the network functions effectively (Wind *et al.,* 2021).

These roles have been categorised into four areas by Earl and Katz (2007). Firstly, *setting and monitoring the agenda* includes ensuring the work has a purpose and focus, along with associated duties. Preparatory duties may include organising the meeting location, managing schedules, sending invites to members, and coordinating materials (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.* 2026). Secondly, *encouraging and motivating others to get involved* involves creating motivation among members and inspiring them to play a role and build connections with other network members. This gives meaning to social integration across boundaries (Chapman and Pino-Yancovic, 2026). Thirdly, network leaders are required

to *build capacity and provide support* to foster innovation and creative thinking. Fostering professional growth demands specific expertise and 'requires targeted strategies to embed new knowledge into the system and sustain its impact' (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026, p.39). Finally, *shared or distributed leadership*, defined as intentionally sharing leadership, requires giving others in the network freedom to contribute to actions and decisions. This involves creating conditions for peer learning and joint problem-solving and stretching leadership capacity between and across organisations according to expertise (Harris, Azorín, and Jones, 2023). Lateral distribution of leadership emphasises collective agency, interdependent decision-making, and horizontal patterns of formal and informal leadership among network members (Harris, Azorín, and Jones, 2023). The structural composition can foster greater cooperation across hierarchical levels when roles and responsibilities are not predefined (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026). Distributed leadership approaches in networks foster connections, facilitate the flow of knowledge across schools and build the necessary infrastructure for success (Taylor *et al.*, 2022). Professional learning for network leaders, developing skills in shared leadership, conflict management, decision-making, and trust-building, is needed, as these skills may differ from traditional school leadership (Feys and Devos, 2015).

Within schools, school leaders also play a key role in ensuring that teachers actively engage in network activities, thereby making meaningful contributions to their schools (Brown *et al.*, 2024). However, Cunnane, Gorman and Furlong (2025, p.9) refer to 'material economic conditions' in schools that specifically restrict leadership and collaboration, such as constraints on time, space and resources.

Network Facilitation

Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) explain that skilled facilitation by an external facilitator is particularly important during the startup phase of a network, often using a gradual release of responsibility approach as the network's capacity increases.

An external facilitator might provide organisational support, helping to maintain network momentum (Muijs and Rumyantseva, 2014). In Duffy and Gallagher's (2017) study, network participants identified external coordinators as key to managing the logistics of shared learning. Expertise may also include listening, gaining knowledge of personalities and the group's dynamics (Hadar and Brody, 2021), and supporting network members in seeing connections between their teaching experience and practical and contextual

knowledge (Hadar and Brody, 2021). They can help leverage failure, using it as an opportunity to foster reflection, open dialogue and collective problem solving (MacGregor and Friesen, 2026). Additionally, facilitators may help expand connections beyond the network itself. This may include ensuring network insights are applied within schools, including those not directly involved in the network (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026), by encouraging reflection on established practices (Atkinson *et al.*, 2007).

Facilitators may also have expertise in a specific area relevant to the network's focus (Azorín & Muijs, 2017). In a study in Northern Ireland involving 152 primary and secondary schools as part of the DCU/EQI Shaped Professional Learning Network, participants emphasised the importance of external, trusted advisors in ensuring the network's success. These advisors facilitated action-research sessions and provided ongoing support and follow-up (Shevlin & Brown, 2023).

Both internal and external facilitators play an important role in supporting group learning, which in turn can lead to improvements in student learning (Poortman & Lai, 2026). Systemic change requires consistent, collaborative, and clear leadership both within and beyond schools, along with suitable mechanisms for assessing effectiveness, accountability, and improvement. (Chapman, 2019b).

Network Evaluation

Network governance is also important to consider, including how collective action is governed, whether formally or informally. Evaluation research has often focused on individual schools, owing to the complexity and often voluntary nature of networks (O'Hara *et al.,* 2020). There is a challenge in aligning distributed leadership in networks with traditional accountability mechanisms (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026). However, O'Hara *et al.* (2020) advise that, for network sustainability and quality outcomes, there must be clearly defined evaluation methodologies and standards.

In Brown *et al.'s* (2020) study, polycentric network inspections focused on networks as a whole rather than on isolated schools, which one participant felt made individual schools less accountable. In this study, the inspectorate's remit was to quality assure the network's ability to collaboratively self-evaluate and to decide which aspects of quality to evaluate. A quality continuum was used, ranging from outstanding to unsatisfactory, and a report detailed the main strengths and areas for improvement. Participants in this study had a

positive disposition towards inspection and emphasised the importance of the inspectorate as a trusted colleague who could help guide the process. Findings indicated that the inspectorate's engagement helped develop participants' self-evaluation capacities, as well as providing strategic leadership. The study highlights that network accountability requires reciprocal trust and a focus on shared responsibility. Accountability can be a tool for learning and improvement rather than hierarchical control, helping dissolve boundaries between schools, the inspectorate, and policymakers, and focusing on shared goals and responsibilities (Ehren and Perryman, 2018). This is an important consideration in the Irish context, since the traditional school inspectorate model has been likened to a 'check list audit type process' that can undermine 'the intrinsic moral dimension of the teaching role' (Harford, Bruton and Fleming, 2026, p.15).

Shevlin and Brown's (2023, p.xi) study was grounded on 'autonomous accountability' in which leaders within the network worked autonomously, taking ownership of their own school data, whilst remaining accountable to external inspectors, who were on occasion invited to visit lessons. Furthermore, 'horizontal evaluation' was a collegial strategy within the network, in which participants used evidence-informed techniques in the classroom to evaluate learning (Shevlin and Brown, 2023, p. xii). In addition to analysing data, network members and inspectors monitored network impact using a range of evidence to evaluate progress, including pupil, teacher, and parent voice through surveys and discussions, observations of teaching and learning, and student work. This range of evidence was identified as important in providing a clearer picture of students' achievements and spotting variants that standardised tests may have missed. Importantly, self-evaluation focused on the quality of pupils' learning rather than fixating on and making judgements about teachers' performance. Participants reported feeling a strong sense of ownership, commitment, and investment in the network, as well as accountability to students and parents, resulting in the network having an ongoing impact on improving the quality of learning within schools. The study emphasised the need to continually reflect on and find different ways of self-evaluation 'that does not involve needless/bureaucracy and endless paper that serves no purpose beyond producing needless stress' (Shevlin and Brown, 2023, p. 63).

External evaluation standards should be based on intelligent accountability, which considers context appropriately, including barriers to learning and a school's

socioeconomic demographics, rather than relying on standardised test results as a benchmark (Turner, 2026).

In Azorín & Muijs' (2017) study, each network in the Spanish case study had an evaluation committee composed of administrative staff within the local authority. At the end of each year, each school is evaluated and must submit an evaluation report detailing the network goals achieved, the timetable followed, the implementation difficulties, the activities developed, the evaluation tools used, the results, and improvement proposals for the future. In the Canary Islands case study, the network coordinator compiled the final report. The study emphasises the importance of inclusive network structures that give all members a voice, not just leaders and teachers, and suggests opportunities for all members to be involved in evaluation.

In Irish research, principals were of the view that developing meaningful evaluation methodologies and standards should be left mainly to principals, teachers and the inspectorate, who are skilled professionals within the education system (O'Hara *et al.*, 2020). Participants identified that a 'loosely bound framework of quality indicators' provided by DoEY to support network activity evaluation would be helpful (O'Hara *et al.*, 2020, p.49).

In the Well Schools network, schools monitor the impact of the framework through staff and pupil wellness surveys, strategic meetings and external agencies to track progress (Hennessey *et al.*, 2025). This supports alignment with network goals and guides decision-making. Schools expressed interest in developing monitoring tools to assess the long-term benefits for their communities.

Access to Resources

Resources are essential for sustaining a network, including access to some flexible funds. (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) point out that effective networks make the most of the resources within their control, such as time, meeting agendas, and meeting locations, to start the work of collective improvement. They add that when resources are scarce, collectively finding resources to sustain the network can foster collective identity and commitment. However, networks that are not adequately resourced from inception may put pressure on educators, which may deter

them from joining. Before joining educational networks, principals in New Zealand expressed concerns about the impact on their schools, including disruptions to classroom learning when teachers are absent and the additional workload (Wylie, 2016).

A study by Prenger *et al.* (2019) of twenty-three networked schools in the Netherlands found that organisational factors, such as time and workload, negatively impacted the satisfaction of network participants. Teachers emphasised the importance of managing time effectively during meetings and allocating sufficient time to prepare for network activities. It is important to note that the networks in this study were still in the early stages of development, and organisational factors may improve as the network matures (Prenger *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, challenges for participants in the DCU CSN included time limitations, managing their workload, and staying up to date with modern pedagogical approaches (White *et al.*, 2025). However, these factors were not viewed as obstacles because engagement with the network itself aligned with the members' personal values and established practices, which helped to sustain their involvement.
Substitution cover in smaller schools in Germany meant participation by the same individuals was not always possible (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026). This impacts the stable composition of network members referred to earlier in the chapter (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026).

Central leadership, such as education departments, plays a vital role in providing resources and enabling conditions for effective collaboration (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). This includes supporting educators in becoming aware of the structural and functional characteristics of their networks, including the size, communication frequency and supports exchanged, as well as mapping out their professional networks (Bumble *et al.*, 2025). In this way, educators in the network are better equipped to conduct evaluations and make data-driven decisions for continuous improvement (Bumble *et al.*, 2025).

Frequent Interaction

Frequent interaction among network actors helps develop high levels of trust and internal accountability, and consolidates network norms and behaviours (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). Duffy and Gallagher's (2017) study refers to a 'sharing continuum' developed by the Sharing Education Programme Implementation team, which is helpful

in locating the position of school partnerships and provides guidance towards enhanced collaboration. It identified six stages of collaboration, outlined in Table 2.1, which are not necessarily linear.

Table 2.1- Sharing Continuum (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017)

Stages of collaboration	**Features**
Schools in isolation	There is little or no collaboration with other schools.
Organic and emergent collaboration	Limited contact begins.
Less sustainable and irregular collaboration	Contact is infrequent but increasing.
Sustained and regular collaboration	Increasingly regular and well-coordinated, timetabled collaboration.
A culture of collegiality	Schools are involved in sustained collaborative activities, and high-status shared learning occurs.
Symbiotic partnerships	Collaboration has become normalised, with significant shared learning and the pooling of expertise and resources.

Interacting frequently with colleagues who are focused on a shared goal is a powerful strategy for improvement and innovation, helping create a shared language (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). However, the mechanisms of partnership, such as leadership and sustained collaborative activity, must be effective and embedded to deliver social and educational outcomes (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017).

2.5.5 Networks by Whom?

Joining a network can range from voluntary to intermediate or coercive collaboration, depending on the context (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010). Some networks form organically, often created by groups of teachers or leadership teams, and may do so

without external incentives (Chapman & Hadfield, 2010). In voluntary networks, pre-existing relationships may help establish trust among participants (Muijs *et al.*, 2011). However, for network sustainability and to have the power to influence change at scale, networks need to be connected to other regional or national networks rather than operate in isolation (Jones *et al.*, 2023).

Networks can also be established to support local authority school clusters or emerge from participation in specific projects or initiatives (Chapman and Sammons, 2013). In such cases, governments may play an active role in steering the network, providing frameworks for collaboration or supporting knowledge sharing (Ehren *et al.*, 2017).

At the local level in Spain, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) have established legislation which has encouraged the growth of networks without obliging schools (Azorín & Muijs, 2017). This has led to a 'diverse networks map' (Azorín & Muijs, 2017, p.290) as there is no common state policy to support networking between schools. In the Canary Islands, legislation from the LEA has emphasised the importance of establishing networks to develop inclusive projects and foster ties between schools, local authorities and universities (Azorín & Muijs, 2017). Within the legislation, the aims of the networks are specified, and cooperation mechanisms for network actors are defined, including the use of virtual platforms to interact and share resources.

In some cases, schools may be compelled by the government or LEA to form networks to lead to school improvement. This approach can lead to resistance from staff in their network engagement and in their sense of trust in the network (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010). There is also the risk that, if networks are funded, supported, and managed by governments, they may disempower network actors or curb creative and innovative inputs (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017).

An incentivised approach falls between voluntary and coercive collaboration and may work best for schools that need encouragement to begin collaborating and for education systems characterised by autonomy and competition (Feys and Devos, 2015). In Azorín & Muijs' (2017) study, teachers and leadership teams received fewer teaching hours per week and financial support for purchasing school resources from their LEA. Feys and Devos (2015) studied the initiation and operation of incentivised networks across eight

Flemish school networks. The primary schools in the study joined their respective networks to secure resources and avoid isolation or dismissal, rather than out of an intrinsic desire for partnership. The study concluded that whilst incentives may be necessary to initiate networks, they are not enough to sustain genuine collaboration. Once funding ends, networks may dissolve, especially if they were established as temporary trends or relied solely on financial support (Jones *et al.,* 2023). A longer-term approach is required to support networks with their 'growing pains' (Feys and Devos, 2015, p.752). This includes a clear framework outlining the maximum size and composition of networks. Furthermore, it requires a framework that considers school context factors that present obstacles to collaboration, such as regions characterised by intense student competition and high poverty (Feys and Devos, 2015). Incentives have created disparities between schools that are part of regulated networks and those that form voluntary networks without financial or political support in Spain, highlighting inequalities in network participation (Azorín, 2021).

2.5.6 Conclusion

Wellbeing enactment in primary schools is a complex, multifaceted endeavour. The literature has highlighted that networks offer a practical mechanism to foster collaboration, shared problem-solving, knowledge exchange, multi-agency working, and systemic improvement (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). However, it is not the mere existence of a network that improves student outcomes; rather, it is its operation and what it enables schools to do that ultimately matters (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). This includes the quality of interactions, purposeful activities, and supporting infrastructure that supports network functioning and sustainability.

Chapter two of this thesis established the theoretical foundation for this study by undertaking a comprehensive review of key literature on effective educational network collaboration. This review clearly delineated the characteristics consistently associated with effective collaboration in educational networks. These include: shared commitment to measurable outcomes; trusting relationships; opportunities and structures for professional learning and collaborative inquiry; network leadership and facilitation; evaluation; resource access; and frequent interaction. This review has highlighted that networks face design, implementation, and sustainability challenges, requiring stakeholder collaboration to establish necessary infrastructure and support

(Constantinides & Eleftheriadou, 2023). Achieving coherence and alignment between policymakers and the practical realities educators face is critical, yet, as noted by Constantinides and Eleftheriadou (2023), this alignment often demands more deliberate and sustained attention than it typically receives.

The existing literature identifies significant gaps, particularly regarding the roles of networks and external partnerships in facilitating the implementation of wellbeing initiatives in Irish primary schools. Specifically, the challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors of these networks, as perceived by Irish primary school educators, are under-researched.

The objective of this thesis is to probe these areas. In doing so, this research seeks to give attention to genuine educator involvement (Azorin and Muijs, 2017) to support their role in the process and highlight the supports and resources needed for wellbeing networks to reach their full potential and ultimately benefit the students they serve. The following chapter will detail the methodology employed in this research.

CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is structured into several key sections. It begins with a discussion of the researcher's philosophical assumptions, followed by an outline of the overarching research methodology that clarifies the chosen research paradigm and how it shaped the study's design. The methods that establish the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and generalisability of the study are outlined in this section to ensure trustworthiness. This is followed by a description of the research design, including the methods and sampling procedures used. Following that, critical ethical considerations are detailed. The data analysis process is subsequently examined. Limitations of the research are also acknowledged prior to the chapter conclusion.

In this chapter, principals and teachers will refer to primary school teachers, middle leaders, principals, and deputy principals who have been involved in, or are currently involved in, the SSE wellbeing promotion review and development cycle and who have engaged with The *Wellbeing Framework*. This includes teachers, middle leaders, and deputy principals/principals who may have designated responsibility for wellbeing.

For clarity, it is also important to revisit the overarching research question and two subsidiary questions that guided this study:

Overarching research question

What are the challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors of inter-school wellbeing networks, from the perspectives of primary school educators?

Subsidiary research questions

- How do school leaders and teachers understand and enact wellbeing in their school contexts?
- What roles do networks and external partnerships play in supporting wellbeing enactment in schools?

3.2 Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophy in research is concerned with questions of meaning, reality, and value of phenomena as they relate to the researcher's worldview; the divergence of worldviews may lead to philosophical inquiry (Wolters, 1989; Sefotho, 2015). Our beliefs are shaped by our worldview, which in turn forms the foundation of our research paradigm (Sefotho, 2015). A paradigm is a philosophical framework that guides the entire research process (Tuli, 2010). By aligning with a particular paradigm, researchers adopt its established methodologies, assumptions, and principles. Depending on their philosophical stance and the purpose of the inquiry, researchers may choose to use quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods (Sefotho, 2015; Klassen *et al*., 2012).

Philosophical assumptions include four key components: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology (Scotland, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As Sobh and Perry (2006, p. 1195) state, ‘Essentially, ontology is 'reality', epistemology is the relationship between that reality and the researcher, and methodology is the technique used by the researcher to discover that reality.’ Axiology, the fourth component, considers the role of values and ethics in the research process, including the value placed on participants, data, and how findings are shared (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Researchers working within a qualitative tradition often adopt an interpretivist paradigm. This study adopted a qualitative methodology underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm. This contrasts with positivist paradigms commonly associated with quantitative research or pragmatist paradigms often adopted in mixed-methods studies. Ontology, in this context, addresses the nature and structure of reality itself (Crotty, 1998).

Ontology

The ontological assumption underpinning interpretivism is that multiple realities exist, each socially constructed by individuals. As such, the aim of inquiry is not to predict or control phenomena, but to understand the varied and subjective meanings people assign to their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Blaikie (1993, p. 96) states, 'social actors together negotiate the meanings for actions and situations.' Interpretive inquiry, therefore, explores the meanings, assumptions, and worldviews individuals attach to social phenomena (Creswell, 2007).

In this study, the researcher sought to uncover the diverse personal perspectives and meanings associated with wellbeing enactment and interschool networks, shaped by the unique contexts of the participating teachers and principals. The inquiry began by exploring participants' understandings of how wellbeing is conceptualised and enacted within their own school environments. Holzer *et al.* (2021) underscore the importance of understanding teachers' conceptualisations of wellbeing and how these align with theoretical models, as such insights are key to effectively supporting students. A clear understanding of relevant contextual factors may help support network design.

This research is grounded in participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2018), recognising that wellbeing enactment cannot be meaningfully described without engaging with participants' personal narratives and subjective interpretations. Understanding these experiences is essential to identifying how interschool networks might best support wellbeing in schools.

This ontological stance, which is grounded in the tradition of post-positivism, stands in contrast to positivism, which assumes a single, objective reality composed of measurable, independent variables that can be predicted and controlled (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Post-positivism developed to overcome the weaknesses of positivism and, ontologically, acknowledges that there is room for subjectivity, as reality is culturally and socially constructed (Maksimovic and Evtimov, 2023).

Epistemology

The epistemological stance underpinning interpretivism is constructionism, which holds that meaning is created through individuals' engagement with the world. In this view, subjects and objects are not separate, but co-constructors of meaning (Crotty, 1998). In this study, knowledge was constructed collaboratively between the researcher and the participants. The researcher interpreted what was seen, heard, and understood, representing the data through both the participants' perspectives and her own interpretive lens (Creswell, 2007).

Qualitative researchers aim to build a rich, holistic picture of the phenomenon under investigation by exploring multiple perspectives and considering the contextual and interactive factors that shape experiences (Creswell, 2007). Social constructivists, typically aligned with qualitative approaches, argue that reality is shaped by cultural and

historical contexts, resulting in multiple interpretations of meaning (Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle, 2006). From this perspective, quantitative methods can be critiqued as 'dehumanising' because they often fail to capture the complexity, richness, and interconnectedness of human experiences in natural settings (Schulze, 2003, p. 12; Salomon, 1991).

Social constructivists maintain that life cannot be fully understood through measurable variables alone, but rather through lived experiences and personal meaning-making. Furthermore, the act of observation in qualitative research can influence, and even transform the reality being studied (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Muijs, 2011).

This stands in contrast to the epistemological position of positivism, which adopts objectivism, the belief that meaning exists independently of the researcher and is embedded in objects themselves (Scotland, 2012). Within this paradigm, the researcher is viewed as a detached observer, striving to uncover laws or patterns among observable variables (Shulman, 1986). Positivist methodology therefore emphasises generalisability, prediction, and the use of methods, often from the natural sciences, that minimise researcher involvement and maximise objectivity (Muijs, 2011). Post-positivists accept the positivist position but acknowledge that human subjectivity cannot be completely avoided and that the role of the researcher should be as neutral as possible (Maksimovic and Evtimov, 2023).

Qualitative inquiry becomes especially valuable when variables are unknown or difficult to define, allowing the researcher to explore and make sense of complex social realities (Creswell, 2003). In this study, wellbeing enactment, network functioning and meaningful collaboration are not easily defined or measured. They are complex and context-dependent, based on individual experience, school culture, and relationship dynamics. Qualitative inquiry provides space for novel, nuanced understandings and insights to emerge in this study.

3.3 Justifying a Qualitative Approach within a Broader Research Landscape

While no single paradigm can fully address the complexity of all research questions, both quantitative and qualitative approaches can complement and inform one another (Salomon, 1991). A research study may integrate both approaches, for example, beginning with qualitative methods and following up with quantitative data collection, to

examine phenomena from multiple perspectives and within their contextual realities (Roni, Merga, & Morris, 2020; Panhwar, Ansari, & Shah, 2017). As Farghaly (2018, p. 9) argues, ‘a dichotomous or hierarchical view may be severely limiting.’

While a sequential or concurrent mixed methods design, such as a survey followed by interviews, could have generated complementary insights in this study, capturing both broad trends and individual voices, this study's exploratory and emergent nature made a qualitative, interpretivist approach most suitable. This allowed for the collection of rich personal accounts, diverse perspectives on network function, and a detailed, contextual understanding of the enactment of wellbeing policy. The study's findings on network function can serve as a foundation for future quantitative validation and mixed-methods studies, illustrating how these approaches should inform and guide one another for a holistic understanding (Salomon, 1991).

Creswell (2003) notes that it is essential to connect philosophical assumptions with broader research approaches to justify the chosen research methodology. This is outlined in the following paragraph.

3.4 Research Methodology

The research methodology refers to the rationale behind the chosen methods and the process that links them to the desired research outcomes (Crotty, 1998). This study adopted a qualitative inquiry methodology underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm and social-constructivism. However, qualitative research is more than simply a methodological choice; it is a commitment to exploring the depths of participant experience and phenomena as well as connecting with their subjective experiences (Lim, 2025). This study was concerned with meaning-making through participants' voices, shaped by their contexts. This methodology aligns with the philosophical assumptions outlined above and is appropriate for answering the research questions. It offers a unique lens to focus on perspective, experience, context and voice to uncover the 'what', 'where', 'who', 'when', 'why' and 'how' that make up social interactions and behaviours in schools and networks (Lim, 2025). This depth of understanding is necessary to develop theory, inform policy and formulate solutions that are 'culturally sensitive and socially relevant' (Lim, 2025, p. 201).

There are several qualitative methods for exploring and capturing the wide spectrum of subjective experiences and perspectives (Lim, 2025). To select the most appropriate research design, six key qualitative approaches were examined: narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and action research. The strengths and weaknesses of each approach relative to this study are outlined in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Choosing a Qualitative Research Approach (adapted from Creswell, 2007)

Research approach	Description of this approach	Strengths	Limitations in the context of this study
Narrative	Narrative is the reporting of stories and experiences of individuals in chronological order.	Participants provide a chronology of their experience, grounded in their social, personal and historical context. This can help explain the 'why' behind thinking.	The aim of this research is not to capture participants' life experiences and detailed life stories, but rather to capture their experiences as they relate to wellbeing enactment in school and interschool collaboration.
Phenomenology	Phenomenology involves capturing the meaning or common understanding of a lived experience (e.g., how wellbeing is enacted within a school for a group of individuals, such as teachers).	Provides a rich understanding of human consciousness. The generation of deep, novel insights from teachers that may inform theory and practice (Lim, 2025).	The focus of this study was not on exploring the core of a shared, deeply personal phenomenon but rather the wider understanding of diverse educator insights around wellbeing enactment through networks.
Grounded Theory	Grounded theory aims to move beyond description to generate a theory grounded in participant views, shared actions, interactions and processes.	Developing a theory may help explain practice and reveal novel insights, particularly when no theory is available or when the available theories do not address areas of interest to the researcher. The development of a theory may provide a framework for further research.	The study's primary aim is to uncover the meaning of teachers' and principals' lived experiences of wellbeing enactment and interschool collaboration, rather than to develop a new theoretical framework. The researcher has instead developed design principles informed by existing theoretical perspectives, as outlined within the literature, and further expanded upon through qualitative methods and participant data.

Ethnography	An ethnographer examines the shared patterns of behaviour, language, and beliefs of a cultural group, such as teachers in a school who interact over time. Ethnography involves observations over extended periods to determine how a culture works.	The researcher becomes immersed in the participants' lives and can gain deep insights into cultural practices.	The aim of this study was not to describe how a cultural group worked but to uncover the meaning of teachers' and principals' lived experiences. The approach may be useful in future research to describe how a network of leaders and teachers work, exploring language, behaviour and issues such as trust and participation.
Case Study	A case study involves examining an issue through a specific case(s) rather than studying the culture.	Provides a rich, contextual understanding of a phenomenon within its real-world setting.	Case studies are usually selected to illustrate an issue. The aim of this study is not to understand a specific issue but rather to gain a wider understanding of educators' insights into wellbeing enactment through networks.
Action Research	Research that combines action to effect a positive change, for example, improving educational practice in wellbeing (Clark *et al.*, 2020).	Research is conducted 'with' rather than 'on' communities and helps build the gap between theory and practice (Lim, 2025).	Before any action can be taken, it is necessary to unpack teachers' and leaders' understandings of wellbeing, their experiences of networks, and what they want and need from a wellbeing network.

This study has not been explicitly positioned using one of the six qualitative approaches. Instead, it was designed as a qualitative inquiry, underpinned by interpretivism and social constructivism, recognising meaning-making as co-constructed through participants' voices and shaped by their professional contexts and experiences. This fits the 'specific contours' of the research questions (Lim, 2025, p. 204).

Quantitative research aims to establish validity and reliability through statistical metrics (Lim, 2025). Validity means that quantitative methods measure what they intend to measure, and reliability means that results obtained would be consistent if repeated over time (Roni, Merga and Morris, 2020). Qualitative research does not seek to be replicated. Even when sharing the same data, different researchers may produce different outcomes, given that reality is constructed (Stahl and King, 2020). Instead, qualitative researchers prioritise trustworthiness, ensuring the reported findings instil confidence and are worthwhile (Stahl and King, 2020; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This differentiation 'does not imply a lack of rigour in qualitative research; rather, it reflects an adaptation of rigour to suit the type of data and the nature of inquiry' (Lim, 2025, p. 222).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability.

The researcher's role as a professional learning facilitator for wellbeing in Irish primary schools enhanced credibility by fostering an understanding of diverse school contexts and maintaining sustained engagement with practitioners within the field of educational practice in wellbeing. Credibility was further enhanced by integrating direct participant quotations into the findings, thereby aligning participant realities with the researcher's interpretations (Eldh, Årestedt and Berterö, 2020).

The transferability of findings from one context or situation to another is a second perspective on trustworthiness. Stahl and King (2020, p.27) caution that the 'transfer in qualitative research is not a recipe, but rather a suggestion that must itself be researched for its applicability to a new context.' The findings in this study provide thick descriptions from a range of school contexts, making transferability possible and applicable to other situations (Stahl and King, 2020). Contextual information is provided about the school types, participants, their roles and experience. The methods and time frames for data collection have also been described, which will support this study's application to additional contexts, such as focus groups in a school or observations of a wellbeing

network. Such changes in context should not unduly impact research outcomes. The following chapter also presents contrary findings to further enhance transferability (Creswell, 2018).

Dependability or the ‘trust in trustworthiness’ is a third perspective on trustworthiness (Stahl and King, 2020, p.27). Dependability provides reassurance that the findings are not capricious or arbitrary (Lim, 2025). The inquiry process and methods used ‘should exhibit a level of consistency that allows the findings to be dependable' (Lim, 2025, p. 223). Dependability in this study has been strengthened by having clear research questions, as well as by the interview design, recruitment procedures, and data collection and analysis methods, all clearly documented and explained. Research decisions can clearly be traced through the researcher's own notes and minutes from meetings with supervisors. All transcripts have been thoroughly checked and analysed, and all codes have been consistently defined throughout the data analysis to avoid changes in meaning during the coding process or 'definitional drift' (Gibbs, 2007, p. 99). This clarity and accuracy may help others follow the procedure (Yin, 2009). This also helps to establish the confirmability and transparency of the findings.

Confirmability assesses whether the research findings are grounded in the data, interpretations, and conclusions without being unduly influenced by the researchers' interests, experiences, personal bias, and motivations (Lim, 2025). 'The interview researcher is his or her own research tool', which highlights the central role of the researcher in qualitative inquiry (Kvale, 2007, p. 60). Personal background, positionality, and reflexivity inevitably influence the research process and shape how data is gathered, interpreted, and represented (Creswell, 2018). They help the researcher make sense of the data; however, they may lead the researcher to focus on certain themes or inadvertently privilege data that aligns with pre-existing beliefs. Confirmability is akin to objectivity in the positivist paradigm (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Reflexivity for confirmability concerns 'the ongoing critical reflection by researchers on their own influence over the research process and outcomes' (Lim, 2025, p.200). In this study, the researcher's current role as a professional learning facilitator in primary school wellbeing deeply informed both the research interest and engagement with participants. This professional experience enhanced her skills in empathic listening, creating psychologically safe environments, and recognising both spoken and unspoken meanings,

all of which were critical to facilitating authentic conversations about participants lived experiences (Kvale, 2007). The researcher's background also contributed to an openness to emerging insights and a sensitivity to nuance. Her facilitation experience enabled her to guide conversations respectfully and to probe deeper without leading participants (Denscombe, 2017). This sensitivity was important in ensuring participants' narratives remained central to the analysis.

Reflexivity was an ongoing component of the research process to support the robustness and rigour of the study and allow the researcher to get as close to the objective reality as possible. The researcher remained attentive to her assumptions and considered how her background might shape her interactions with interviewees and her interpretation of the data (Kvale, 2007; Denscombe, 2017). Reflexivity went beyond acknowledgement of bias; it involved sustained critical reflection on how her perspective could influence the trajectory of the study (Creswell, 2018).

3.5 Research Methods

Methods are the procedures and techniques used to gather and analyse data related to the research questions (Crotty, 1998). This section outlines and provides a rationale for the use of semi-structured interviews, highlighting their flexibility and probing value for exploring wellbeing enactment and network functioning. The design and structure of the interviews are explained, followed by a comparison of in-person and online interviews. Participant selection and recruitment are then detailed.

3.5.1 *Data Collection Method*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to align with the research aims, prioritising participants' voices, thoughts, perspectives, priorities, and lived experiences (Creswell, 2012). This method allowed for a detailed exploration of participants' thinking, not just what they think, but why they think what they do. As teachers and principals experienced enacting wellbeing in their schools, their perspectives were integral to the findings. The interviews sought to describe the meaning of wellbeing enactment and the opportunities and challenges of wellbeing networks. Interviews took place online via Zoom between July and September 2025, lasting forty-five to seventy-five minutes.

‘Calibrating the data collection method with accessibility for the participant and appropriateness for the research question’ is crucial (Enoch, Subramanian, and Willig,

2023, p.3). Given the participants' geographic dispersion, online interviews were selected for their ability to provide broader access and scheduling flexibility (Salmons, 2014). This also helped to ensure a high response rate (Denscombe, 2017).

Observing participant behaviour in school was unsuitable to address the research questions in this emergent study because wellbeing enactment is not easily observable in daily school life; it is embedded in school culture, learning, relationships, policy, and planning. These are not discrete behaviours that can be reliably observed. Observations would not have answered what teachers and leaders explicitly need from a wellbeing network. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to reflect on their practice, generating responsive and applicable data (Lim, 2025). Future observational research may offer a lens to witness first-hand social processes and interactions within an interschool wellbeing network (Lim, 2025).

Structured interviews were not chosen as this research study was emergent, and questions posed could not be tightly prescribed. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to delve deeper into the topic (Creswell, 2018). They allowed for explicit descriptions and meanings to be expressed, which covered both a factual and a meaning level (Kvale, 2007). They capitalised on authenticity and inclusivity as qualitative methods can uncover personal stories and specific contextual factors (Salomon, 1991). Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to connect with participants' experiences of their everyday school and classroom realities which may ultimately have greater potential for informing educational practitioners and policy in this area (Maxwell, 2012).

While a focus group was considered, its susceptibility to social and power dynamics (Schuster *et al.*, 2023) led to the selection of one-to-one semi-structured interviews. This format allows participants to speak more openly about personal challenges with wellbeing enactment and leadership, without the fear of judgment or dominant speakers. A group dynamic may also lead to a desire for harmony (Lim, 2025). As the study involves both principals and teachers, individual interviews are better for in-depth exploration of perspectives, mitigating concerns about hierarchical relationships and confidentiality (Kitzinger, 1995). Individual interviews are also preferable for topics that may be perceived as more sensitive, such as wellbeing (Schuster *et al.*, 2023).

In qualitative methods like semi-structured interviews, ‘precision in description and stringency in meaning interpretation correspond to exactness in quantitative measurements’ (Kvale, 2007, p.12). While a quantitative study could measure attitudes toward wellbeing and educational networks, this exploratory study's qualitative approach allows for unexpected insights, avoiding the limitations of standardisation and generalisation that obscure individual uniqueness (Rossman and Rallis, 2017). By studying a small sample, qualitative research preserves individuality (Maxwell, 2012), viewing participants holistically as complex social systems rather than discrete variables (Rossman and Rallis, 2017). The aim is to understand the deeper thoughts, behaviours, and sense-making that govern participants' responses, moving beyond simple cause-and-effect (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2012). This study focuses on open questions, nuanced descriptions, and themes to depict the variety of wellbeing enactment and network experiences within Irish primary schools.

Finally, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research method, as they offer greater flexibility than quantitative approaches, in which the research plan is fixed after data collection begins (Maxwell, 2012). Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to use clarifying and interpreting questions to check ambiguous or contradictory statements, which also signals engagement to the participant (Kvale, 2007). Probing questions are important in this exploratory study to encourage elaboration and detail, and can address inconsistencies (Denscombe, 2017). Holzer *et al.* (2021), in their study of students' and teachers' conceptualisations of wellbeing in Austrian secondary schools, noted that the lack of follow-up in the questionnaires limited the clear interpretation of responses. Skilful and sensitive probing is important for maintaining participant comfort and allows the researcher to follow the participant's lead (Engward *et al.,* 2022).

3.5.2 *Designing and Structuring Interviews*

In chapter two, a comprehensive literature review on wellbeing and networks in education identified key themes that informed the design and structure of the interview schedule (Appendix E). The interview was structured into three parts: participants' background and understanding of wellbeing and whole-school wellbeing practices; external supports, partnerships, and collaboration; and the design, development, leadership, and sustainability of a wellbeing network.

A subject-matter expert in Wellbeing in Education reviewed the interview schedule and suggested rephrasing questions for clarity. For instance, the question 'In your own words, how do people at your school think about ‘wellbeing’ and wellbeing promotion?’ was changed to ‘What does ‘wellbeing’ mean in your school? What does it look like, feel like, sound like?’, which helped participants better define wellbeing in their setting.

A pilot study involving one teacher and one principal was conducted to refine the interview process and enhance research quality (Malmqvist *et al.* 2019). The study tested the interview questions for interpretation, reception, and appropriateness of answers, while also assessing the interview structure for participant comfort and noting non-verbal cues. The pilot highlighted the need to explain educational networks at the outset, whilst acknowledging participants may have their own understanding and conceptualisation of what they are and could be. It confirmed the relevance of all questions for both principals and teachers, while identifying less important ones. Excess time spent on whole school wellbeing led to a shift in focus toward current collaborations and networks in subsequent interviews. These modifications improved the research design (Malmqvist *et al.* 2019). Furthermore, the pilot phase fostered the researcher’s self-awareness and reflexivity, supporting an ongoing understanding of her role in the research process (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

Interviews began with introductions, sharing the research aims and origins of interest, easing participants in (Denscombe, 2017). Starting on familiar ground, participants discussed how long they had been teaching, their role and any additional qualifications/ experience relating to wellbeing in education. This provided valuable background on their professional journeys (Denscombe, 2017) and provided a space for them to tell their story (Farrell, 2020).

It was important for the researcher to carefully manage the interview, smoothly transitioning between sections and following up on unanticipated, relevant issues (Mason, 2002). Questions were kept short, clear, and free from academic and theoretical language. Illustrative examples from the interview schedule are: ‘Would having shared goals across the network be helpful? Why or why not?’ and ‘What would encourage you or other staff to join and stay engaged in a wellbeing network?’ This ensured the researcher gathered reliable and relevant descriptions to form conclusions (Kvale, 2007).

The researcher had to make on-the-spot decisions on the interview sequence, grounded in the research questions, to ensure a smooth process and necessary data collection. This involved deciding between breadth and depth of coverage (Mason, 2002). As well as having confidence in using Zoom and being mindful of technology doing its job, the researcher needed to listen carefully for changes in the participant's demeanour, such as boredom or fatigue.

An asymmetrical power relation can exist between the interviewer and the interviewee. In initiating and defining the interview situation, posing questions, deciding which questions to follow up on, and terminating the interview, the interviewer has 'scientific competence' (Kvale, 2007, p. 15). This imbalance may lead interviewees to give desired answers, withhold information, evade topics, or withdraw, particularly if questions cause embarrassment or threat (Denscombe, 2017). To mitigate this and ensure a positive experience, participants were advised they could decline to answer any question and were free to withdraw at any time during the interview without consequence. Should distress have occurred, they would have been advised to pause/end the interview and be signposted to the Employment Assistance Service.

Following the interviews, the process involved questioning the researcher's own assumptions and checking transcriptions as soon as possible. The researcher's own observations, interpretations, experiences, and judgements were also recorded following the interviews.

3.5.3 *In-Person v Online Interviews*

Traditionally, face-to-face interviews were considered the 'gold standard' for rich qualitative data, including non-verbal cues about participants' mannerisms, dress, and social cues (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006). Today, research within the qualitative paradigm can be carried out via a range of inclusive, ethical and creative methods for remote data collection (Engward *et al.* 2022).

A study by Krouwel, Jolly, and Greenfield (2019) found that online and in-person interviews yielded a similar breadth of topics, with only a modest difference in depth, suggesting that in-person interviews were slightly more comprehensive. Importantly, remote interviewing did not hinder rapport.

Whilst online interviews can save time and cost when participants are geographically dispersed (Krouwel, Jolly and Greenfield, 2019), they also entail practical considerations. Online interviews can face technical difficulties, such as screen freezing and call drops. Rather than being a barrier to rapport, the interviewer in Krouwel, Jolly and Greenfield's (2019) study found that solving these issues became a bonding experience for the participant and interviewer. Furthermore, researchers cannot assume that their intended population is digitally skilled, and this requires preparation to determine how comfortable participants are with online modes of communication (Engward *et al.* 2022). In studies involving populations that are not digitally active, in-person interviews and postal invitations should be considered (Engward *et al.* 2022).

To maintain confidentiality and prevent disruption, participants were advised to choose a private, comfortable space and use a 'do not disturb' sign (Krouwel, Jolly and Greenfield, 2019). Whilst the environmental data collected through online interviews may be more limited than in-person interviews, this can enable participants to present themselves more in line with how they wish to be perceived (Engward *et al.,* 2022). The restricted online visual field also compels the researcher to ask ‘more attentive and expansive questions about place, person, and the things connected to the research purpose and questions’ (Engward *et al.,* 2022, p. 3). Finally, the faster pace of online interviews requires clear signposting, and the researcher must be attuned to when to pause, allow reflection, inject, or gently move on, given the potential intensity of online eye contact (Engward *et al.*, 2022).

3.5.4 *Participant Selection*

Outlining explicitly the approach used for participant sampling helps to improve methodological rigour. Sampling is also essential for the analysis of data and the conclusions drawn (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Qualitative studies often utilise a small sample of people to study in depth, whereas quantitative studies aim for a larger number of participants to achieve statistical significance.

A purposive strategy was used to select 50 primary schools in Ireland, drawing on school type and size. Teachers, middle leaders, and deputy principals who had been involved in the SSE wellbeing promotion review and development cycle and had engaged with *The Wellbeing Framework* were invited to participate. This included teachers, middle leaders, and deputy principals/principals who may have had designated responsibility for

wellbeing. Mason (2002) suggests that when selecting participants for interviews, the sample should satisfy both the empirical and theoretical purposes of the study, allowing the researcher to develop an empirically and theoretically grounded argument. This sample allowed for variation in the data corpus and aligned with the ontological and epistemological perspective as well as the overall aims of the study. This sample consisted of sixteen participants. Table 3.2, provides a brief description of the participants, including their pseudonyms, gender, school type, teaching experience, and role within the school. Participants were drawn from a variety of primary school settings across Ireland, including National Schools, Gaelscoileanna, Special Schools, Community National Schools, and Educate Together Schools. The purpose of this sample, with educators from different school settings and roles, was to enhance the study's transferability to similar educational contexts (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

The sample was also stratified according to DEIS/non-DEIS schools. Primary schools in Ireland are categorised and assessed based on the socio-economic profile of their student body. 'DEIS' in the Irish language means 'opportunity,' hence the acronym Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) (Cahill & O'Sullivan, 2022, p. 482). DEIS is a policy response by the Irish government applied to 'disadvantaged schools'. 'Educational disadvantage' was defined in the Education Act (1998, Section 32, 9) as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools.' Stratified sampling selects certain subgroups that need to be part of the final study (Campbell *et al.*, 2020). These subgroups facilitate comparison and the examination of variation in key phenomena of interest (Marshall and Rossman, 2006; Ames, Glenton, and Lewin, 2019). The reason for stratification must clearly link to the aims of the study and demonstrate how each group differs (Campbell *et al.*, 2020). In the case of wellbeing promotion, there is no one-size-fits-all approach; it is necessary to understand a country's contextual factors and monitor these regularly (Bartelink *et al.*, 2024). This includes different school types. The relevant range of school contexts in this study enabled the researcher to explore the potential of networks to support wellbeing enactment across different contexts and school environments.

Table 3.2 Details of participants in the study

Pseudonym	Gender	School Type	Number of years teaching	Role
Mary	Female	Urban girls school with DEIS band 1 status	38	Principal
Alice	Female	Urban girls school with DEIS band 1 status	21	Deputy Principal
Sean	Male	Large suburban mixed gender school with DEIS band 1 status	24	Principal
David	Male	Small rural mixed gender school (Experience of teaching in 2 jurisdictions)	13	Principal
Fiona	Female	Large suburban mixed gender Educate Together School	13	Assistant Principal
Peter	Male	Large suburban boys school	23	Principal
Louise	Female	Rural mixed gender school	20	Deputy Principal
Tracey	Female	Large suburban mixed gender school with DEIS band 1 status (Experience of teaching in 2 jurisdictions)	27	Deputy Principal
Sharon	Female	Urban mixed gender with DEIS band 1 status (Experience of teaching in 3 jurisdictions)	14	Assistant Principal
Nuala	Female	Urban Special School, mixed gender	26	Principal
Eve	Female	Rural mixed gender school (Experience of teaching in 2 jurisdictions)	14	Teacher
Niamh	Female	Large suburban Community National School, mixed gender	12	Acting Principal
Stephen	Male	Large suburban mixed gender school with DEIS band 1 status	17	Principal
Caoimhe	Female	Suburban Gaelscoil, mixed gender	25	Principal
John	Male	Urban mixed gender school with DEIS band 1 status (Experience of teaching in 3 jurisdictions)	25	Principal
Orla	Female	Large suburban school, mixed gender	8	Assistant Principal

3.5.5 *Recruitment*

Participants were recruited from Irish primary schools in June 2025, using the publicly available list of schools on http://www.gov.ie, which provides school names and contact emails. In June 2025, an introductory email (Appendix A), outlining the study was sent to fifty school principals who were invited to take part. The researcher attached an Invitation Email (Appendix B), a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C), and an Informed Consent Form (Appendix D), requesting that they be forwarded to any relevant staff. Participant identities were triangulated using publicly available information, including school websites, to ensure relevance and appropriateness. The sample size was informed by a similar qualitative study in this area (Bourke, 2023). Bourke's (2023) exploratory study adopted a case study approach, collecting data from interviews, focus groups and surveys of two networks. Each network consisted of 16 primary schools, with 12 schools overlapping between the networks. The study found that networks helped DEIS schools respond to economic and social inequity in Irish society through focusing on how networks function, evolve and support knowledge creation and sharing.

Not only is the recruitment of research participants prior to collecting data worth attention but also engaging with them meaningfully throughout the research process to establish their purpose in the real world setting (George *et al.*, 2023). George *et al.* (2023, p. 765) note that sharing research with participants is an 'ethical imperative' because their knowledge provides the data that can promote change. Sharing research with participants increases their sense of ownership over the research outcomes and encourages them to participate in future research. The researcher has considered participant access to research findings so that they can engage with the findings effectively. At the interview, the researcher offered to send the abstract to participants upon graduation. Within the Participant Information Sheet, participants were also informed that findings may be presented at national and international conferences, published in peer-reviewed journals and that the thesis will be available publicly through the DCU online depository system, Doras.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

It is important to transfer the principles of good research practice to online interactions (Engward *et al.,* 2022). The Email Invitations (Appendix A & B), Participant Information

Sheet (Appendix C), and Informed Consent Form (Appendix D) that were sent to participants were part of the research risk assessment and received ethical approval from Dublin City University's Research Committee. This helped ensure transparent communication about the nature of participation and the purpose of the research for participants (Lim, 2025).

This research presented a low-level risk to participants. As interviews were conducted via Zoom with video enabled, participants were not anonymous. AI-assisted Zoom transcriptions were utilised. Confidentiality was maintained through secure data handling: audio recordings were stored in the researcher's password-protected DCU Google Drive, and Zoom transcripts containing any identifying details were removed. The researcher was familiar with best practices for online interview security. Zoom interviews were protected using encrypted links, individual meeting passwords, and the waiting room feature.

Participants were advised that data could be removed up to the point of data anonymisation, which occurred four weeks after the interview date. Participants were informed of this in the Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form. Participants were also informed that all digital files with recordings and identifiers would be deleted four weeks after the interviews had been conducted, and that anonymised transcriptions would be retained. This helped to establish trust between the researcher and participant (Lim, 2025).

Participants could decline to answer any question and were free to withdraw from the interview at any time without consequence. If any distress had been experienced during or after the interview, participants would have been advised to pause or end the session and signposted to the Employment Assistance Service.

Once raw data had been collected, the next step was to transform it into insightful findings (Lim, 2025).

3.7 Data Analysis

Prominent writers in the field, Miles and Huberman (1994), frame qualitative data analysis as three co-occurring processes: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction occurred throughout the life of the study, before data was even collected, through decisions made by the researcher regarding the research

questions and the data collection method chosen. Data reduction following data collection involves transforming the data in the interview transcriptions through processes of simplification, focusing, and selection. This includes writing summaries and coding until the final report has been completed. Data display refers to organising and presenting data in a compact, immediately accessible way, for example, through graphs and charts. This design process also involves data reduction, illustrating that the data analysis process is non-linear.

A specific thematic analysis approach was utilised in this study, based on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006). Their six-step process, applicable across various qualitative methodologies, is outlined in Table 3.3. Thematic analysis is a rigorous and systematic process for 'developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset' (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.4). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach was chosen because it provides a flexible structure for comprehensively scrutinising and systematically interpreting the qualitative data collected (Peel, 2020). The principles of thematic analysis include familiarisation with data, coding, generating initial themes, refining themes and reporting the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

A theme 'captures shared meaning, united by a central organising concept' (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.77). Prior to identifying themes, codes with specific labels were generated that captured particular meanings within the dataset relevant to the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The coding process helped to sort, focus, sharpen and discard data so that the conclusions could be made (Miles and Huberman, 1994). When coding was complete, codes were categorised into broader themes which were later reviewed and refined (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This six-step process supports the qualitative researcher in embracing subjectivity, creativity, and reflexivity in knowledge production (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The qualitative researcher had an active role in identifying common threads across the dataset and was required to be thorough, deliberate and reflective (Braun and Clarke, 2014). The six steps will now be outlined in greater detail to explain the analysis process the researcher engaged with.

Table 3.3 -Six Step Approach to Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data, reading and rereading the data, and noting down initial ideas.
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

Upon data collection, phase one of the process involved familiarisation with the dataset. This was necessary to identify information relevant to the research questions (Byrne, 2022). Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. Due to connection difficulties for one participant, auditability was compromised, affecting the transcription. The researcher sent the transcript to the participant for accuracy checks, and it was edited accordingly. Each interview transcript was thoroughly reread and cross-checked against the audio for accuracy, ensuring it reflected the participants' verbal accounts. It also involved closely reading and rereading the transcripts to identify meanings and patterns, thereby becoming immersed in the depth and breadth of the content (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Notes on insights and analytical ideas following reflection were also taken at this point, illustrating the interpretive skills needed (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999). The researcher also began extracting relevant passages and quotes from the participants'

transcripts. Progression through the process often fosters greater familiarity with the data and may yield new patterns of meaning (Byrne, 2022).

Phase 2 consisted of generating initial codes, which served as the building blocks for the subsequent themes (Byrne, 2022). At this point, the researcher systematically worked through each data item to manually identify segments that were meaningful, relevant, and interesting to the research question. (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Code labels were applied to segments of data, which are analytical descriptors (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Meaning was also explored through semantic and latent approaches. Semantic coding explores surface meaning and the production of descriptive analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). 'Collective resilience' was a code within the data that captured the obvious meaning: how networks sustained participants in their roles as teachers and leaders. Latent coding explores implicit and conceptual or hidden meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2020). The code 'emotional labour' revealed the invisible emotional labour teachers and leaders undertake to meet students' needs. Inductive coding was predominantly utilised to capture the true meaning and essence within the data and to allow codes to emerge from participants' accounts (Braun and Clarke, 2021). 'Distributed leadership' of wellbeing roles within schools was an example of a code generated through inductive analysis. The coding process was also partly informed by existing literature. This deductive engagement provided a lens for interpreting and analysing data (Braun and Clarke, 2021). A table supported data coding, helping to illustrate the common threads, relationships, and contradictions within the data (Peel, 2020).

The second column of Tables 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6 illustrates examples of codes, including 'Belonging, recognition and feeling heard', 'Social wellbeing and relationships,' 'Distributed leadership' and 'Top-down wellbeing culture.' Code labels were subsequently collated and data was compiled for each code. At this stage, fifty-eight codes were identified. As familiarity with the data increased, the original transcripts were frequently referred back to and existing codes were examined for potential new codes. Further, some existing codes were renamed, for example, 'resource allocation' to 'resource framework' and 'collective efficacy' to 'shared purpose.'

Table 3.4 - Illustrative Examples of the Analytical Process (Conceptualising Wellbeing and Systems of Support)

Category (Phase 3-4)	Description of code (Phase 2)	Anchor example
Conceptions of wellbeing	Belonging, recognition and feeling heard	'Making sure everybody's heard and seen and valued and notice this is a place where they can come and be respected' (John).
Conceptions of wellbeing	Social wellbeing and relationships	'It's about routines and relationships and finding out where your kids are coming from, and finding out what they're interested in, and really genuinely trying to get to know them' (John).
Whole school approach	Distributed leadership	'Our Wellbeing committee is made up of the leader of wellbeing, the leader of SSE, and the leader of Bi Cinealta. So there are three posts in our school, so the three of us work together, and then we have other teachers within that team as well, just to make sure that there is the links between those three areas' (Orla).
Leadership and policy implementation	Top-down wellbeing culture	'I think it's (leadership) the cornerstone of it, really, if the leadership don't have a good kind of concept of what wellbeing promotion is, and if they're not really actively leading it and involved in it and living it, I think it's very difficult then, for the rest of the school to plow ahead with their different endeavours' (Louise).
Boundaries, burnout and emotional labour	Emotional labour	'Principals, deputy principals and teachers are going above and beyond, they're relationship counsellors, they're into their work and they're operating in the realms of addiction, homelessness... family mediation. It goes on and on and on' (Sean).
External Supports	Role clarity	'Where is the line in the sand? Because wellbeing is all encompassing with regards to that and where do we start? Where do we stop and HSE start?' (David).
External Supports	Access challenges	'I just feel like you're just constantly chasing people for information like...and you're just lucky if you get the right information from people' (Sharon).

Table 3.5 - Illustrative Examples of the Analytical Process (Wellbeing Networks in Practice)

Category (Phase 3-4)	Description of code (Phase 2)	Anchor example
Current collaborations	Network plurality	'I think we could definitely pool our practice to get better and I don't think that's happening at all. And if it is happening, it's happening in a very over prescribed way. That is a tick the box exercise and is not leading to any lasting change or affecting change' (David).
Current collaborations	Network benefits	'It strengthens ourselves as a community of educators and pits us less against each other, and brings us to work together for the good of everybody' (Louise).
Enablers and sustainability	Network momentum and impact	'When they (teachers) see results for kids, when they see ways that you can, I suppose, circumnavigate the waiting lists, overcome the issues with waiting lists and get stuff done for kids, that's what shows people the power of networking...That's what I think gets the buy in from staff gets the buy in from maybe reluctant principles as well' (Sean).
Challenges and barriers	Trust Building	'The thing that makes it (a network) work is that it's secure, and it's safe…the biggest, biggest thing is the trust. I trust them completely. I have no fear over anything I say to them, and I know they've no fear over anything they say to me'(Nuala).

Table 3.6 - Illustrative Examples of the Analytical Process (Wellbeing Network Composition, Purpose and Accountability)

Category (Phase 3-4)	Description of code (Phase 2)	Anchor example
Network goals and structure	Key stakeholder groups	'Who's involved in a child's life from 0 to 18?..'Every actor needs to come to the table and look at what part they have to play in getting our children to where they need to be' (Tracey).
Leadership and roles	Role of a facilitator	'If you want to get the most out of the network, somebody with expertise in how networks can run successfully would probably make more sense' (Stephen).
Network goals and structure	Shared purpose	'Networks need to move towards, actually looking at meaningful, like taking tangible projects. Not just sitting around talking about the level of need' (Sean).
Evaluation and accountability	Structural clarity	'A manual won't work… Guidelines will work… It can't be a perfect blueprint' (Tracey).

Once all data items were coded, phase three involved collating these fifty-eight codes into initial themes. This was achieved through the identification of shared patterns across the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Clusters of codes that shared ideas or concepts which helped answer the research question were compiled (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Categories, as illustrated within column one, were used to provisionally group codes during Phases 3–4 to support the development of fully articulated themes. Data on trust and confidentiality, time, workload and capacity constraints, and network continuity and sustainability highlighted key challenges and barriers to networking. These codes were categorised as 'Challenges and barriers' to an interschool wellbeing network. Codes were grouped into twelve categories to support the development of fully articulated themes. Phase three represents a shift in meaning from interpreting individual data items to aggregated meaning and meaning across the data set (Byrne, 2022).

Themes can be described as 'multi-faceted crystals' that capture multiple facets (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p.340). Themes were constructed based on the data, the research questions, the researchers' insights and background, and the literature (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This combination helped to develop analytically rich themes, grounded in participants' experiences. Three distinctive themes were identified that explore the breadth and depth of the data: Conceptualising Wellbeing and Systems of Support; Wellbeing Networks in Practice; and Wellbeing Network Composition, Purpose, and Accountability.

Following this phase, phase four involved two levels of review. Firstly, going back to the coded extracts and dataset to review how well the themes matched the data and whether they told a 'convincing and compelling story.' (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.35). This stage also involved reviewing the different categories. At this point, the researcher concluded that theme two, Wellbeing Networks in Practice, did not constitute an appropriate representation of the data, specifically participants' own experiences of current collaborations. The researcher repeated earlier phases of the analysis and generated new and revised interpretations to ensure the most meaningful and accurate interpretation of the data (Byrne, 2022).

Furthermore, data that had been missed at earlier stages was coded. Codes and data were reviewed and reduced to thirty-eight. The second level of review involved the researcher

considering the validity of the themes, whether they highlighted the most pertinent patterns across the dataset as they related to the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2022). No additional themes were identified at this phase.

Once the themes were reviewed and developed, the researcher identified what each theme was about and began analysing the data within each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was phase five. Alongside analysing each theme, it was necessary to consider how each theme created a 'lucid narrative' that was 'consistent with the content of the dataset and informative in relation to the research question(s)' (Byrne, 2022, p. 1407). This involved considering which extracts to use to inform each theme and accurately illustrate the diversity of meaning across the dataset (Byrne, 2022). The naming of each theme was reconsidered to ensure they were concise, informative and punchy (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Phase six consisted of writing up the themes to address the research questions, which is the focus of the forthcoming chapter. Informal writing began at the start of the process as the researcher continually reviewed the data. Formal analytical writing began in phase 3, once shared patterns were identified. Each data extract was subjected to deep analysis and interpretation in relation to its corresponding theme and the research questions, going beyond simply reporting what participants said (Byrne, 2022). Analytic narratives were composed which described the implications of the data and included important divergent views.

This was a ‘fluid and recursive process,’ for the researcher, as opposed to a linear one where movement back and forth between phases was necessary (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p.591).
An overview of the analysis process, is presented in Tables 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6. A sample codebook for theme 3 is included in Appendix F.

3.8 Limitations of this Study

Prior to concluding this chapter, it is important to consider the methodological limitations of this study when interpreting the findings.

In terms of credibility, findings from online semi-structured interviews cannot always be assumed to reflect what people say they do (Crewell, 2018; Denscombe, 2017). This can affect the data's trustworthiness. The researcher attempted to assess the honesty and accuracy of the interviewees' statements through clarifying and probing questions. The researcher has also used rich descriptions when reporting the findings. This has helped 'transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experience' (Creswell, 2018, p. 200). In addition, as previously mentioned, the researcher clarified the bias she brought to the study and made every effort to avoid bias; however, it is acknowledged that her interpretation of the data may have been tainted by unintended bias (Creswell, 2018). The concluding chapter will outline further limitations of the study once the findings are presented and discussed.

Despite the limitations, this study offers a unique exploration of how wellbeing is enacted in different primary school contexts across Ireland and of what teachers and leaders want from an interschool network to support its enactment.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter presented the rationale for adopting an interpretivist paradigm and the appropriateness of qualitative research methods for uncovering teachers' and principals' experiences of wellbeing enactment and interschool collaboration. The strengths and weaknesses of online semi-structured interviews were outlined, and the steps taken to enhance rigour and trustworthiness. Ethical considerations have threaded through all phases of this study, including seeking consent, maintaining confidentiality and protecting the anonymity of the participants (Creswell, 2007). The following chapter, chapter four, will present the findings of the research design outlined within this chapter, demonstrating how the research questions have been addressed and offering insights into how wellbeing is understood and enacted in different school contexts in Ireland. The findings present how networks can support this enactment, as well as educators' perspectives on meaningful collaboration, network design, and sustainability.

CHAPTER 4
PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from sixteen semi-structured interviews conducted with school leaders and teachers from thirteen primary schools across Ireland, as detailed previously in Table 3.2. As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to explore the opportunities and challenges of networks in supporting wellbeing enactment, as perceived by principals and teachers in Irish primary schools.

As previously stated, the overarching research question was: What are the challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors of inter-school wellbeing networks, from the perspectives of primary school educators?

The subsidiary questions were as follows:

- How do school leaders and teachers understand and enact wellbeing in their school contexts?
- What roles do networks and external partnerships play in supporting wellbeing enactment in schools?

The findings are presented as three main themes that emerged from the analysis of the data, as illustrated in Table 4.1: Conceptualising Wellbeing and Systems of Support; Wellbeing Networks in Practice; and Wellbeing Network Composition, Purpose, and Accountability. Constitutive subthemes detailing specific discoveries and observations are also illustrated in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Themes and Sub-themes

Conceptualising Wellbeing and Systems of Support	Sub Theme
Conceptualising Wellbeing And Systems of Support	– Wellbeing as a Multidimensional Concept – Contextual Influences on Wellbeing Enactment – Whole School Approach to Wellbeing Enactment – External Supports – Schools' as Hubs for Wellbeing Support – Boundaries, Burnout and Emotional Labour
Wellbeing Networks in Practice	– Wellbeing Network Experience – Benefits of a Wellbeing Network – Challenges and Barriers – Enablers and Sustainability
Wellbeing Network Composition Purpose and Accountability	– Composition of a Wellbeing Network- A Multi-Stakeholder Approach – Network Leadership – Shared Purpose of a Wellbeing Network – Structural Clarity – Evaluation of Wellbeing and Network Evaluation

4.2 Theme 1: Conceptualising Wellbeing and Systems of Support

4.2.1 Wellbeing as a Multidimensional Concept

As Chapter Two previously outlined, wellbeing is a 'wicked' problem and concept because it is conceptualised and interpreted in multiple ways, encompassing various subsets (Nohilly *et al.* 2023). This complexity stems from differing views on which aspects of wellbeing to prioritise and the best methods for addressing them.

Centrality of Social Wellbeing and Relationships

Participants also view wellbeing as multidimensional and a 'wicked' problem, but strongly agreed on the importance of social wellbeing and the quality of relationships within the school community, including students, staff, parents, and community members. Niamh explained:

> Good relations and relationships with each other, whether that be with the pupils, inter-staff relations with the parents…a place that has a positive environment...somewhere where you look forward to coming to, or you know you enjoy coming into every day.

Fourteen participants highlighted relational practices as foundational to a whole-school approach. John spoke about relational practices with the students:

> It's about routines and relationships and finding out where your kids are coming from, and finding out what they're interested in, and really genuinely trying to get to know them…That's being met by smiling faces asking them how their dancing competition was at the weekend. People probably think these are small things, but they're massive things...Kids are not stupid, like, they're aware of who's authentic and who's genuine. And if you're authentic and genuine and really actively listen and try to engage with them you know, you'll reap the benefits of that…So when you do have a difficult conversation at least the kid knows you're not judgmental, that you already have a positive relationship, they know they can trust you.

This insight reveals the power of getting to know students at a human level, building a relationship 'that isn't solely based on academia' (Nohilly and Treacy, 2024, p. 6) which helps builds trust and a positive climate (LaRusso, Romer and Selman, 2007) as well as academic engagement and achievement (Gray and Hackling, 2009).

David suggested relationship-building begins at the school gates with greetings and check-ins. Nuala, in a special school context, explained that knowing students' strengths and interests reduces stressors and guides appropriate adult responses to dysregulation, positioning relationships at the heart of support (NCSE, 2025b). David and Nuala's statements illustrate how taking time to build relationships helps adults better meet children's needs. Active listening and getting to know children also support vulnerable children who need difficult conversations or are making child protection disclosures (Nohilly and Treacy, 2024).

Belonging, Recognition and Feeling Heard

A key finding of this study was the significance of belonging, recognition, feeling heard, valued and respected as central components of whole school wellbeing. Across the dataset, belonging was described, not simply as inclusion within the school community but as experiencing respect, being listened to and valued. Sharon stated, 'You belong somewhere, and you're respected, and you're heard, and you're treated the same as

anybody.' She further highlighted the necessity for everyone interacting with the school, whether you're in doing a talk for twenty minutes, whether you're a student, whether you're a family member, whether you're a staff member' instantly feeling welcomed, valued and part of the community.

John emphasised that student agency and voice are crucial for students to feel heard, valued and foster belonging. He described the different student teams in his school, including a Wellbeing team whereby certain pupils get the 'chance to have their voice heard throughout the school.' John added the importance of creating spaces for all pupils in the school, including those in the special classes, 'making sure everybody's heard and seen and valued, and notice this is a place where they can come and be respected.' He described an annual process at the beginning of the school year in which pupils collaboratively discuss with their teacher and peers, their expectations for themselves, staff, and peers, which sets the framework for the year.

Participant perspectives align with the eudaimonic perspective on wellbeing, which prioritises relationships and a sense of meaning, purpose, belonging and social connection, compared to the hedonistic focus on personal happiness and pleasure (Nohilly *et al.* 2023).

An Ecological View of Wellbeing

Fifteen of sixteen participants viewed wellbeing ecologically, encompassing students, staff, and seven participants who explicitly extended this to include parents, aligning with the *Wellbeing Framework's* whole school approach. As Caoimhe articulated, 'The staff, their wellbeing is equally as important, and the families that we're working with every day, as well as the children.' Her perspective reflects interconnected systems (microsystem and mesosystem) supporting wellbeing, resonating with Bronfenbrenner's *Bioecological Model of Human Development* (1979). The exosystem's influence was noted through discussions of health supports for students, explored in a later subsection. While the macrosystem was not explicitly named, indirect references to educational policy suggest that these larger influences have shaped their understanding.

Psychological Wellbeing, Mental Health and Resilience

Participants highlighted the crucial role of psychological wellbeing, mental health and

resilience for both children and staff. This extends beyond observable happiness. Findings note that schools should look beyond outward behaviours and develop capacity to recognise less visible indicators of psychological distress in children.

Niamh emphasised that actively promoting children's psychological wellbeing and mental health must be integral to school wellbeing activities, noting that staff wellbeing is a prerequisite for this. The focus is pertinent, given national data showing a decline in the happiness and positive self-esteem of Irish primary school children, particularly among girls (Sloan *et al.* 2024).

David cautioned against assuming that outward happiness equates to genuine wellbeing and stressed the importance of 'peeling back the layers' and looking beyond surface appearances. His perspective aligns with a discrepancy in the CSL study. While children reported 'experiencing some level of anxiety' at primary school, teachers reported 'relatively low levels of emotional difficulties among the children in their classroom' (Sloan *et al.* 2024, p.62). This mismatch suggests that children may be masking difficult emotions, highlighting the need for teachers to be equipped to understand that a smile is not a definitive indicator of positive wellbeing.

Orla emphasised the importance of staff managing their mental health and maintaining resilience:

> One thing in our school that is kind of explained to us by management is wellbeing is all about, you know, your mental health, and making sure that you are resilient, and that when there are knockbacks, that you can come back from them.

As foregrounded in the literature, Orla's view emphasises the symbiotic relationship between adult and child wellbeing as adults significantly influence a child's mental health through their role modelling, attitudes and relationship (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021).

4.2.2 Contextual Influences on Wellbeing Enactment

Special School Context

Nuala explained how the primary consideration for every child in her special school is their emotional and social wellbeing. Staff assess, 'Do they fit into that class socially, and do they fit into that class emotionally?' Nuala outlined that staffs' primary observations focus on whether children appear happy and content. Staff also monitor for any signs of

emotional dysregulation and, if observed, determine the necessary steps to address the child's needs and assist their emotional regulation. Special schools catering to students with severe and/or complex special educational needs (NCSE, 2026) strongly prioritise social and psychological wellbeing, given the higher prevalence of mental health difficulties (six times more likely) in this population (Emerson and Hatton, 2007; European Commission, 2024).

DEIS Context

In DEIS schools' wellbeing was identified as essential and foundational for children's development. Stephen referred to 'acute' and 'palpable' trauma experienced by some children in DEIS schools. Sean linked a child's external circumstances, such as parental addiction, exclusion, criminality or direct abuse to their cognitive wellbeing, that children 'can't park their psychological or emotional baggage at the gate' and be expected to engage with the curriculum. Focusing on social and emotional competencies became the centrepiece of these children's development. Sean observed, 'Once you got the social and the emotional right the academic tended to flow from there' aligning with the view that wellbeing is not an outcome of education but a prerequisite for children's learning (Spratt, 2016).

David pointed out, however, that prioritising wellbeing remains vital even in the absence of significant social issues, suggesting that other factors can undermine a child's wellbeing. Sharon explained that teachers require support and professional learning opportunities to identify additional factors. In more affluent areas, a perception might exist that children are not struggling or in need of support for their wellbeing. Unacknowledged pressures can include emotional distance due to parents' demanding careers or high perfectionist anxiety (Luthar and Latendresse, 2005). Students from well-resourced families in Ireland reported higher academic stress and engage in tuition which often takes the place of or reduces participation in sport (McCoy and Byrne, 2024). Other factors include anxiety about peer interactions and fear of making mistakes in class, highlighting the importance of support for teachers in recognising the diverse range of factors impacting children's wellbeing (Sloan *et al.* 2024). Sharon suggested both professional learning opportunities and an 'adult buddying up system' recognising that supporting children's wellbeing and relationship building 'comes quite naturally' to some, but is 'more of a learned skill' for others, aligning with previous research (Graham,

Powell, and Truscott, 2016). She emphasised leveraging an adult buddy system and shadowing opportunities to develop context-specific solutions that work within the individual school.

Suburban and DEIS context

In Orla's suburban school non-DEIS context, core, academic subjects such as English, Maths and Irish often take priority, which may be due to the demands of an already busy curriculum or the perception that wellbeing is optional, less important or perhaps less academically valued than other areas of the curriculum. Orla explained;

> I think from time to time, wellbeing has become a little bit of a buzzword for some people, and they don't really see it as being as important as it is. You know, people are thinking, no, but, like it's all well and good, but they don't know their maths, or they don't know their Irish, or they don't know their English, so I think that, sometimes it is getting buy-in, and it's having the time, and it's having the capacity to add something extra to your plate.

Prioritising academic achievement over social-emotional wellbeing was captured in post-primary teacher interviews in Ireland (O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024), highlighting the need to support teachers in recognising the 'overlap and bi-directional importance' of mental health and academic achievement specifically (Dempsey and McCoy, 2026, p. 23).

John, in a DEIS context, also acknowledged the pressures from competing curricular priorities but highlighted that the *Primary Curriculum Framework* provides 'a space for us, which is helpful.' The 'space' refers to opportunities for informal pastoral care or relational interactions that assist children self-regulation or conflict resolution.

4.2.3 Whole School Approach to Wellbeing Enactment

Making Meaning of Wellbeing Within School Contexts

Whilst all participants agreed that a whole school approach to wellbeing is necessary, their experiences highlight varying degrees of enactment and understanding.

Orla's experience suggests how the *Wellbeing Framework* is crucial in supporting staffs' understanding and the need for a whole school approach; 'The understanding of wellbeing

is really important, and I think that's something that we try to communicate quite well, especially with the Wellbeing Framework. That's something we would discuss a lot.' Unpacking the key areas and how they interact and support each other is necessary for successful policy enactment. Orla's school also uses visual aids that display the key areas and their SSE Wellbeing targets, moving beyond a tokenistic gesture to remind staff of whole-school goals and reinforce the link between culture, relationships, curriculum, and policy. This aligns with Street's (2018) perspective on the importance of a clear vision for wellbeing integration.

In contrast, Louise observed a lack of deep, collective understanding. She highlighted that staff ‘didn't understand how RSE and SPHE are actually a fundamental part of wellbeing promotion’ and that only certain leaders and postholders had a ‘really good understanding’ of the *Wellbeing Framework*. Louise attributed this to leaders’ lack of confidence and competing curricular demands, limiting staff engagement with professional supports from Oide.

Eve described the need for a coordinated approach for wellbeing in schools, as foregrounded in the literature (Weare and Nind, 2011), ‘We don't so much have a whole school approach' like she would have had in a previous school. 'The resources are there, and if you want to use them, you can.' Eve's vision for a coordinated approach involved staff collectively sitting down and asking, 'What does SPHE look like in our classrooms as a whole?'

Leadership in Shaping a Culture of Wellbeing

This research finds that leadership plays a significant role in creating and sustaining a whole school culture of wellbeing, helping to ensure a shared vision and collective responsibility for wellbeing enactment. Louise explained:

> I think it's (leadership) the cornerstone of it, really, if the leadership don't have a good kind of concept of what wellbeing promotion is, and if they're not really actively leading it and involved in it and living it, I think it's very difficult then, for the rest of the school to plough ahead with their different endeavours. Or you know, even I can see how their style could be cramped if they weren't actually being actively nurtured in this approach from their leadership.

This was echoed by Sean, who added that inviting wellbeing experts into school to work with staff would have little impact unless leadership practise what they preach on a daily basis and are a visible, reassuring presence for staff. Participants' views indicate that leaders can help wellbeing become embedded in the school's culture rather than treated as a discrete subject.

Sharon elaborated, describing how her principal's genuine and restorative interactions with the whole school community have become subtly embedded into staff behaviour. She observed that many colleagues now act restoratively without even realising it. They have 'become woven within the fabric of the school' (Sharon), echoing findings from Farrelly, O'Higgins, Norman and O'Leary's (2017) study, that a school leader's values shape how a policy is received and enacted.

Mary, reflecting on her role as principal, pointed out, however, that some staff may be resistant to change and unwilling to reflect on their own practice. Her perspective emphasised the need for leaders to consider 'professional context' (Braun *et al.* 2011), staff beliefs, experiences, and interpretations when enacting policy. Sharing research about the link between wellbeing and learning is one such suggestion to support staff (Purnell *et al.* 2020).

Shared Vision and Distributed Responsibility

This research finds that wellbeing enactment is not the sole responsibility of leadership. All participants emphasised shared ownership of wellbeing responsibilities, through wellbeing posts of responsibilities and wellbeing teams who have agency to make decisions and feedback to the whole school, to help facilitate distribution of leadership and responsibility (Miller and Bice, 2014).

As Orla, from a large suburban school, explained, involvement extends to the entire school community:

> Oh, it's the entire school, all the school, the staff, the children as well, and even our ancillary staff, down to, like, our caretaker, making sure that our school is a safe place physically. And our secretaries, when parents come in, that they're greeted with a warm welcome.

To support wellbeing promotion, fourteen of the sixteen participants have wellbeing posts of responsibility in their schools. While this may be a response to the *Wellbeing Framework* or the increasing complexity of student needs, it raises a question: Does this signify that wellbeing responsibility is formally recognised within a structure that fosters relational trust, or is it merely delegated to a staff member? In Orla's school the wellbeing team consists of Wellbeing, SSE, and Bí Cineálta postholders, alongside other teachers. This team has led staff meeting discussions on the four key areas of wellbeing, used these areas as a framework for surveys with staff, pupils, and parents, identified whole-school wellbeing targets, and worked collaboratively with all staff to plan actions to achieve them. Understanding and actively engaging in discussions about the whole-school approach to wellbeing among teachers and principals is key to its enactment (Vilaça *et al.* 2019).

Mary and Peter, who are both principals, emphasised the importance of granting agency to their staff wellbeing teams, acknowledging they are removed from classroom realities. Their role is to support the teams and create the necessary conditions for their suggestions to be implemented. Mary's wellbeing team includes members of the in-school management team, teachers, and SNAs, while Peter's team consists of teachers from across the school. Mary explained how 'It's coming from right across the school…There's lots of people that don't have posts or roles, but they're more than willing to get involved, and they've great ideas, new staff as well.' Mary would also sit in on meetings on occasion to offer support, suggestions and the space to pilot new ideas, suggesting a 'dialogic relation of trust' (Cunnane, Gorman and Furlong, 2025, p.12). The wellbeing team is a standing item on each staff meeting agenda, with dedicated time to provide feedback and review progress towards whole-school targets. Crucially, all staff are allowed to suggest ideas for enhancing wellbeing, illustrating an emerging model of distributed leadership that leverages classroom-based expertise and fosters shared ownership in wellbeing promotion (Vilaça *et al.* 2019).

Peter shared a similar view, describing his leadership role as enabling ideas from the wellbeing team to ‘propagate,’ then supporting their development into a ‘realistic model’ through piloting and embedding successful practices school-wide.

In schools without formal wellbeing teams, Louise emphasised that leadership must ensure wellbeing responsibilities are shared throughout the whole school for sustainable wellbeing promotion and preventing it from becoming solely the postholder's responsibility. Tracey echoed this necessity for collective action; 'It's a collaboration, we're all working together to maximise the life opportunities for children and to look at the children's needs and their functional needs, their social, emotional and their educational needs.'

Curricular challenges

The research highlights several curricular challenges in teaching wellbeing, including discomfort teaching sensitive Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) lessons and complex language within Irish wellbeing resources.

Participants reported that staff generally feel confident teaching the Stay Safe Programme. This was due largely to its 'prescriptive' nature (Orla). The programme contains a manual of lessons and associated resources (MacIntyre and Lawlor, 2016). However, this prescriptive approach can lead to the programme becoming a one size fits all approach, potentially decontextualised from the specific needs of the school and children. Earlier research has shown that mandatory content requires extensive adaptation for children with special educational needs (Morrissey, Keating and King, 2024), and the programme has not been updated since 2016, suggesting that some content may be outdated given societal changes.

Discomfort teaching sensitive RSE lessons was highlighted by two participants, particularly for less experienced teachers. Fiona explained, 'Some staff find it very, very uncomfortable, and would much prefer not to be doing it at the senior level or the junior level, but they know it's part of their jobs.' RSE is a component under Key Area 2 'Curriculum' within the *Wellbeing Framework* (DES, 2019, p.35) for supporting children's 'physical, social and emotional health.' The sensitive lessons within the 1999 SPHE curriculum include the teaching of the body parts using anatomically correct language from junior and senior infants, the teaching of puberty from third and fourth class and understanding of sexual intercourse at fifth and sixth class level (NCCA, 2025). From September 2026, schools will begin engaging with the Wellbeing specification,

which introduces the topic of consent from stage 1 (junior and senior infants) and sexual orientation at stage 4 (5th and 6th class) (NCCA, 2025).

This discomfort is most evident among less experienced teachers, as explained by Caoimhe: 'Some of the younger teachers struggle, they kind of shy away from it, and if anything comes up, it's like, oh, you know, I don't know how to say it. I don't know what answer to give.' Caoimhe is referring to shying away from teaching sensitive topics like sexual intercourse and challenging questions around emerging aspects of identity, often due to uncertainty about providing age appropriate answers that align with the school ethos. The option for parents to withdraw children from RSE lessons also reflects ongoing sensitivities in this area. This mirrors the literature suggesting that teachers require increased guidance on appropriate language and boundaries for teaching wellbeing topics, sensitivity, and inclusivity at an age-appropriate level (NCCA, 2019).

In a Gaelscoil setting, Caoimhe identified language as a barrier when utilising wellbeing programmes. When English materials are translated into Irish, the terminology can be inaccessible for teachers and overly complex. Referencing an SPHE programme supporting different family structures, Caoimhe commented that 'the Irish language was so complex…it would be quite difficult to teach it in a Gaelscoil…Some of the words, you'd be looking at the dictionaries, trying to figure them out.' For effective engagement, she suggested the language needs to be teacher and child-friendly.

A wellbeing network could offer a forum for teachers to address these contextual challenges, including adapting curricular content for children with needs, building confidence to teach RSE and sensitive topics, using age appropriate language, and translating English materials into accessible Irish language.

Interestingly, unlike an Australian study that reported 'intervention burnout' due to the unsustained, haphazard launch of too many wellbeing programmes (Runions *et al.* 2021, p. 15), none of the participants in this study referred to this issue.

Participant perspectives outline the current state of play in their contexts in terms of how wellbeing is understood and enacted, what works and what doesn’t. This highlights the conditions in which networks may operate.

4.2.4 External supports

Types of External Supports Accessed by Schools

Schools access various external supports for student wellbeing. Participants identified supports from Oide, NEPS, HSE, NCSE, Tusla, School Completion Programme and CDNTs. This acknowledges that the education sector alone cannot address all issues (UNESCO, 2022a; Weemer *et al.,* 2023).

Impact and Variance of External Supports

Participants identified the impact of wellbeing supports received from Oide, School Completion Programme and NEPS, stressing the need for clarity on NEPS role in effectively support schools consistently.

David, Mary and Caoimhe spoke of the impact of in-school support from Oide when using SSE to engage in a wellbeing promotion and review development cycle. David explained:

> Oide were excellent in helping us put this (SSE targets) together and giving us the language and context. How we would have done that without that assistance, I think, would have been definitely lacking. And we wouldn't be as exact and as specific on the way that we're trying to develop our school.

Mary, in a DEIS context, commented how the Oide facilitator was able to 'help us to go through the documents, make sense of the Wellbeing Policy Statement and how we could use the Looking at Our Schools document to feed into our DEIS plan,' creating shared goals and meaningful actions related to the culture, norms and practices in the school. This highlights how an external facilitator supported policy translation and enactment within Mary's school context, working with staff to develop a clear vision for integrating wellbeing into the school beyond policy.

In a DEIS context, John outlined the important work of the School Completion programme in supporting students affected by domestic violence, addiction, bereavement, poverty and homelessness, who may be at risk of not completing secondary education, or not attending school. The programme has helped change expectations and create ‘a feeling of hope’ (John).

NEPS support, mentioned by eight participants, was diverse, including educational psychological assessments, bereavement support, emotional support for principals, guidance on interventions, and professional learning on promoting a trauma-informed environment. NEPS uses a consultative service model aimed at empowering teachers through a continuum of assessment and intervention: classroom support, school support, and school support plus (DoEY, 2026, DoE, 2007). Children with severe and persistent needs may be prioritised for intensive assessment and intervention (DoE, 2007; DoEY, 2026).

Whilst acknowledging the positive impact of NEPS support, Stephen, Peter, and Fiona reported significant difficulties in securing psychological assessments for children with severe needs. Stephen explained:

> Any of the NEPs psychologists I've worked with have been a great support and really willing to help and available when you really need them. I know we say the number of assessments we get for children can be very difficult, they're real challenges. But when it comes to something acute and something kind of serious, they are available.

Access to assessments is critical as children with additional needs are particularly vulnerable, often struggling with social, language, and communication skills, as well as experiencing anxiety and low self-esteem (NCSE, 2014). This, in turn, can negatively affect their capacity to learn (NCSE, 2013).

The level of NEPS support appears inconsistent. Peter's school is not assigned a NEPS psychologist, but the staff received assistance on how to support students following a student bereavement**.** All schools that experience critical incidents that overwhelm the school's normal coping capacity are entitled to receive NEPS assistance (DoEY, 2020). Peter and Stephen's experiences align with O'Connor and Nohilly's (2024, p.221) finding that access is often restricted unless the case is deemed 'extreme or severe.'

Conversely, Caoimhe praised her school's NEPS psychologist accessibility for immediate advice, and Fiona noted that although she could not access NEPS for children's psychological assessments, the service was invaluable in upskilling staff in trauma-informed practices. Nuala received personal support for her emotional wellbeing, workload, and work stress, describing NEPS as a 'really valuable support.'

Despite positive accounts, participants stressed the need for consistent access. Mary requested ‘more NEPS support for issues that arise…support for teachers, things that might help or suggestions.’ Orla also emphasised:

> I wish we could speak to these people (NEPS), and see these people and have, you know, general conversations with them, or have them come in for a Croke Park and tell us what we should be looking out for, and, you know, what supports are out there.

Orla is referring to The Croke Park Agreement, which introduced an additional thirty-six hours per annum for primary school teachers to complete 'essential activities' such as professional learning, school planning and staff meetings (DES CL0008/2011). Collectively, participants' views suggest that NEPS support is often episodic rather than sustained, indicating a need for the service to clarify its role and take on a more consistent approach to supporting schools.

Challenges in Accessing External Services

Supporting pupil wellbeing in Ireland requires a repertoire of resources dispersed across various departments and agencies. This research finds that the lack of coordination of resources and funding, particularly at the meso level, impedes access to services, thereby hindering support for children's wellbeing. Participants explained how schools are compensating for system-level failures by seeking support from local charities and health staff working pro bono, emphasising the need for permanent, school-based multidisciplinary teams.

Tracey highlighted the challenge for services:

> It's more difficult at the moment to collaborate with primary care, which I wouldn't have found until two years ago. The system's imploding. They have no resources. There's a brilliant manager there, and she would do anything to work with us. But all her staff are on leave. The current speech and language therapist now is on long-term sick leave with no replacement.

Tracey's concerns are reflected in the literature, which identifies staffing and recruitment difficulties experienced by CAMHS teams and consultant psychiatrists (Mental Health Commission, 2023). Participants expressed their frustration: 'I just feel like you're just

constantly chasing people for information...and you're just lucky if you get the right information from people' (Sharon). 'I feel like it's a bit disjointed between us and mental health services for children' (Orla). Niamh added, 'They just don't have that time to give to us.' Caoimhe emphasised the need to speak to experts from NEPS, Tusla and NCSE for clarity and answers, but instead, 'You'd be told to read a circular or read a letter again, and you're like, no, but I've read it, and I still don't understand it.'

Their views align with the literature, which found that services providing Disability Services, Primary Care interventions, and CAMHS work in silos, causing disjointed work processes and communication barriers (Mental Health Commission, 2023). Consequently, there is a clear need for stronger intersectoral relationships between health and education services in Irish primary schools. If lengthy waiting lists are not addressed and children remain untreated, their social interactions, relationships, educational attendance, achievement and behaviour may be impacted (Mental Health Commission, 2023).

As a solution to the existing governance structures in Ireland, Sean suggested considering how pieces of work can be jointly commissioned across agencies through the collapsing of silos and funding streams.

> How can Tusla jointly commission pieces of work with the HSE or how can the HSE jointly commission pieces of work with the local authority?...How can we better align our funding? How can we jointly commission pieces of work that lead to better outcomes for families?

Sean's view prompts consideration of the challenges of inter-sectoral bridge building, including conflicting philosophies, priorities, policies and practices (Weemer *et al.* 2023). The health sector may be reluctant to fund education systems, perhaps due to uncertainty about value and limited evidence of effect (Gray *et al.* 2022).

Tracey further explained:

> The funding has to come from the Department of An Taoiseach and the will and the desire…People are still so siloed with their budgets…ministers are fighting for budgets and not working together to ultimately achieve the same aim.

Her view stresses that an agreed vision for wellbeing across education and health sectors

is needed (Weemer *et al.* 2023). To compensate for system-level failures, schools resort to support from local charities. In Sharon's case, children may access counselling and mental wellness programmes or one-to-one mentoring. However, these supports are limited and may still not be able to cater for all the children who need them.

Due to a lack of access to psychological services in Tracey's school, a consultant clinical psychologist works pro bono. His vision is to oversee five other schools, dedicating one day a week to each, with an assistant psychologist in each school to oversee wellbeing. This model relies on a school's willingness and readiness to collaborate, build relationships and time to complete funding applications. Further, if health professionals were on site, effective school leadership is required to facilitate the allocation and execution of roles, responsibilities and shared goals (Bryceson and Sheridan, 2022). These are challenges that individual schools may struggle with. A major barrier is thus the lack of system-level leadership, coupled with the complexity of multiple, disparate services, which can present a 'black box' to schools. Tracey explained, 'We wouldn't have to put all those funding applications together if the government actually funded a wellbeing network.'

Tracey's point emphasises that a multidisciplinary approach to networks is one possible solution to ensuring that children equitably receive the services and resources they need to support their wellbeing. Sean emphasised that 'a core group of people that believe in the multi-agency model' is needed. The composition of a multidisciplinary network will be considered within theme two. When asked what might address the access to services, Niamh similarly explained:

> What I think is needed is, you know, people with expertise in Speech and Language, in behavioural expertise, in Occupational Therapy to come in and work with staff in supporting, ensuring these children are hitting their full potential because it's draining for teachers.

Sharon suggested, 'How great would it be to have cluster networks,' or a 'cluster of supports for different areas.' She suggested that representatives from external services could use this network to help schools collaboratively access the advice they need. Coordinating this effort may be more challenging for a school acting alone. This model of collaboration among schools may foster greater trust and cooperation between schools

and services. Orla shared the view that greater collaboration is needed, explaining it would allow staff to proactively ‘note down and bank up all of what's coming up and what's happening.’ This documentation could then be presented during support visits. However, Niamh cautioned that monthly network participation would be insufficient. She stressed that support services ‘need to be on the ground as well… we need to be seeing them in schools weekly.’ A regular on-site health professional, shared across schools, was recommended in O'Connor and Nohilly's (2024) study, highlighting the need for permanent, school-based multidisciplinary teams rather than short-term pilots. This could facilitate accessible pathways to care and support children in overcoming barriers which would otherwise follow them into adulthood (Hill *et al.* 2024; Hickey, 2025).

Participant suggestions inform understanding of current relationships with external partners and the role networks can play in supporting wellbeing enactment in schools.

4.2.5 Schools as Hubs for Wellbeing Support

Participant views support the idea of schools serving as a central location for external support. Sean observed that schools function as 'hubs' for the delivery of numerous services for children, citing examples such as speech and language therapy and occupational therapy programmes. He pointed out that the school environment, with its familiar expectations and routines, allows children to engage more effectively than in clinical settings. 'The child gets more out of it and the therapist is able to deliver a program that is not frustrated…The magic happens within the school.' This serves to confirm that schools can support early intervention, given their 'near-universal access to children and families, including those considered hard-to-reach' (Finning *et al.* 2022, p.1592).

4.2.6 Boundaries, Burnout and Emotional Labour

Participants acknowledged the lived reality of a lack of coordination between schools and the health sector, that can lead to staff burnout. Sharon explained that teachers often serve as the one constant source of support for children, and despite lacking professional training, are increasingly expected to manage a wide range of behavioural and emotional needs. Sean similarly commented: 'Principals, deputy principals and teachers are going above and beyond, they're relationship counsellors, they're into their work and they're operating in the realms of addiction, homelessness and family mediation. It goes on and on and on.' This mirrors findings in O'Farrell *et al.*'s (2025) study that the boundaries have

shifted. In addition to being educators, teachers reported being emotional buffers, behaviour managers and social workers. This places a professional demand on staff, known as 'emotional labour,' to remain patient, composed, and enthusiastic each day regardless of their feelings (O'Farrell *et al.* 2025, p. 14).

Working in a DEIS context, Stephen explained, 'Working in areas of high trauma creates a trauma within individuals and within groups of people working there and that's something that definitely, I'm keenly aware of at the moment and staff burn out.' He emphasised the importance of setting boundaries and of not taking school-related concerns home. The burnout Stephen is referring to is located in the environments teachers navigate, within environments shaped by insufficient supports, policy pressures, relational tensions, and administrative expectations (O'Farrell *et al.* 2025). Niamh highlighted that an ‘awareness of what we're asking of our colleagues is really, really important.’

Sean, Tracey and Stephen described how counselling to support their own wellbeing has been organised for staff, through local organisations, and in Sean and Tracey’s context through a clinical psychologist working on site. Stephen explained:

> I suppose you can't process that (trauma) for somebody. You can only kind of listen, support advise, and we do our usual thing of sending on about the Employee Assistance Scheme, you know, but I always feel that that's a bit of a cop out. With serious cases and maybe more ongoing cases we've organised access to counselling ourselves for individuals. Just being able to offer counselling through some local organisations who offer counselling, that's really appreciated by people.

Whole-school approaches to wellbeing should address the mental health of staff in a ‘multi-layered, collective, and systemic’ manner as echoed in the wider literature (O’Farrell *et al.* 2025, p.16).

4.2.7 Theme 1- Conclusion

The findings emphasise the centrality of social wellbeing and quality relationships within the school community to participants' understanding of wellbeing, emphasising belonging, recognition, feeling heard, valued and respected. Psychological wellbeing was specifically identified by participants. Wellbeing is a priority in all school contexts. However, teachers need support in recognising the diverse factors that impact children's

wellbeing, as well as the bidirectional relationship between wellbeing and academic achievement. Participants also identified the importance of a symbiotic relationship between the wellbeing of adults and children. Leaders are key to shaping a culture of wellbeing, and shared ownership of wellbeing responsibilities is evident within schools, with distributed leadership models emerging. There is a need for guidance on appropriate language and boundaries for teaching wellbeing topics, sensitivity, and inclusively, at an age-appropriate level, as well as teacher and child-friendly Irish wellbeing resources.
Participants reported NEPS support as often episodic, requiring greater clarity and consistency in support for schools. An agreed vision and coordinated intersectoral efforts are needed to support pupils' wellbeing, particularly across health and education services, as current supports are inaccessible, leading to blurred role boundaries, emotional labour, and teacher burnout. A multidisciplinary network approach to networks was discussed as one possible solution to help children equitably receive the services and resources they need within school to support and enhance their wellbeing, though coordinating this effort may be challenging for individual schools.

4.3 Theme 2- Wellbeing Networks in Practice

4.3.1 Wellbeing Network Experience

Network Plurality and System Coordination

Eleven participants spoke about sporadic wellbeing network experiences: national networks including piloted networks, regional DEIS networks and school context networks for Special Education Teachers, and professional networks. This highlights a plurality of networks, but a lack of coherence and oversight was apparent. The other five participants had collaborated with other local schools on projects not related to wellbeing.

Sean's experience in a DEIS Band 1 principals network highlighted the crucial role of networks in securing support for students' wellbeing, given that 'schools are so busy' and 'resources are finite'. This network obtained funding to conduct a needs analysis focused on the availability of multidisciplinary supports, which are services from various specialisms like education, health, social services, and psychology (EASNIE, 2026). Part of the funding was used to hire a researcher to articulate the message of just how difficult things are in school and the lack of support.' Sean's school also directly benefited from the funding, financing therapeutic interventions and the construction of a stage in their

hall. The stage facilitated the school's opening to the wider community in the evenings and weekends for activities such as dance and drama classes. This directly aligns with the *Wellbeing Framework* to promote the wellbeing of the whole school community.

Sean also described an 'action driven network' by local schools in partnership with the local university and child disability services, which identified occupational therapists and speech and language therapists to work with the schools. Sean emphasised the importance of getting the right people involved who are willing to work with the network, developing 'that coalition of the willing' and 'engage with you to move programmes forward' so they don't become tokenistic. Sean explained that over the years, 'The therapeutic supports have enabled us to create a landscape that enables kids to maximise and fulfil the opportunities that are there for them.'

Furthermore, his school's strong networking with the Garda National Youth Diversion, driven by student interest, led to equine programmes. Sean explained:

> On average, we'd have about between six and eight kids a week going out to equine programs, going out to stables as part of the school day…And they are on task four and a half days of the week, so they can get out for their half day out to the equine programs…So, you would have had kids here ten years ago, literally bouncing off the walls, hijacking the school week, and instead, now we have them engaged in equine programs.

This programme began in one school and now operates in nine across the local area. It aligns with the 'Relationships and Partnerships' key area within the *Wellbeing Framework* that schools establish links with Department Support Services to support the needs of students with behavioural and emotional needs and demonstrates the tangible, positive impact that networks have on student wellbeing, engagement and the wider community.

Stephen participated in a local interschool network with special education teachers, initially established to jointly purchase assessment tools and reduce resource costs, a practice aligning with cost-sharing benefits noted by Muijs and Rumyantseva (2013). Stephen explained:

> We'd buy the assessment tool between a number of schools and then share it. It was the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test. At the time I think it was going to cost €800, a lot for a small school. So we shared them ourselves and then continued the

networking supporting other areas of SET.

The joint purchase supported teachers in making more reliable assessments of children's reading, language and numerical attainment. This clarity can help teachers adapt their teaching and assessment methods 'to promote a sense of achievement and differentiate their expectations to promote full participation and achievement for all children and young people' (DES, 2019, p.42).

David contrasted his experience in a network with a wellbeing focus with that of an inter-school network he was part of abroad which ‘was so rigid and deployed from the top down.’ He highlighted the difference, commenting that his experience in Ireland employed ‘a distributed leadership approach where different schools were taking leadership roles’ through theme based cluster groups. Network staff support these clusters with advice. David explained:

> The energy was brought from within, where it wasn't oversubscribed by the department, and people were integrating with it out of their own steam and their own energy, which is really important…It was almost replenishing itself and energising itself.

He valued the organic, voluntary and internally driven collaboration, in contrast to government-mandated collaboration and focus. John, also part of this same network, emphasised the impact of being part of a network of schools from across Ireland. The opportunity for professional and student collaboration in person provided an opportunity for connection and to belong to a wider educational community. He explained, 'We've had teacher exchanges, we've had conferences, and we've had loads of different opportunities of student councils visiting student councils, and student councils coming here. So that's been really, really good to be a part of.'

Peter's experience and view of networks differed as he recounted the assurance, support and structure of being part of a pilot wellbeing network, which was shaped and directed by the DoE. Peter's school were invited to network, which included school wellbeing representatives, NEPS, HSE, Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the Inspectorate. The purpose was to establish wellbeing SSE targets. This network was credible and assuring according to Peter, as 'It was backed by evidence and policy and you felt assured, because it was these state bodies that were involved in it. So you felt like

you were on sure footing with what you were doing now.' He appreciated the network's clear direction and support from the inspectorate, which still offered scope for individual school autonomy: 'We weren't hammered into like this is what you must do, or anything like that…as a school leader you felt that it was going to be sustainable as well long term.' Although securing time, space and substitute cover for teachers to attend meetings was a challenge, the school remained motivated due to the tangible task of co-constructing SSE Wellbeing targets with experts. The network ultimately ceased due to the Covid pandemic.

In contrast to Peter's structured experience, Louise reflected positively on her involvement in an organic network. The network consisted of her school's NEPS psychologist and five other local schools. Together they considered different assessment types for children and gained expertise relating to specific diagnosis. She remarked, 'It just gives you so much confidence to think. Okay, right, I was on the right track or, you know, I might try this instead and just to have people that you could ask.' This raises questions concerning potential variations in equity and access to experts among different schools.

Eve's participation in a four-school network in Sydney, which included a focus on wellbeing, offered an alternative professional learning model. This network scheduled four professional learning days annually, a distinct contrast to the time constraints faced in Ireland, which will be discussed later in the 'Challenges and Barriers' subsection. Each network event began with a guest speaker on an educational topic, followed by classroom walkthroughs focused on a pre-agreed area. Participants first analysed classroom data, conducted walkthroughs, and in the afternoon, presented evidence regarding the focus area to the network. Eve explained:

> We would have looked at mindfulness in the classroom, how you can incorporate that into your classroom and the advantages of it. We would have also looked at growth mindset, the language and the research of Carol Dweck in growth mindset.

Grounding discussions in classroom data and school contexts allowed members to evaluate progress and make data-informed decisions aligned with their shared goals. Eve feels there are missed opportunities for networking in Ireland and queried the appetite for interschool networking: ‘I don't think people see the value of coming together, as much.’

She feels there needs to be a shift in the common understanding that ‘professional learning maximises student outcomes’ as she has observed staff ‘dragging’ their heels with Croke Park hours. Some staff may be on the lookout for new and promising ideas in wellbeing, with a large capacity for networking outside of their own school, while others may need to see the benefit of networking in action and may be influenced by observing others. Nuala explained: 'They (teachers) need to be given the opportunity to network and then they need to be supported to network, because we don't always know how to network.' Nuala's view echoes earlier findings that investment in network participants is needed to develop individual understanding of their contribution to the network's goals and vision (Constantinides and Eleftheriadou, 2023).

David also feels there is significant untapped potential for local and diverse schools to network more effectively to support wellbeing enactment:

> At the end of the day, we're all working for the same company here, and that's the children of Ireland, or the State of Ireland and it doesn't feel like that. It doesn't feel like that, where I'm a school and three miles up the road I know nothing about them, and I'm not saying I want to know everything about them…But I think we could definitely pool our practice to get better and I don't think that's happening at all. And if it is happening, it's happening in a very over prescribed way. That is a tick the box exercise and is not leading to any lasting change or affecting change…And also bring heterogeneous groupings together, as well to really blow their minds as such on different things.

Bringing diverse schools together, as David suggested, would offer a path to broaden perspectives and prevent the homogenisation of wellbeing practice.

Participants’ network experiences help to illustrate how wellbeing networks can support wellbeing enactment in schools.

4.3.2 Benefits of a Wellbeing Network

Through their involvement in wellbeing networks, participants shared the benefits they experienced. Sean explained how schools can more readily access the necessary supports for students' wellbeing, while Stephen found that networking can enable schools to purchase resources that reliably assess children's attainment. Louise gained confidence to try new approaches and collaboration with colleagues about new ideas and exchanging feedback reduced feelings of isolation, increasing motivation and positivity:

> If you see yourself as part of a bigger movement, it's very inspiring…it's seeping into the population…it's normalising things. This is good. This is what all schools are doing as opposed to pitching schools against each other.

Her view advocates for the need for schools to move beyond traditional school boundaries (Díaz-Gibson, Civís-Zaragoza and Guàrdia-Olmos, 2014) and may regulate any existing competition between schools (Muijs and Rumyantseva, 2013).

John highlighted opportunities for staff and students to be part of a wider educational community. For students, these include enhancement of student voice, agency and leadership as well as collaboration across schools. Staff reported feeling supported, gaining expertise, the opportunity for professional collaboration and a sense of feeling personally and professionally enriched. For Peter, a wellbeing network directed by the DoE provided assurance, support and structure in developing wellbeing SSE targets. These benefits highlight how networks can support wellbeing enactment in schools.

4.3.3 Challenges and barriers

Trust and Confidentiality

Despite the many benefits of networks described by participants, several potential challenges and barriers may also arise.

Participants highlighted the importance of a high level of trust to create a safe collaborative environment that facilitates the sharing of expertise, confidential information and engagement in challenging conversations. Nuala explained:

> The thing that makes it (a network) work is that it's secure, and it's safe…the biggest, biggest thing is the trust. I trust them completely. I have no fear over anything I say to them, and I know they've no fear over anything they say to me.

Stephen cautioned, however:

> It's easy to say we should all be open and honest. But if you're in a school where schools are competing for pupils and they're trying to hold on to teachers, that can be easier said than done, you know.

Stephen suggested that trust is necessary for engaging in challenging conversations and is developed gradually through openness and sustained engagement among network members. This supportive culture can't be forced into existence.

Fiona explained that trust may be difficult to establish if network members are not aligned in their values, 'You might walk away and say, that's absolutely not what we're here for, that's not what I thought this was going to be.' Sean agreed, adding that within any network that is set up, 'you need to have a very clear understanding of the skill sets, and I suppose how skill sets complement each other.' Tracey added that for networks to work, they must involve collaboration, working together in partnership and the sharing of expertise. Tracey implies the importance of reciprocity being transactional, for the network to be of mutual benefit to all members, a finding in an earlier study (O'Hara *et al.* 2020).

Orla raised the key concern of confidentiality when building trust between schools and potentially sharing confidential information such as 'personal information of children…and problems within the school, or problems within families within the school…how do you protect the information of any individuals involved?' Orla is implying that she would welcome guidance from the DoEY on confidentiality within a wellbeing network. This is an important consideration that will be elaborated upon in theme 3.

Time, Workload and Capacity Constraints

A major barrier to networking emphasised by participants was the lack of available time, echoing findings in the literature (Prenger *et al.* 2019), and the associated need for wellbeing networks to be valued and supported by the DoEY through time, resources and funding. Niamh highlighted the existing heavy curricular demands, stating:

> You're taking time away from something else that maybe has been, you know, timetabled off or sectioned off, or, you know, a sacred time for something else. So it's finding the time in a very busy week or day, where the asks are becoming more and more.

Eve's experience in Australia suggested a solution: 'The Australian Department of Education allowed the flexibility for schools to have those days to come together and upskill teachers. And there was always that understanding that by educating teachers

we're maximising student outcomes.' Her view implies that networking must be formally valued within the education system, requiring policy makers to potentially evaluate and redesign school timetables to create flexible time and space for inter-school professional learning (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017). Both Eve and John suggested utilising mandated, non-teaching Croke Park hours for networking. Eve suggested:

> I think if there was a set time given to clusters of schools meeting and looking at professional learning and networking, that would be very beneficial…I feel like Croke Park hours are very flexible, and it's very much up to the school's discretion of how they are used.

Similarly, John suggested incorporating networking into Croke Park hours or the school day because 'people's lives are very heavy, and people have a lot on their plates.' However, time for professional learning during Croke Park hours also competes with other essential priorities such as staff meetings and whole-school planning (King, Brennan and Gorman 2024). Caoimhe stressed, 'If the departments are serious about health and wellbeing for teachers, for school communities, time, resources and money has to be put into it.'

Caoimhe's view highlights potential disparities between regulated networks, such as those supported by the Teaching Council Féilte Bursary Scheme and voluntary networks that may lack financial or political backing and dedicated time. Currently, allocated time for professional learning is often limited to curricular reform (King, Brennan and Gorman, 2024; Higgins and Booker, 2022).

Caoimhe also highlighted the impact of increased commute times for staff travelling into Dublin due to high rent:

> A lot of staff now don't live in Dublin, and they're travelling because the rent is so high, so for them, they could have a journey of 45 minutes to come home. Why would they decide to stay and be stuck in traffic? You know, if it could be done within school time.

This emphasises that engaging in professional learning outside of working hours is not free and there are indirect costs involved (Boeskens, Nusche and Yuria, 2020). Embedding networking within the school day was suggested by Stephen', who explained

that staff buckets may be depleted by the end of the day and by Caoimhe who noted that staff may stay after school to plan for the following day's lessons. This is a necessary consideration given that compulsory instruction time in Irish primary schools is above the OECD average, reducing the time available for teachers to engage in professional learning (OECD, 2025b).

Wellbeing network design must address current challenges, including wider societal issues, potentially by adopting a blended approach on site in Education centres and online. John was the only participant to suggest a blended approach: 'I think there's space for it.'

Dedicated time is needed, not only for networking, but for staff to trial and implement new knowledge, which is essential for sustainable impact. As Nuala pointed out, 'They'll go back to school in the morning and school will take over. They won't be able to implement the things that they have learned.' This corresponds with Hoke *et al.* (2024), who emphasise the need for wellness teams to be afforded dedicated time to discuss, assess wellbeing enactment and develop supporting guiding documents and policies. David similarly highlighted the necessity for a wellbeing postholder or teacher to have the 'time and space' required to 'lead and develop in that role' and 'really affect change in wellbeing. ' He explained that staff are not simply attending a network event 'like a garden gnome' to absorb information; they need time and space to delve into the 'nitty gritty of practice' and the opportunity to explore challenges and find effective solutions.

Network Continuity and Sustainability

Network sustainability is a key concern, particularly regarding staff changes and external partnerships. Given the small number of staff typically involved in networks, John highlighted the challenge posed by staff turnover.

> Sometimes, in schools, when people leave, things just stop. You know, maternity leaves, career breaks, and new stuff coming in, you don't want to overwhelm them by saying, here you're in charge of this, here you're in charge of that.

John proposed implementing a progression plan to manage transitions. Beyond internal staffing, Tracey highlighted that the network's viability is also threatened when

relationships with external partner agencies break down, stating, 'if relationships break down, the project will break down.'

Similarly, Sharon also questioned if requiring expert staff to participate in wellbeing networks compromises their capacity to provide direct support to children: ‘you would hope that there is enough staff to staff it, because what if they're out supporting you (a school) with something, is that taking away from support somewhere else?’ These are important considerations for the longer term impact and sustainability of wellbeing networks and their role in supporting wellbeing enactment in schools.

4.3.4 Enablers and sustainability

Participants suggested several incentives that may enable staff to participate in and sustain an interschool wellbeing network. These included: time, space and dedicated support for network members, appropriate meeting frequency and network momentum and impact.

Time, Space and Dedicated supports

As foregrounded in the literature, this research finds that leaders play a key role in ensuring teachers actively engage in network activities that lead to meaningful contributions for their schools (Brown *et al.* 2024). This includes leadership support for network members, demonstrating genuine commitment to network goals and creating avenues for staff to share feedback. Mary emphasised the necessity of leadership support for staff involved in a wellbeing network:

> To allow them to go in comfort and relax rather than feeling I have only got three quarters of an hour now I have to be back…We're freeing you up now. Your class is going to be looked after. You know, and this is time for you... And not saying, Well, look, you can't go this month now, because there's a lot on, you know. You have to be fully invested in it. You have to be fully supportive of it.

Mary refers to the competing priorities within school and stresses that network participation must be valued, with dedicated timing allocated, supportive structures and attention to culture. This aligns with the findings of Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita (2020). Stephen acknowledged that whilst ‘time is the biggest challenge, we’ll always find time for the things that matter and are important.’ Niamh further observed that ‘staff pick up

very, very quickly on whether a person places value on something.' This insight indicates the importance of school leaders actively modelling the network's value and demonstrating genuine commitment to its goals. Such commitment includes showing genuine interest in the network's discussions and outcomes as well as creating avenues for staff to share feedback and inform the wider school community. This process aids knowledge mobilisation, supporting the sustaining of innovation and change across classrooms and schools (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010).

Effective feedback to staff may be achieved by including network updates on the agenda at staff meetings (Sharon) and assemblies (Stephen). This empowers all school staff (Prenger *et al.* 2019) by encouraging reflection on established practices (Atkinson *et al.* 2007). However, merely reporting back is insufficient to drive changes in wellbeing practice; teachers must not be viewed as passive followers or implementers (Brown and Flood, 2020). Network members may be supported to feedback through a school-university partnership, which will be considered further in Theme 3.

Appropriate Meeting Frequency

Louise suggested a network should not be 'all consuming,' that meeting or event frequency should not be as often as every other week; 'I'd need to be able to pace myself to be a member depending on where I am in my life.' The frequency should be 'often enough so that you feel part of something, and you belong to, and you look forward to it as opposed to it, being one more thing on your to do list.' This level of engagement, according to Duffy and Gallagher's (2017, p.114) 'sharing continuum', falls between 'sustained and regular collaboration' and a 'culture of collegiality.' Fiona agreed that meetings that are too frequent would be a disincentive for members. John added that it's important to 'be realistic,' referencing an 'intense' Summer term after Easter. He suggested limited contact in the beginning to assess if networking worked for members and one meeting per term thereafter if networking is successful. Increasingly regular and well-co-ordinated, timetabled collaboration in this way can help to sustain collaboration, however, the mechanisms of partnership, such as leadership and sustained collaborative activity, must be effective and embedded to deliver social and educational outcomes (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017).

Network Momentum and Impact

The importance of tangible, purpose-driven learning that is applicable to professional contexts was highlighted by Tracey, John and Sean. To ensure that networks are sustainable and something members look forward to, Tracey expressed the need for 'energy and a momentum' which she felt is generated through the people involved and an engaging project:

> The relationships, the laughter, the fun, the enthusiasm…respect, trust…If you see that you're working with somebody who's passionate and committed and it's for the children, and they want to drive change, and they want it for the greater good of the children and the system that energises a network.

John concurred, emphasising how this energy and momentum often stem from like-minded people who share similar educational approaches, encouraging continued involvement. He explained: 'You want to meet them again, you think, oh, that was really worthwhile, we got a lot from that. There was really value there. What we did today will add value to our school.' Both Tracey's and John's perspectives illustrate the importance of cultivating the right conditions and culture within the network to foster change (Constantinides and Eleftheriadou, 2023).

Sean pointed out that seeing clear, tangible results for children encourages network buy-in from staff and even 'reluctant principals.' He explained, 'When they see ways that you can, I suppose, circumnavigate the waiting lists…and get stuff done for kids, that's what shows people the power of networking.' Sean's reference to 'reluctant principals' may refer to those who question the value of networks and if they are the best use of time, possibly due to 'material economic conditions' in schools that restrict leadership and collaboration, such as constraints on time, space and resources (Cunnane, Gorman and Furlong, 2025, p.9).

Tracey also commented that for policymakers seeking system-wide change, incentives like Extra Personal Vacation (EPV) days or financial benefits might still be needed for some individuals if networking and professional learning are not integrated into the school day and adequate time is allocated. This incentivised approach steers between voluntary and coercive collaboration and may be most effective for schools that need

initial encouragement to begin collaborating, although it may not necessarily lead to sustained, genuine collaboration (Feys and Devos, 2015).

4.3.5 Theme 2- Conclusion

Findings reveal that participants experienced a plurality of networks that lacked overall coherence and structure. Structured network activity was grounded in classroom data and specific school contexts.

A significant and unrealised potential exists for local and diverse schools to network more effectively. Achieving sustainable network activity requires a dual focus, cultivating strong relational factors, including trust and relationships, and providing essential structural supports, such as adequate time and funding. These supports are necessary to ensure equity across all schools and to maximise impact.

The challenge of securing adequate time for networking was a common theme, mirroring OECD data. Suggestions for addressing this included allocated time by DoEY or utilising Croke Park hours for networking, as participants cited the burden of networking outside of working hours and the associated indirect costs. Wellbeing network design must consciously address these existing logistical and wider societal challenges.

To support staff transitions and network longevity, the implementation of progression plans within schools was proposed. Furthermore, strong leadership support is crucial for staff participation, requiring a supportive culture and clear feedback channels to communicate progress across the wider school community. Within the network, participants emphasised cultivating a culture that fosters energy and momentum and focusing on clear, tangible results for children. Finally, incentives were suggested as a potential way to boost network participation.

4.4 Theme 3- Wellbeing Network Composition, Purpose and Accountability

4.4.1 Composition of a wellbeing network: A Multi-Stakeholder Approach

This research finds that participants in an interschool wellbeing network should be broadly inclusive, extending beyond educators, to include those involved in a child's life. Tracey asked, 'Who's involved in a child's life from 0 to 18? Every actor needs to come to the table and look at what part they have to play in getting our children to where they need to be.' Across the data set participants identified that networks should include pupils, a teacher representative or wellbeing postholder or leader, Initial Teacher Education Providers, parents, community representatives, health sector representatives and the Inspectorate. This aligns with Muijs, West and Ainscow's (2010) definition of networks as schools and diverse organisations, working together for a common purpose.

Key Stakeholder Groups

Pupil participation

Four participants identified pupils as important members of a wellbeing network. John strongly advocated for the inclusion of student voices:

> There's definitely a space for everybody…now, the more I think about it, is probably the pupils, hearing from them, hearing what their challenges are…Wouldn't it be great to get the pupils together from a mental health, wellbeing perspective, and get them talking about the challenges in their area, and what they feel could improve, or needs to be improved in their community…I suppose it'd be really interesting to hear from them about technology and what they feel its impacts are, the lack of sporting facilities in the area, how does that impact them, their wellbeing, their opportunity to be part of a team, or to be physically fit.

John's perspective emphasises the importance of pupil input in a network designed to promote and enhance their wellbeing. John did, however, caution about children's attention span and ability to converse if directly involved. In contrast, Niamh suggested involving student councils who feed views into the network, thus keeping students 'peripherally connected' (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010, p.22). She explained, 'Rather than everybody attending everything, it's maybe a kind of a filtration…a channel of communication,' supporting the view that too many directly involved interests can limit network effectiveness (Feys and Devos, 2015).

School Staff Participation

Participants suggested involving a teacher representative or wellbeing postholder with Niamh emphasising ‘a genuine interest’ and ‘value the importance of wellbeing.’ This prompts discussion of including staff who may prioritise core subjects, such as English, Irish and Maths, as network involvement could increase awareness of the overlap and bidirectional importance of wellbeing and academic achievement discussed earlier.

Louise outlined how interest in a network may depend on a teacher’s life stage:

> At my point of life, I'd have a lot of interest, but I can imagine for someone who is trying to rear, maybe a few small babies and toddlers this would be a deterrent, however, if it wasn't overly scheduled, I think we would get a nice smattering across the population of experienced and maybe younger teachers and varying levels of experience. And I think we need all the voices to make it balanced.

She added that because someone isn’t overtly interested in a network, they should still be given an opportunity to be involved. She advocated for making it ‘accessible to everyone along their spectrum of where they are in their career.’ This raises the question of whether network participation should be voluntary, encouraged or incentivised.

Tracey and Peter, conversely, felt involvement should be based on ‘expressions of interest.’ Tracey felt it was essential to, ‘Ascertain where schools are at and what they're ready for, because not every school is ready to go and collaborate. So you have to have an appetite.’ Tracey's view implies interest in networking increases a network's chance of making a meaningful impact. However, whilst some schools or individuals may not be ready to network, others within the school may desire change.

Not all participants felt a principal's direct involvement was necessary if a wellbeing postholder was present, however Mary stressed the principal’s role is key for ensuring network sustainability.

Initial Teacher Education Providers (ITEPs)

David was the sole participant to propose including ITEPs, 'because they will never get down as far as we've dug to get that information.' Despite Sean and Tracey being part of a network with their local university, as mentioned previously, they did not explicitly identify their involvement in a wellbeing network when asked in the interview. David

believes this inclusion would provide a platform for ITEPs to acquire deeper insights and gather perspectives on shared wellbeing goals from the whole school community. His view implies that a partnership approach would enable teacher education to be more responsive to the reality of school contexts. ITEPs could also offer evidence-based practice details and professional learning opportunities while schools provide local knowledge (Weemer *et al.* 2023). Such a partnership could foster teacher empowerment, supporting network members to become informal teacher leaders within their own schools to lead change and improve practice amongst their colleagues, a finding in a previous study (Brennan and Pennycook, 2025).

Parent Participation

Eleven of sixteen participants felt parents should be involved. Views on the nature of this involvement varied, with Fiona and Sharon suggesting a Parents 'Association representative, and Niamh proposing a filtered communication channel, similar to her suggestion for pupils. Eve suggested that parents be invited as guest speakers, 'if they have something to offer in terms of wellbeing.' Eve's view provides an interesting insight, stressing the need for genuine and authentic involvement. Participant views reflect a whole-school approach that involves parents as active partners in wellbeing promotion (Cefai, Simões and Caravita, 2021). In Lever *et al.* (2024) study, school-based wellness teams included parents to drive the integration of the WSCC model and school mental health. Networks can strengthen connections and collaboration with parents by actively engaging them in a network, sharing the schools' improvement and innovation priorities (Azorín & Muijs, 2017).

Community Participation

Involvement of the wider community was mentioned by eight participants, highlighting the importance of achieving alignment when working towards network goals. Explicitly mentioned were sports coaches, the local authority, An Garda Síochána and the youth justice worker, the homeschool liaison coordinator, the local parish priest, the community care manager and the local priest. Niamh explained:

> I definitely think there's space for community representatives, they know exactly what is happening on the ground. You know they're supporting our children who are most in need, so I think they would have a very valued seat at the table as well.

This aligns with findings that excluding community voices can lead to incomplete solutions (Dyson *et al.* 2012). Orla specifically mentioned sports coaches as ‘they’re the people that they (the children) look up to, and that’s their escape.’ This suggests that coaches, working closely with children, may offer valuable perspectives in the promotion of wellbeing, healthy lifestyle and anti-bullying initiatives. Eve cautioned against ‘having too many chefs in the kitchen,’ suggesting community representatives should attend only when they have a specific contribution to wellbeing promotion. Community participation may raise concerns of trust and confidentiality in relation to the personal information of children and families, as previously identified by Orla. As Stephen previously explained, trust is developed gradually through openness and sustained engagement. The selective engagement of community members could impede the development of trust.

Within a DEIS context, Sean stressed the necessity of representation 'right across the community landscape,' specifically referencing the local authority, An Garda Síochána and the youth justice worker. ‘Otherwise it becomes very insular and something like an echo chamber, teacher A is talking to teacher B, who's talking to teacher C.’ Sean’s view aligns with the need for external perspectives to broaden understanding of educational realities (Muijs, 2015).

Tracey added that within a DEIS context, representation is also needed from, for example, the homeschool liaison coordinator, the local parish priest and the community care manager. Tracey explained how their local church is 'very invested in wellbeing' and that the current priest, who was previously a prison chaplain, has 'a real understanding of mental health, and the importance of addressing the needs.' Tracey's statement highlights the importance of a school considering key stakeholders within their school and wider community context to best support wellbeing enactment. However, identifying a fixed, exclusive group for membership could inadvertently limit inclusivity. It may be important to ensure opportunities for broad representation across the school community to reflect diverse and potentially less visible voices when establishing wellbeing priorities.

Health Sector Participation

Representatives from the health sector, particularly NEPS psychologists and mental health practitioners, were identified as important network members by twelve

participants. Stephen and Sharon, however, were concerned that network involvement might detract from the time available for children's assessments, as mentioned earlier. Involvement of occupational therapists and speech and language therapists, clinical psychology, CAMHS and CDNT was mentioned by a smaller number of participants. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency were referenced for inclusion by two participants.

Participants suggested specific ways health professionals could integrate into the network. Eve proposed that NEPS attend a network event termly to offer professional learning, citing bereavement awareness as an example.

A common theme was the need for dedicated time for dialogue with health sector representatives such as NEPS and Tusla. Eve, Nuala and Louise emphasised the importance of question and answer sessions. Louise specifically sought support in 'a conversational capacity just to temper and make sure that everything is on the right message, you know, to keep the messages straight.' Orla articulated the broader need for a network that would provide 'support for us, and information for us and places for us to go.' These suggestions were informed by the diverse supports participants have previously received from NEPS, as identified in theme 2. Their perspectives frame health professionals as knowledgeable others who could offer sporadic guidance and validation within a network.

A multidisciplinary approach, where health professionals are physically present on school sites and integrated through the network, could effectively meet the needs of both students and teachers. This model promotes a lateral engagement where issues are solved collaboratively, with health professionals offering expertise and teachers contributing their knowledge of children, families and school contexts. This contrasts with a model where the health professional acts merely as the knowledgeable authority, offering advice. Integrating diverse actors in this way would support embedding intersectoral collaboration into the system's culture (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016).

Inspectorate Participation

Despite recommendations that goal-driven networks should be open to guidance from external stakeholders (Brown *et al.* 2020), in this study, participants expressed mixed views on DoEY Inspectorate involvement. Caoimhe was undecided and indicated that

there may be a reluctance to share openly if a member of the inspectorate is present. She explained:

> You don't want to go in a room and say, we're really struggling with such and such in our school, and all of a sudden you have an inspection on your plate…It's an awful shame that we can't feel that we're on the same page.

However, Caoimhe indicated that inspectorate involvement might help strengthen their relationships with schools. Louise and Stephen echoed a common sentiment that the inspectorate is typically perceived as being involved for 'oversight and governance' (Louise), which Stephen warned 'can stifle things.' This may be due to the inspectorate model in schools, which has been likened to a 'check list audit type process' (Harford, Bruton and Fleming, 2026, p.15). Louise emphasised the importance of inspectorate involvement in a supportive role, helping the network achieve its goals, rather than being perceived as 'there to inspect.' Stephen suggested that celebrating achievements could serve as a more constructive evaluation method.

These views reflect a tension regarding the potential role of the inspectorate in supporting and building capacity within networks, including the development of self-evaluation practices that could enhance network sustainability. Given the need for trust, fear and reluctance will persist unless deliberate relationship building ensures network members perceive the inspectorate as an equal partner working towards the same network goals.

4.4.2 Network Leadership

Participants identified two approaches to network leadership: an initial external facilitator or rotating internal leadership with support. Their perspectives align with research suggesting that non-traditional, non-hierarchical approaches are preferred (Harris, Azorín, and Jones, 2023).

The Role of a Facilitator

Nuala suggested appointing ‘a facilitator’ to clarify the purpose of the network for participants and to support its initial setup, warning that without this, the network ‘could all fall apart.’ Sharon, Caoimhe, Orla and Niamh agreed that this facilitator should not be a teacher or school leader. Sharon explained; ‘you need to have one person being able to properly allocate, plan and communicate clearly without being pulled left, right and

centre.' Furthermore, certain participants specified a facilitator with expertise in network management. Louise commented that this would provide 'a level of consistency' across schools, whilst Niamh suggested it would give members 'an idea of what a network is, and how a network could be set up, or how a network could be run.' Their perspectives are consistent with Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan's (2016) recommendation for a gradual release of responsibility as network capacity increases. Stephen concurred that a successful network should be led by 'somebody with expertise in how networks can run successfully.' Niamh cited examples, such as an Oide facilitator or a principal with network experience. Notably, participants did not explicitly state the need for a facilitator to be a wellbeing expert, possibly because they felt the priority was enabling, organising and sustaining activity, with the subject matter expertise already residing within the network itself.

Alternative and Distributed Leadership Models

In contrast to the facilitator model, John proposed a system where each school identifies a lead person and rotates leadership 'according to perhaps who is the host school.' Eve positively recalled experiencing this model in Australia, where principals rotated the responsibility for hosting and leading professional learning sessions: 'It was up to each principal at different times of the year when they had to host the professional learning session, they had to get either their staff to lead focus area seminars or get guest speakers in.'

However, Peter cautioned that school leaders transitioning into this role would need support to build their capacity for effective network leadership. This echoes previous research that stresses the importance of developing competencies in shared leadership, conflict management, decision making and trust-building (Feys and Devos, 2015).

Louise similarly advocated for a 'rotating chair' to introduce 'other flavours and voices' into the network, emphasising a desire to leverage internal expertise and promote a distributed leadership model (Harris, Azorín, and Jones, 2023). She further suggested that a leadership structure resembling a board of management could help maintain 'constancy' in how the network is governed, maintain a clear agenda and prevent the network from being 'totally derailed.'

Finally, Stephen recommended piloting various network models to trial different approaches and identify the key considerations for effective network functioning.

4.4.3 Shared Purpose of a Wellbeing Network

As foregrounded in the literature review (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016), all participants spoke of the necessity for a shared purpose within a wellbeing network; although what this should look like varied amongst participants. The need for a shared purpose emerged organically from Sean, Tracey, David, Mary, Peter, Nuala, Niamh, Stephen and John. For other participants, it became evident in response to direct questioning. Sean contended:

> Networks need to move towards actually looking at meaningful, tangible projects. Not just sitting around talking about the level of need...Oh, look, it's awful in the schools now we've no supports. We need NEPS, we need HSE, we all know that. But let's actually take tangible projects that we can work towards and move things forward.

This was echoed by Tracey, 'If we're not changing policy or affecting system change, we're at nothing.' Stephen agreed, emphasising the importance of a 'strong outcome' for a network. He explained:

> There needs to be something to almost hang your coat on by the end of it...Look, we all love sharing best practice...but it can turn into…this is what we do in my school… and then we all head off, and we do get great ideas, and I've gone to schools and implemented them. But I think we need to be really careful with that.

To move beyond simply sharing ideas, Stephen suggested a wellbeing network could implement an area wide program, citing the 'great success' of a local homeschool cluster that collaboratively focused on attendance.

David proposed using each school's existing School Improvement Plan (SIP) as a starting point to identify the similarities and differences between schools to match and trend schools.' What he felt was key in developing a shared purpose within the network was comparing improvement plans, since without them 'they'll be basically like window plants, just there for show,' with little depth to the learning that is taking place. Integrating professional learning practices and network goals within SIPs is one solution. For teachers, the school and beyond, it would help ensure teacher's practices are informed by their own needs, the needs of the school and the system whilst creating shared goals for

colleagues to collaborate on and actively contribute to improvement (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020).

Whilst LAOS (DE,2022a) recognises teacher and leader participation in networks as a highly effective practice, it does not push the boundaries for schools to use networks as part of their SIPs. The SIP can provide an implementation pathway, and network activity would then become integrated into school policy. Stephen added that if network members can see the value for their school and its self-evaluation process, there will be 'a more authentic outcome and endeavour by the network.' Niamh agreed, indicating how network members would 'zone out' and 'listen less' if the shared content is not relevant to them. Mary also cautioned that shared network goals must remain flexible to reflect each school's unique culture and identity. However, a potential risk of linking network activity too closely to SIPs and LAOS is that it could become procedural, stifling the energy 'brought from within,' that David previously discussed as essential for meaningful action.

Following the consideration of SIPs, David suggested structuring network focus around the four key areas of wellbeing in the *Wellbeing Framework*, dedicating one area per year, to create a four year cycle with 'targets to go forward with.' There is a risk that this policy-driven structure could compromise network authenticity and membership engagement. Niamh, an acting principal, viewed policy as primarily a leadership team concern, not integral to a teacher's role, suggesting that a teacher's career stage might influence their willingness to engage with policy.

Louise agreed with David's idea, believing it would help schools develop a 'broad sense of what wellbeing promotion could be.' She suggested dedicating a full term to each key area of wellbeing: 'If you give each area a nice enough amount of time and air and oxygen, people's understanding could broaden, and then they could actually see the links between the four key areas.'

4.4.4 Structural clarity- The Need for Department of Education Guidance

All participants agreed that clear structural guidance from the DoEY would facilitate the establishment of wellbeing networks. Explicitly referenced was guidance on membership, facilitation, confidentiality, professional conduct, member expectations and benefits for schools. However, views varied on the required level of prescription. David advocated

for the DoEY to initially group schools but then ‘helicopter distance for a while…(and) let schools organically develop their own sense of identity.’

Mary cited further practicalities that are important to clarify:

> I suppose it would make it a lot easier if you knew how many schools should be involved, what staff or you know how many parents… and maybe a set of rules as to you know like confidentiality, kind of setting the parameters of what could be discussed and what shouldn't be discussed. Those kinds of things would be helpful. I suppose it stops you running into trouble.

Louise emphasised the necessity of professional conduct guidelines for network members, stating, 'I would be so embarrassed if I thought I was part of a network, and there was somebody here giving up their time and expertise only to be torn down.' Such guidelines would reinforce the importance of every member feeling valued and heard and allow for 'democracy and opinions to be aired and shared, but not dominated' (Louise). Professional conduct guidelines would also help clarify expectations around trust and the confidential sharing of information, as raised by Orla in theme 2, perhaps by advising participants not to identify specific children or families.

Clarity is also required regarding member expectations and the benefits for the school, as pointed out by Niamh. Peter called for a more prescribed approach, ideally from 'Oide, or an inspector, or someone with the harp on their letterhead.' He explained:

> You need to get an email and say whoever's interested in wellbeing, there's two or three teachers interested in wellbeing, there's a wellbeing network for X area. The schools in your network are this, and it will be facilitated, or the first meeting or every second meeting will be facilitated by Oide as I say, and there's a professional learning leader's name attached to it.

Similarly, Eve added the DoEY ‘need to push schools a little bit' possibly by requiring schools to complete 'five hours of professional learning within a network.' This might necessitate substitute days (Stephen). Whilst this would provide opportunities for integration, compelling schools to network might lead to reluctance of some staff members engaging in the network and their sense of trust in the network (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010).

Niamh's reflection encapsulates the mixed sentiment: 'Whilst we love being able to be in

control, and to have our own agency, we also love being told what to do.' She recommended providing explicit guidance where necessary, whilst leaving room for agency to accommodate varied school contexts.

Tracey contended, 'A manual won't work… guidelines will work… It can't be a perfect blueprint.' She proposed the following starting steps for schools creating a wellbeing network:

1. Identify the internal wellbeing team to lead the project
2. Build relationships with local schools and clinicians
3. Identify a common ground or project
4. Identify funding streams

Tracey's suggestion offers a useful starting framework incorporating the intersectoral collaboration and key considerations raised by participants. The appetite for some prescriptions is understandable given that interschool wellbeing networks are still evolving in Ireland. Without guidelines, 'trying to get consensus on what an approach should be, could be very, very challenging' (Stephen). John explained that clear communication of the vision, benefits and requirements allows members to make an 'informed decision' if the network is for them or not. However, participants' perspectives show that the ideal level of prescription is complex. Some teachers prefer control, others desire specific representatives to answer questions, and views differ on student and parent participation. Overly prescriptive DoEY guidelines that fail to meet these diverse needs may risk the network's success and be perceived as a rigid, top-down directive.

4.4.5 Evaluation of Wellbeing and Network Evaluation

The findings highlight that effective evaluation mechanisms are needed for a wellbeing network to successfully achieve its goals and enhance wellbeing enactment in schools. Participants identified the need to internally evaluate the impact of network engagement on wellbeing enactment within schools, as well as conducting both internal and external evaluations of the network's overall function and effectiveness. However, no participants discussed external evaluation of the impact of network engagement on wellbeing enactment within schools. Furthermore, participants did not specify if the evaluation should be left mainly to principals, teachers and the inspectorate or the responsibility of all network members.

Evaluating the Impact of Network Engagement on Wellbeing Enactment

Findings indicate that the impact of network activity on wellbeing enactment is intrinsically linked to a school's context and shared network purpose. Participants found evaluating wellbeing difficult, with Nuala questioning, 'How do I know how well somebody else is?' David explained that it comes back to 'having that shared purpose or shared target…that goes up for someone to reevaluate.' Nuala emphasised the need for schools to define the 'specific part of wellbeing' they aim to improve. Using her special school as an example, Nuala cited improving pupils' social regulation. To measure this, schools must identify relevant indicators: 'What are the indicators that are there?' and 'How will we know it has improved?' For social regulation, these indicators could look like 'frequency of verbalisations, a decrease in the number of bullying incidents, an increase in the number of expressions of gratitude or expressions of kindness.'

Examples of context-specific measures included increased attendance and reduced school leaving (Tracey), reduction in challenging behavioural incidents through a focus on relationship building (John), and teachers increasingly using growth mindset language (Eve). Such evidence within a network can help fuel collective efficacy (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). How wellbeing is measured will depend on the context of the school and the cohort of students. Caoimhe proposed using baseline data to set network goals and revisiting the data at the end of a defined period. Staff and pupil wellness surveys, strategic meetings and input from external agencies were key monitoring tools for whole school evaluation of wellbeing in the Well Schools network (Hennessey *et al.* 2025).

Network Evaluation

Both Eve and David advocated for the DoEY playing a role in the evaluation of the network itself. David explained:

> I think it should be done with the Department of Education definitely in my eyes and someone there that is getting a sense of okay, there is progress in this particular area, in this particular network and here is the evidence for it…someone of that level in the Department of Education that is influencing policy to take that and evaluate it, because if it's not them, what evidence do they have for the policy they're after talking about in the first place?

David is implying that DoEY should support networks in developing meaningful

evaluation methodologies and standards, rather than leaving this task solely to teachers and leaders. Given that networks are a focus of policy in Ireland, but are still evolving, establishing clearly defined evaluation methodologies, standards, and quality indicators is essential. Earlier research supports this need, with participants identifying that a 'loosely bound framework of quality indicators' from the DoE would be beneficial for evaluating network activity (O'Hara *et al.* 2020, p.49). For instance, in Northern Ireland, a quality continuum was used to evaluate school networks, classifying performance from outstanding to unsatisfactory and providing a detailed report of strengths and areas for improvement (Brown *et al.* 2020).

Participants in this study made a number of suggestions to facilitate internal evaluation of the network and wellbeing enactment in schools. These included informal methods such as surveying members about network function and impact (Mary, Alice, Niamh and Orla), gaining qualitative feedback on network functioning (Peter, Louise, Niamh and Orla) and monitoring shared goals and evidence of goal achievement (Fiona, Tracey and Nuala). Seeking feedback from network members is a necessary consideration, as Sean highlighted, 'people vote with their feet.' Sean's statement emphasises the importance of network self-evaluation methods. Louise suggested informal focus groups for constructive, solution-oriented feedback: 'if you come up with a negative, you come with a solution.' This may provide a safe space to build trust, resolve conflict, while monitoring progress.

A flexible, four-component evaluation framework from previous professional learning research (Gilleece, Rawdon and Surdey 2023) could be adapted to evaluate both student wellbeing and the network itself. The framework considers relevant contextual features such as school and classroom characteristics; features of professional learning, including collective participation and the alignment of the network with teachers' goals. Also considered are teacher outcomes, which may be evaluated through measuring changes in teacher competencies and behaviours and evaluating student experiences and outcomes. Practical tools to support evaluation included teacher pre- and post-Teacher Professional Learning questionnaires, reflective journal prompts and evaluation templates (Gilleece, Surdey and Rawdon, 2023).

4.4.6 Theme 3- Conclusion

Participants agreed that an effective wellbeing network should involve all individuals involved in a child's life, including student voice, to accurately identify challenges to children's wellbeing. Recommended membership included a wellbeing postholder or teacher representatives with varying levels of experience. There were mixed views regarding the degree of interest required for the role. The inclusion of ITE providers was suggested to foster a responsive partnership between teacher education and the realities of school contexts. Parent and community participation was proposed to offer valuable perspectives. A collaborative approach with health professionals was suggested to build an intersectoral culture. Whilst views on the inspectorate's role were mixed, it was agreed their participation should be supportive and equal, rather than in a governing or overseeing capacity.

Network leadership options included an initial, external facilitator or rotating, internal leadership with support.

A shared purpose that transcends the sharing of best practice, towards meaningful, tangible projects for system change, was considered essential. Suggestions for operationalising this purpose included reflecting on and comparing SIPs for goal setting, in a balanced way, that doesn't stifle creativity, energy and meaningful action.

All participants requested structural guidance on network establishment areas including membership, confidentiality, professional conduct and member expectations. This guidance must balance top-down direction with agency for varied school contexts. Finally, effective internal and external evaluation mechanisms are necessary for network success and enhanced wellbeing enactment.

CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This study explored how Irish primary school teachers and leaders understand and enact pupil wellbeing, recognising the potential schools have in reaching pupils at an early age to shape future health (Higgins and Booker, 2023). It also examined the supporting role of networks and external partnerships in offering diverse perspectives, ideas and solutions (Denee, 2024). Furthermore, the research identified challenges, design factors, and sustainability factors of wellbeing networks, focusing on recognising and supporting educators' roles and fostering collaboration within and across schools (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020). A comprehensive literature review guided the research, establishing the discourse on wellbeing and networks in education and informing key themes.

This chapter details the study's unique contribution to the discourse on educational networks and wellbeing by clarifying the distinct ways it supports understanding in this area. Specifically, it renews emphasis on whole school responsibility for wellbeing enactment; identifies a desire for networking; outlines the composition of networks; explains the role of a facilitator in supporting network function; demonstrates the need for network reciprocity and distributed expertise models; and outlines key structural supports for effective network functioning.

The chapter structure begins by presenting answers to the three research questions:

Overarching research question

What are the challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors of inter-school wellbeing networks, from the perspectives of primary school educators?

Subsidiary research questions

- How do school leaders and teachers understand and enact wellbeing in their school contexts?
- What roles do networks and external partnerships play in supporting wellbeing enactment in schools?

A key aim of this chapter is to develop design principles for wellbeing networks grounded in the perspectives of primary school educators. These principles will offer a structured framework for network design by exploring the associated challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors. The discussion will connect these proposed design principles to educators' current understanding and enactment of wellbeing, demonstrating how networks can effectively support wellbeing enactment in their specific school contexts. Finally, the chapter will outline the study's limitations, offer implications for policy, practice, and future research, and highlight the study's key contributions before concluding.

A review of the literature confirms that addressing pupils' wellbeing needs necessitates multidisciplinary and collaborative practices (Thielking *et al*., 2018; UNESCO, 2022a; Weemer *et al.*, 2023), and educational networks have been proposed as a solution for addressing the highly contextualised nature of educational challenges (Sinnema *et al.*, 2020). This study is timely, given that recent CSL data show a decline in positive emotions and an increase in anxiety between 2019 and 2023 (Sloan *et al.,* 2024). The CSL report highlighted a need for professional development to support teachers with profound issues such as anxiety, behavioural issues and bereavement and the provision of external support to support the wellbeing of pupils with intellectual difficulties. In parallel, Irish and international policy, reviewed in chapter one, advocates for education networks as platforms for reflection, collaboration, and improvement. These policies include: the *Wellbeing Framework* (DES, 2019), LAOS (DoE, 2022a), OECD's (2023) *Educational Research and Innovation Supporting Teachers to Foster Creativity and Critical Thinking,* and ILO's (2024) *Transforming the teaching profession: Recommendations and summary of deliberations of the United Nations Secretary General's High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession.*

However, a review of the literature revealed a significant gap, limited practical guidance on network development and function within the Irish context. This lack of guidance is crucial, as the mere existence of a network does not improve pupil outcomes; rather, it is its operation and what it enables schools to do that ultimately matter (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). This gap has strengthened the relevance of the research questions. Furthermore, the literature lacks perspectives from Irish principals and teachers on the opportunities and challenges of using networks to support wellbeing enactment. By

exploring educators' needs and expectations for wellbeing networks, this study directly addresses this deficit.

5.2 Discussion of Research Questions

This section addresses the research questions individually, synthesising key theoretical insights from the literature review on wellbeing in education and educational networks with data collected in this study, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of wellbeing networks in the Irish primary school context.

What are the challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors of inter-school wellbeing networks, from the perspectives of primary school educators?

The study identified primary challenges within wellbeing networks. Maintaining trust and confidentiality to drive network progress was reported, as highlighted by Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016). Constraints related to time were identified, aligning with the findings of Prenger *et al*. (2019). Participants highlighted workload and capacity issues, consistent with Wylie's (2016) study.

The research expands upon existing literature by proposing eight key network design principles to address these challenges directly: promoting whole-school involvement, ensuring transactional reciprocity, establishing effective leadership or facilitation, cultivating a shared purpose, building trust, adequate resourcing, providing professional learning supports, and implementing robust network evaluation.

Achieving network sustainability requires focusing on strengthening relational factors, as Tracey referred to them: 'the relationships, the laughter, the fun, the enthusiasm…respect and trust.' Building relational infrastructure, the informal networks of social relations, through the creation of meaningful social ties, is necessary to generate and diffuse knowledge across a network (Sinnema *et al.*, 2020). Network sustainability also requires the provision of essential structural supports, including funding and sufficient time, as engaging in professional learning outside working hours is not free and involves indirect costs (Boeskens, Nusche and Yuria, 2020). As stressed by Caoimhe, 'If the departments are serious about health and wellbeing for teachers, for school communities, time, resources, and money have to be put into it.' These supports are necessary to ensure equitable access and maximise impact for wellbeing networks across all participating schools.

Network sustainability is also affected when members change schools or when relationships with external partners break down, as identified by John and Tracey. Participants suggested that sustainability can be enhanced by reducing dependence on specific network members, implementing a 'rotating chair' (Louise), and developing intentional progression plans to manage transitions (John). Further, establishing clear feedback channels within the wider school community helps 'broker the skills and knowledge' gained in the network (Prenger *et al.,* 2019, p. 450). These structures and practices are crucial for distributing knowledge, roles, and responsibilities, thus building overall network capacity. This research contributes to existing knowledge by spotlighting the issue of network continuity following a member's departure, raising a critical question about current transitions and handover processes. Implementing purposeful replacements and organised handovers may enhance the success of these transitions.

How do school leaders and teachers understand and enact wellbeing in their school contexts?

The exploration of participants' perspectives offered valuable contextual insight into how school leaders and teachers currently understand and enact wellbeing across diverse Irish primary and special school settings, including National Schools, a Gaelscoileanna, a Special School, a Community National School, and an Educate Together School. Wellbeing enactment was a priority across all contexts.

The significance of social and psychological wellbeing was particularly emphasised in this study for all school contexts. The focus on pupils' mental health specifically was highlighted in earlier Irish studies (Higgins and Booker, 2022; Dempsey and McCoy, 2024; O'Connor and Nohilly, 2024; Dempsey and McCoy, 2026).

In DEIS schools, wellbeing enactment was identified as crucial for children managing external challenges. Similarly, in Special Schools, wellbeing enactment supports pupils with additional needs, who are often more vulnerable due to difficulties with social, language, and communication skills, as well as higher rates of anxiety and low self-esteem (NCSE, 2014). Prioritising core academic subjects over the Wellbeing curriculum was captured in previous studies (Dempsey and McCoy, 2026; O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin, 2024) and highlighted by Orla in her suburban school context, recognising a

need to strengthen understanding of the overlap and bidirectional importance of wellbeing and academic achievement.

The findings highlighted that wellbeing is more than a subject to be taught; its successful enactment relies on an enabling school environment and an approach involving ‘the entire school’ (Orla). Findings indicate that wellbeing must be deeply embedded within the school's culture, supported by positive leadership and strong relational practices. This echoes earlier research by Cefai, Simões and Caravita (2021). Participants identified that school leaders are pivotal in shaping a culture that promotes wellbeing and fosters shared responsibility for its enactment. This aligns with Rasberry *et al.*'s (2015) findings that leadership commitment signals to the school community that wellbeing priorities are integrated into policies and practices. Louise explained that leaders are the 'cornerstone of it,' and should have a good understanding of wellbeing promotion and actively lead it. They must practise what they preach on a daily basis and be a visible and reassuring presence for staff (Sean).

Participants identified several challenges to wellbeing enactment when discussing a whole school approach. Developing a coordinated whole school approach to wellbeing emerged as a challenge. Whilst all participants agreed that a whole school approach is necessary, their experiences highlighted varying degrees of enactment and understanding on the ground. Navigating competing curricular demands was a recurring theme. A lack of understanding of the interrelationship between RSE, Stay Safe, and Wellbeing curricula was identified by Louise, and addressing staff's lack of confidence in teaching sensitive wellbeing topics was raised by Fiona and Caoimhe. To address these challenges, targeted professional learning supports are required. These will be outlined later in the chapter.

What roles do networks and external partnerships play in supporting wellbeing enactment in schools?

The study's findings reveal that wellbeing networks offer advantages, including easier access to pupil wellbeing supports, increased staff confidence in trying new approaches, reduced feelings of isolation and a boost in motivation, the chance to be part of a broader educational community, inter-school collaboration, and the strengthening of pupil voice, agency, and leadership. This aligns with earlier literature, which notes how networks can provide collaborative environments that enable educators to share insights, learn from one another, refine their practice (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010) and reduce isolation

(Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010). Networking can also facilitate resource optimisation. Stephen's network enabled the purchasing of an assessment tool. Similarly, a Spanish study by Díaz-Gibson *et al.* (2017) found that networking resulted in the creation of a community resource inventory.

However, accounts from the eleven participants with experience of wellbeing networks suggest that these networks are often sporadic across schools, with varying levels of coherence, funding, and oversight, potentially constraining their overall impact. These experiences included national networks, including piloted networks, regional DEIS networks, school context networks such as SET, and professional networks. Eve, Nuala and David emphasised the untapped potential for networking. David specifically referenced bringing local and diverse schools together to network more effectively, broaden perspectives, and prevent the homogenisation of wellbeing practice.

Participants made a clear connection between health, wellbeing and education and the need for a multidisciplinary approach with 'a core group of people that believe in a multi agency model' (Sean). This aligns with previous research on the WSCC model, which recognises that interprofessional collaboration between health and education sectors to promote pupil wellbeing (Willgerodt, Walsh and Maloy, 2021). This approach should involve health professionals being physically present on school sites and integrated into a wellbeing network. Impact will be limited unless school health services are delivered in a sustainable manner within a school setting (Soultatou, Vardaros and Bagos, 2023), as Sean stressed. Multi-agency working, whereby schools provide a full-service, holistic offering to pupils through engagement with health, social, and psychological services, was highlighted in the Cummings *et al.* (2007) study. Such integration is essential to effectively address the needs of both pupils and teachers, fostering collaborative problem-solving through lateral engagement. While health and wellbeing are not competing concerns (UNESCO, 2025), participants frequently described existing supports as inconsistent, hard to access and disjointed. Sharon explained, ‘I just feel like you are just constantly chasing people for information like...and you're just lucky if you get the right information from people.' Specifically, participants’ accounts reported NEPS support as episodic. Three participants expressed significant difficulties in securing psychological assessments for pupils with severe needs. This can negatively affect their social

interactions, relationships, attendance at school, achievement, and behaviour (Mental Health Commission, 2023).

Participant accounts align with the literature, which found that services providing Disability Services, Primary Care interventions, and CAMHS work in silos, causing disjointed work processes and communication barriers (Mental Health Commission, 2023). This situation has led to blurred role boundaries for staff. Sean highlighted staff 'going above and beyond' and 'operating in the realms of addiction, homelessness and family mediation.' Stephen explained his concern about staff burnout, 'working in areas of high trauma' highlighting the emotional labour staff face, identified by (O'Farrell *et al.*, 2025).

The research indicates that schools require clarity and consistency in their support for pupil wellbeing. A multidisciplinary network approach and coordinated intersectoral efforts are vital to ensuring that children receive the services and resources they need for their wellbeing. This model would establish accessible care pathways, helping children overcome barriers that might otherwise persist into adulthood (Hill *et al.*, 2024; Hickey, 2025).

5.3 Wellbeing Network Design Principles

The data analysis informed the development of key design principles for wellbeing networks, which aim to leverage the identified potential for networking. Table 5.1 provides an overview of these principles. Given the study's findings on the critical need to prioritise pupil wellbeing across all school contexts, these design principles are broadly applicable.

Table 5.1 Wellbeing Network Design Principles Overview

Literature on Effective Networks →	Participant Findings →	Design Principle
There is a need to 'build strong networks integrating families, youth organisations, higher education institutions, healthcare and welfare sectors and other local stakeholders' (European Commission, 2024, p.5).	Participants identified network representation from students, teachers, leaders, parents, community representatives, health sector and child welfare sector, the Inspectorate and ITEPs.	**Whole System involvement**
Principals in O'Hara *et al.* (2020) study noted the importance of reciprocity being transactional, that schools learn from each other through sharing and collaborating.	The importance of understanding the distinct skill sets and values of network members across the system and how these can complement each other was highlighted.	**Transactional Reciprocity**
Networks cannot be led using traditional top-down methods, as the functions of the network leader are multifaceted and the challenges are diverse (Harris, Azorín, and Jones, 2023)	Two main options for network leadership were suggested: an initial, external facilitator or rotating, internal leadership with adequate support. Within schools, leaders also play a key role in supporting network functioning and impact.	**Leadership and Facilitation**
A shared commitment to measurable outcomes can support in improving the effectiveness of networks (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016).	The importance of wellbeing network members having a shared purpose was a consistent finding in this study. Some emphasised that it goes beyond simply the sharing of ideas, considering tangible projects to move things forward.	**A Shared purpose**
Trusting relationships, focused on a shared and compelling agenda, facilitate a push-and-pull dynamic that can move the network's work forward (Rincón-	It was highlighted that trust builds a sense of security and safety within a network, is necessary to engage in challenging conversations, share information, and support network functioning.	**Trust**

Gallardo and Fullan, 2016).		
In Prenger *et al.* (2019) study, organisational factors, such as time and workload, negatively impacted the satisfaction of network participants. Resources are essential for sustaining a network, including access to some flexible funds (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016).	The most significant constraint to participating in a wellbeing network is the lack of dedicated time for networking during the school day. Heavy curricular demands were connected to this. It was identified that there is a need for time to trial new knowledge and affect change in wellbeing, as well as network funding.	**Resourcing**
Networks offer several ways to enhance professional learning, including leveraging internal and external expertise (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010).	Professional learning is needed to enhance staff capacity to recognise the overlap and bidirectional importance of wellbeing and academic achievement as well as the diverse factors influencing children's wellbeing. Schools also require support to understand and enact a whole school approach to wellbeing. This includes the interrelationship between the RSE, Stay Safe, and Wellbeing curricula.	**Professional Learning**
Achieving network sustainability and quality outcomes requires clearly defined evaluation methodologies and standards (O'Hara *et al.* 2020). For goal-driven networks to operate they must be open to guidance from external stakeholders who aren't directly involved in the network (Brown *et al.* 2020).	Effective network engagement requires a dual approach to evaluation: internally assessing the network's effectiveness and impact on wellbeing enactment within schools and externally evaluating the overall function and effectiveness of the network itself. Inspectorate involvement in a supportive role was emphasised, helping the network achieve its goals.	**Network Evaluation**

Whole System Involvement

The study's findings strongly advocate for representation in a wellbeing network across the whole system, including all stakeholders involved in a child's life, to include: students, teachers, leaders, parents, community representatives, health sector and child welfare representatives, as well as the Inspectorate and ITEPs. This recognises that the education sector alone cannot effectively address the multifaceted wellbeing issues impacting pupils (UNESCO, 2022a). Findings acknowledge the complex, interactive systems surrounding a child, linking to Bronfenbrenner's *Bioecological Model of Human Development* (1979), referred to in chapters one and two, systems which are inseparable from the child and their academic success. Wellbeing interventions must consider the different systems that collectively shape children's experiences (O'Brien, O'Brien, and Goodwin, 2024). The findings align with guidelines from the European Commission (2024, p.5), which highlights the need to 'build strong networks integrating families, youth organisations, higher education institutions, healthcare and welfare sectors and other local stakeholders.'

The need for pupil voice in a wellbeing network was a key theme in the data. John specifically referred to seeking pupil voice on challenges in their local area and community that impact their wellbeing, what can be improved, and the impacts of technology. This research contributes to the existing literature, notably Dempsey and McCoy's (2024) work, which advocates for the voices of children in developing the *Wellbeing Framework* and co-designing wellbeing initiatives (Dempsey and McCoy, 2026). Furthermore, Minkkinen's (2013) definition of wellbeing, referenced in chapter two, emphasises children's agency and their contribution to their own wellbeing as constructive social actors in their lives. The findings in this study highlight the necessity of pupil voice and representation within a wellbeing network in a meaningful way, thereby ensuring that network activities accurately address their evolving needs. Authentic participation in such a network could empower those pupils involved to genuinely solve problems and collaborate outside the traditional classroom, fostering key competencies necessary for their present and future lives, as outlined in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2023). Niamh suggested that student councils feed into a wellbeing network, which may allow a broader range of voices and interests to be reconciled.

The findings suggest involving a teacher representative or a wellbeing postholder in a wellbeing network. Louise highlighted that including staff who may not prioritise wellbeing as a core subject or take an interest in networking allows them to engage. This in turn may increase their awareness of the overlap and bidirectional importance of wellbeing and academic achievement discussed in chapter four. Providing teachers with an opportunity to network is also emphasised by OECD (2020b) data, which found that only 44% of teachers across OECD countries have participated in collaborative forms of professional learning, including networking, which is lower than participation in more traditional courses and seminars.

The findings also highlighted a disparity in the level of involvement that pupils, parents and community representatives should have in a network. Participants suggested that these groups may not always need to be present, but could instead remain 'peripherally connected' through a filtered communication channel (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010, p. 22), becoming more directly involved when their contributions support wellbeing. Consequently, certain network actors or organisations form the core, driving the network and controlling information flow. Although rotating participants in this way can provide broader insights, it is important to consider that such rotation may destabilise the network (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026).

Twelve participants identified representatives from the health sector, particularly NEPS psychologists and mental health practitioners, as important network members. Stephen and Sharon, however, were concerned that network involvement might detract from the time available for children's assessments. Involvement of occupational therapists and speech and language therapists, clinical psychology, CAMHS and CDNT was mentioned by a smaller number of participants. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency were referenced for inclusion by two participants.

Whilst participants expressed mixed views on DoEY Inspectorate involvement due to a lack of clarity about what their role might look like, four participants felt that supportive participation could help achieve network goals and strengthen relationships with schools. In Brown *et al.'s* (2020) study, the importance of the Inspectorate as a trusted colleague who could guide the process was supported by participants' positive disposition towards network inspection.

Surprisingly, no participants commented on the optimal network size or the number of schools that should be involved. A potential concern is that networks with a large number of schools may face functioning limitations due to the challenge of reconciling too many diverse interests (Feys and Devos, 2015). However, prior research, specifically the DCU/EQI Shaped PLN, which included 152 primary and secondary schools, demonstrated a positive impact, as the schools involved focused on continuous improvement to enhance learning during the pandemic (Shevlin & Brown, 2023).

Transactional Reciprocity

Transactional reciprocity, highlighted in previous literature as mutual learning and collaboration (O'Hara *et al.*, 2020), is defined in this study as mutual collaboration, support, and social exchange among actors, describing a network in which all actors derive mutual benefit.

A common theme in this study was the need for dedicated time for dialogue with health sector representatives such as NEPS and Tusla. Orla articulated the need for a network that would provide 'support for us, and information for us and places for us to go.' Participant findings frame health professionals as knowledgeable others who could offer sporadic guidance and validation within a network. The findings of this study emphasise the importance of network benefits, not just for individual schools involved but also for network members across the system so that all members derive benefit. For instance, health professionals bring specialised expertise to schools, while teachers contribute their in-depth knowledge of children, families and school contexts. Similarly, universities could share evidence-based practices and offer professional learning opportunities, whereas schools provide local knowledge and insights. This mutually beneficial relationship between university research teams and schools was exemplified in Weemer *et al.'s* (2023) study. These partnerships can foster teacher empowerment, allowing teachers to lead change and improve practice within their schools, as highlighted in Brennan and Pennycook's (2025) study.

Achieving transactional reciprocity requires breaking down existing barriers. Tracey identified that an existing barrier is that agencies work in isolation, with siloed budgets. Sean and Tracey proposed jointly commissioned projects across agencies, providing an example of the HSE and local authorities. Sean and Fiona also emphasised the importance

of understanding the distinct skill sets and values of members, and how these can complement one another. A shared understanding that each actor perceives only part of the pupil's needs was helpful to participants in multidisciplinary teams in Bryceson and Sheridan's (2022) research. Successful collaboration is facilitated by recognising organisational cultural differences, establishing clear intersectoral communication channels, and assigning explicit responsibilities to different actors to account for the distinct values in health and education (Gray *et al.* 2022). However, establishing joint practices and aligning professional cultures between school staff and agencies takes time (Cummings *et al.*, 2007). All participants agreed that clear structural guidance from the DoEY would support the development of wellbeing networks. This will be considered further later in the chapter. Tracey stressed the importance of building early relationships between schools and external agencies to strengthen network formation.

Network Leadership and Facilitation

Participants in this study, consistent with previous research (Harris, Azorín, and Jones, 2023), favoured non-traditional and non-hierarchical approaches to network leadership. Two main options for network leadership were suggested: an initial, external facilitator or rotating, internal leadership with adequate support. These findings support the adoption of inclusive, interconnected network structures that will enhance the equity, effectiveness and sustainability of networks (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026). School-based leadership was also identified as necessary to support network participation and functioning.

a. External Network Facilitators

External facilitators can encourage leadership and challenge participants' learning (Cordingley *et al.*, 2015), as well as leverage failure to foster reflection, open dialogue, and collective problem-solving (MacGregor and Friesen, 2026).

Those who favoured an external facilitator saw this role as necessary for initial network set-up and clarifying its shared purpose. Six participants highlighted that a facilitator with network expertise is necessary to provide 'a level of consistency' across schools (Louise) and give members an idea of how networks could be set up (Niamh) and function successfully (Stephen). This aligns with Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan's (2016) model of gradual release of responsibility as network capacity develops and transitions into a self-regulated phase. It was suggested that the facilitator's responsibilities should include

allocating, planning and communicating clearly. Logistical and preparatory duties outlined in the literature include: organising the meeting location, managing schedules, sending invitations to members, and coordinating materials (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026). The findings imply that the initial network facilitator is also the de facto network leader.

Whilst participants identified that a facilitator could show members how networks are set up and function effectively, the extent of the facilitator's role was not defined. Earl and Katz (2007) identified explicit leader duties: setting and monitoring the agenda, encouraging and motivating network members to get involved, building capacity, supporting innovative thinking, and intentionally sharing leadership in the network. Findings in this study also highlighted the need for clear feedback channels to communicate progress across the wider school community. Sharon proposed including network updates on the agenda at staff meetings, while Stephen suggested sharing updates at assembly with the whole school. This communication is vital for staff understanding, engagement, co-creation of new practices and network sustainability (Brown and Flood, 2020). This raises the question of whether a facilitator's role should also ensure network insights are effectively applied in schools, particularly by staff who are not directly involved (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026).

b. Rotating Internal Leadership

As an alternative to or progression from external facilitation, rotating leadership was identified as a mechanism to leverage internal expertise. Louise suggested a ‘rotating chair’ to introduce ‘other flavours and voices’ into the network, emphasising a desire to leverage internal expertise and promote a distributed leadership model (Harris, Azorín, and Jones, 2023). It was not assumed that network leaders must be individuals already in formal positions of leadership; rather, John suggested that each school identify a lead person and rotate leadership. Distributed leadership approaches in networks can help to foster connections, facilitate the flow of knowledge across schools and build the necessary infrastructure for success (Taylor *et al.* 2022). Peter noted the need for support to build the capacity of leaders transitioning into this role. Necessary competencies for network leaders may include conflict management, decision-making and trust-building (Feys and Devos, 2015). Building capacity in this way is important for network sustainability.

c. School Leadership

Within schools, Mary, Stephen and Niamh highlighted the key role school leaders play in network functioning and impact. Leaders play a key role in ensuring that teachers actively engage in network activities, thereby making meaningful contributions to their schools (Brown *et al.*, 2024). Mary emphasised the importance of leaders allocating dedicated time for networking for staff 'to go in comfort', knowing their class would be 'looked after.' Furthermore, leaders should demonstrate a genuine commitment to network goals through modelling its values and demonstrating commitment to its goals (Niamh). This helps to cultivate a positive school culture towards networking.

A Shared Purpose

A shared commitment to measurable outcomes can support improving the effectiveness of networks (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). Given that wellbeing is a 'wicked' problem, meaning it has no single, enumerable solution (Rittel and Webber, 1973) and demands continuous re-evaluation as circumstances change (Bache, Reardon and Anand, 2016), network members will inevitably have differing priorities and methods for addressing it. The importance of wellbeing network members having a shared purpose was a consistent finding in this study, emerging from the experiences of eight participants in wellbeing networks. For other participants in this study, the need for shared network goals became clear in response to direct questioning during the interview. Some participants emphasised that a shared purpose must go beyond simply the sharing of ideas. Sean suggested moving towards 'actually looking at meaningful, tangible projects' to move things forward, and Stephen emphasised the need to have something 'to almost hang your coat on by the end of it.' Tracey highlighted that tangible projects are necessary to impact policy and affect system change. These eight participants naturally developed shared goals within their wellbeing networks, through their own practices and collaborative efforts, whereas only Peter worked within a pre-existing policy structure. This organic, bottom-up approach is vital as it can strongly influence effective enactment, network momentum and impact. This is because schools co-constructing solutions and knowledge around network needs can result in stronger learning or outcomes than what would be possible from buying into programmes (Muijs, West & Ainscow, 2010) or aspirations of local authorities (Chapman and Pino-Yancovic, 2026). Networks with shared, school-level goals in Northern Ireland succeeded in overcoming institutional

barriers and resolving contested issues through a bottom-up methodology that fostered teacher empowerment and innovation (Duffy and Gallagher, 2017).

A practical starting point, suggested by David, is to identify the similarities and differences among schools' SIPs to develop shared goals for collaboration. The SIP can provide an implementation pathway for network activity to be integrated into school policy in line with genuine school needs. David added that using networks as part of SIPs can help network members see the value of the collaboration for their school. However, a potential risk of linking network activity too closely to school self-evaluation plans is that it could become procedural, stifling the energy ‘brought from within,’ that David previously discussed as essential for meaningful action.

Trust

Trusting relationships, focused on a shared and compelling agenda, facilitate a push-and-pull dynamic that can move the network's work forward (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). Social wellbeing and relational practices were identified as foundational in a whole-school approach to wellbeing and important in networks for building trust and a positive climate, which impacts network success and sustainability. Nuala highlighted that trust builds a sense of security and safety within a network, reinforcing existing literature (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). Stephen identified that trust in a network may be more difficult for schools competing for students, but it is necessary to develop to engage in challenging conversations. Muijs and Rumyantseva (2013) found that building trust over time helped schools withstand competitive pressures and network together whilst strengthening their competitive positions. Given the difficulties highlighted earlier in the chapter, some participants experienced when accessing external support for pupils, bridging the trust gap between the education and health sectors may be necessary for successful network impact.

To establish trust, some participants emphasised the need to set clear expectations at the network's inception around professional conduct guidelines within a network 'for democracy and opinions to be aired and shared' (Louise) and confidentiality when sharing pupils' personal information (Orla). John and Tracey also noted that staff turnover and changes in external partnerships pose risks to the network's success and sustainability. A

stable composition of network members has previously been identified as essential for a trusting environment (Jesacher-Roessler *et al.,* 2026).

Resourcing

The literature and this study's findings highlight the challenging environments that teachers navigate, shaped by insufficient support and policy pressures (O'Farrell *et al.,* 2025). The most significant constraint to participating in a wellbeing network is the lack of dedicated time for networking during the school day, a constraint that echoes Prenger *et al.'s* (2019) findings. Specifically, Niamh identified the heavy curricular demands and concerns about taking time away from something that has already been timetabled, as 'the asks are becoming more and more.' This constraint is exacerbated by the high compulsory instruction time in Irish primary schools (OECD, 2025b) and external challenges such as long commute times for some staff, identified by Caoimhe. Furthermore, time allocated to professional learning is often focused primarily on curricular reform (King, Brennan, and Gorman 2024). Eve explained that if time to engage with peers meaningfully was formally valued within the education system, educators may see the value of coming together. She noted that there needs to be a shift in the common understanding that 'professional learning maximises student outcomes', as she has observed staff 'dragging' their heels over Croke Park hours.

Nuala and David expressed concern about the time to trial new knowledge, 'lead and develop' in the role and 'really affect change in wellbeing.' Hoke *et al*.'s study (2024) emphasised the importance of 'wellness councils' being afforded protected time to assess wellbeing, discuss enactment, and develop guiding policies, which foster staff accountability.

Time is also needed to provide feedback to staff not involved in the network, as highlighted earlier in the chapter. Previous research proposed establishing a PLC within the school to ensure a two-way link between the network and the school (Brennan and Pennycook, 2025). Opportunities for knowledge mobilisation are essential to help staff understand, engage with and cocreate new practices (Brown and Flood, 2020).

Caoimhe stressed, 'If the departments are serious about health and wellbeing for teachers, for school communities, time, resources and money has to be put into it.' This highlights

potential disparities between regulated networks, such as those supported by the Teaching Council Féilte Bursary Scheme and voluntary networks that may lack financial or political backing and dedicated time. Her view aligns with Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016), who state that resources are essential for sustaining a network, including access to some flexible funds.

Professional Learning

This study finds that effective implementation of a whole school wellbeing approach requires professional learning support for educators within a network. Identifying a teacher's learning needs is a crucial prerequisite in designing relevant opportunities and supporting their learning activities (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020). Given Orla's earlier point about core subjects such as English, Maths and Irish often taking priority, also highlighted in O'Brien, O'Brien and Goodwin's (2024) study, this again emphasises that support is needed to enhance staff capacity to recognise the overlap and bidirectional importance of wellbeing and academic achievement. Further, David identified the need to develop a deeper understanding of the diverse factors influencing children's wellbeing, since outward happiness does not always equate to genuine wellbeing. The focus should extend beyond the significant social issues often linked with DEIS contexts. His perspective aligns with a discrepancy in the CSL study. While children reported 'experiencing some level of anxiety' at primary school, teachers reported 'relatively low levels of emotional difficulties among the children in their classroom' (Sloan *et al.*, 2024, p.62). This mismatch suggests that children may be masking difficult emotions, highlighting the need for teachers to be equipped to understand that a smile is not a definitive indicator of positive wellbeing.

This study identified varying degrees of understanding and enactment of a whole school approach to wellbeing, including a lack of deep collective understanding identified by Louise and the need for coordination expressed by Eve, emphasising that schools require support to develop understanding and a coordinated approach. This need for a coordinated approach was emphasised by Weare and Nind (2011).

Louise also identified a lack of understanding of the interrelationships among the RSE, Stay Safe, and Wellbeing curricula, emphasising the need to connect across these areas. Fiona and Caoimhe discussed a lack of confidence in teaching sensitive RSE topics,

which mirrors the literature suggesting that teachers require increased guidance on appropriate language and boundaries for teaching wellbeing topics sensitively and inclusively at an age-appropriate level (NCCA, 2019).

Network Evaluation

Achieving network sustainability and quality outcomes requires clearly defined evaluation methodologies and standards (O'Hara *et al.,* 2020). This study highlights that effective network engagement requires a dual approach to evaluation: internally assessing the network's effectiveness and impact on wellbeing enactment within schools, and externally evaluating the network's overall function and effectiveness.

Similar to the network evaluation reports used by participants in Azorín & Muijs' (2017) study, which encouraged reflection on network goals, timetable, activities, evaluation tools, and improvement proposals, participants in this study made several suggestions to facilitate internal evaluation of the network and the enactment of wellbeing in schools. These included informal methods such as surveying members about network function and impact (Mary, Alice, Niamh and Orla), gaining qualitative feedback on network functioning (Peter, Louise, Niamh and Orla) and monitoring shared goals and evidence of goal achievement (Fiona, Tracey and Nuala). Staff and pupil wellness surveys and strategic meetings were also identified as key monitoring tools for a whole school evaluation of wellbeing in the Well Schools network (Hennessey *et al.*, 2025). Seeking feedback from network members is a necessary consideration, as Sean highlighted, 'people vote with their feet.' Sean's statement emphasises the importance of network self-evaluation methods. Louise suggested informal focus groups for constructive, solution-oriented feedback: 'If you come up with a negative, you come up with a solution.' This may provide a safe space to build trust and resolve conflict, while monitoring progress.

Eve and David advocated for the DoEY to play a role in evaluating the network itself, mirroring previous findings that, for goal-driven networks to operate, they must be open to guidance from external stakeholders who aren't directly involved in the network (Brown *et al.*, 2020). Eve's experience of grounding network discussions in classroom data and school contexts and revisiting this data at the conclusion of an agreed period allowed members to evaluate progress and make data-informed decisions aligned with their shared goals. Caoimhe also suggested using baseline data to set network goals. Eve

added that network impact and function should be considered as part of the school inspection process. This suggests a framework of 'autonomous accountability' (Shevlin and Brown, 2023, p.xi) which empowers networks to operate with full autonomy, owning their performance data, while simultaneously being accountable to the Inspectorate for the impact of their work.

Louise and Stephen echoed a common sentiment that the Inspectorate is typically perceived as involved in 'oversight and governance' (Louise), which Stephen warned 'can stifle things.' Louise emphasised the importance of inspectorate involvement in a supportive role, helping the network achieve its goals, rather than being perceived as 'there to inspect.' This perspective aligns with current research suggesting that successful inspectorate involvement necessitates dissolving traditional boundaries between schools and the Inspectorate, fostering reciprocal trust, and establishing a focus on shared responsibility (Ehren and Perryman, 2018). David pointed out that evaluation should be 'done with the department of education,' implying that DoEY should support networks in developing meaningful evaluation methodologies and standards, not leaving this task solely to teachers and leaders. In a context of trust, accountability can then function as a tool for continuous learning and improvement, rather than hierarchical control (Ehren and Perryman, 2018).

Findings indicate that the impact of network activity on wellbeing enactment is intrinsically linked to a school's context and shared network purpose. Participants found evaluating wellbeing difficult, with Nuala questioning, 'How do I know how well somebody else is?' David explained that it comes back to 'having that shared purpose or shared target…that goes up for someone to reevaluate.' Nuala emphasised the need for schools to define the 'specific part of wellbeing' they aim to improve, which is context-specific. Tracey gave an example in her DEIS context of increased attendance. In a diverse educational landscape like Ireland, evaluation standards must embrace 'intelligent accountability' (Turner, 2026). This means factoring in the unique school context, such as school and classroom characteristics (Gilleece, Surdey and Rawdon, 2023), potential barriers to learning, and socioeconomic demographics, rather than relying solely on standardised test results as the measure of success (Turner, 2026).

5.4 Key Implications of the Study

Informed by the findings of this study and the wider literature, the following implications highlight key considerations for policy, practice, and future research relating to the design and sustainability of wellbeing networks.

Implication 1: Development of Network Guidelines

All participants agreed that clear structural guidance from the DoEY would facilitate the successful establishment of wellbeing networks. Previous research has highlighted the vital role central leadership plays in providing resources and enabling conditions for effective collaboration (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). While views on the necessary level of prescription varied, it was suggested that actionable guidelines should cover several key areas:

- **Network Structure:** Guidelines on the optimal number of schools involved and the identification of key stakeholders (Mary) to include a facilitator (Peter).
- **Professional Standards:** Guidance on professional conduct (Louise) and the confidential sharing of information (Orla).
- **Member Expectations and Benefits:** Clarity on the expected contributions from network members and the benefits for the participating schools (Niamh).
- **Inception Steps:** Suggested steps for schools initiating a network, including identifying an internal wellbeing team, building relationships with local schools and clinicians, establishing common goals, and securing funding streams (Tracey).

Support for educators is necessary to help them become aware of the structural and functional characteristics of their networks (Bumble *et al.,* 2025). In this way, educators in the network are better equipped to conduct evaluations and make data-driven decisions for continuous improvement (Bumble *et al.*, 2025). However, overly prescriptive DoEY guidelines that fail to meet educators' diverse needs may risk the network's success and be perceived as a rigid, top-down directive. A valuable approach would be to pilot different network models, as Stephen suggested, to identify the key considerations for effective network functioning across contexts.

Implication 2: Support Schools in Building Networks with Key Stakeholders that influence Pupil Wellbeing

Supporting schools in building networks with key stakeholders that influence pupil wellbeing involves equipping schools with the appropriate number of professionals to operate within a multidisciplinary team. Participants indicated a multidisciplinary team should include: NEPS, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, clinical psychologists, CAMHS, CDNT and Tusla. This team should deliver consistent, coordinated services directly within the school environment, as recommended by Sean, and establish accessible pathways to external support. Supporting intersectoral collaboration aligns with UNESCO's 2022-2029 strategy to promote links among the education, child protection, health, and social protection sectors (UNESCO, 2022a). The FSES initiative, referred to in chapter two, provided a full-service holistic offering to students through engagement with health, social and psychological services on the school site and reported long-term benefits for children, families, and communities' wellbeing and their life chances (Cummings *et al.* 2007). A positive influence on student achievement was also recorded in this report.

Six participants recommended facilitation by an Oide professional learning leader who may support networks in connecting with experts, community groups and HEIs. In Duffy and Gallagher's (2017) study, coordinators supported schools in connecting with agencies and external supports.

System-level leadership is essential for clearly defining and implementing multidisciplinary team roles and responsibilities. A designated coordinator could be appointed to streamline the team's processes (Meyers *et al.,* 2025). For schools involved in the DEIS Plus scheme, this coordinating function could be incorporated into the new Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing coordinator's role, as outlined in the DEIS Plus Scheme and Implementation Plan (DoEY, 2026b).

Implication 3: Support for the Alignment of Funding across Sectors to Improve Children's Wellbeing

To effectively enhance children's wellbeing, Sean and Tracey emphasised the need to align funding across all relevant sectors, including education, health, and community.

Achieving this requires improved financial coordination to ensure that school-based wellbeing initiatives receive adequate, cross-sectoral funding (UNESCO, 2025).

Implication 4: Collaborative Development of Network Evaluation and Impact Tools

This implication suggests that the Inspectorate and network members collaborate to develop robust standards and quality indicators for evaluating the network's effectiveness, impact, and sustainability. The Inspectorate's engagement in Brown *et al.'s* (2020) study proved helpful in developing participants' self-evaluation capacities and in providing strategic leadership. The study further highlights that network accountability requires a focus on shared responsibility.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

While the study offers valuable insights into wellbeing networks, its limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

The small sample size in this study excluded several key groups whose perspectives would have provided valuable, complementary, and nuanced insights. Specifically, the study did not incorporate academics from HEIs, professional learning facilitators from Oide, NEPS psychologists or members of the Inspectorate. Furthermore, this sample did not include pupils and parents, who are the ultimate recipients of the work being examined. The focus of this research, however, was to establish exactly what teachers and leaders want and need from a network to support the enactment of wellbeing in their school context. Their current perspective on how wellbeing is understood and enacted in their context was necessary for this exploratory research. Future research could expand the scope by exploring the needs and expectations of other key network members. This is considered further in the following section.

Secondly, the relatively small number of participants limits the generalisability of the study's findings to the wider population, so the results cannot be used as an example of wellbeing networks in a particular jurisdiction. However, the results may still be transferable to contexts similar to those studied, as outlined in Chapter 3. It is important to note that achieving broad generalisability was not a primary objective of this research. It was to prioritise depth and rich insights from participants. The rationale was that imposing standardisation or seeking generalisations would have compromised the ability to capture the unique complexity of individual experiences (Rossman and Rallis, 2017).

Consequently, the research adopted a holistic approach, viewing participants not as discrete, statistically measurable variables, but as integral parts of complex social systems (Rossman and Rallis, 2017).

This study offers valuable perspectives and contextual insights into how school leaders and teachers in Ireland currently understand and enact wellbeing across diverse Irish primary school settings, their experiences of wellbeing networks and external partnerships in supporting wellbeing enactment. Crucially, their perspective identified key challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors relevant to implementing inter-school wellbeing networks. Given the relatively small sample size, caution should be exercised in applying the findings broadly across all educational contexts and in other jurisdictions.

5.6 Further Research

While this study provides important insights into wellbeing networks, further research is needed to deepen understanding of their challenges, design and sustainability.

Research Focus 1- Stakeholder Perspectives on Wellbeing Networks

As this study relied on interview data gathered from primary school leaders and teachers, future research could expand the scope by using semi-structured interviews to explore the needs and expectations of other key network members involved in pupils' lives. Specifically, examining the needs and aspirations of these additional stakeholders regarding participation in a wellbeing network would be beneficial, helping identify commonalities and diverse needs and expectations.

Additionally, it would be valuable to include secondary school educators in future research to support children's educational and wellbeing trajectories and identify wellbeing challenges faced, given evidence suggesting that the steepest declines in life satisfaction are reported among 12–14 year olds and 15–17 year-olds in Ireland since 2018 (Lunney *et al.*, 2025). Investigating secondary school educators' needs and expectations for collaborating with primary schools within a wellbeing network would offer valuable insights.

Research Focus 2- Expanding the Scope of Inquiry

To build upon the findings of this research, which relied on interviews with sixteen leaders and teachers, future studies could expand the scope of inquiry. Specifically, expanding the research to include a larger, more representative sample of Irish primary schools, encompassing National Schools, Gaelscoileanna, Special Schools, Community National Schools, and Educate Together Schools, would be beneficial. Employing a quantitative survey or a mixed-methods design in this wider context would allow for corroborating the patterns observed in this study and yield more generalisable findings.

Research Focus 3- Observing Wellbeing Networks in Practice

Given that this study relied on self-reported interview data, further research may benefit from incorporating observational methods to examine a wellbeing network in practice. Participant observation, for example, allows for rich, detailed descriptions of behaviour and observation of events that participants may be unwilling to share during an interview (Kawulich, 2005). Observing actual interactions could provide valuable insights into the practical challenges, critical design considerations, and sustainability factors, thereby furthering the understanding of how these elements support the enactment of wellbeing within participating schools.

5.7 Key Contributions to Research, Policy, and Practice

The insights gained from this study make important contributions to research, policy, and practice.

The study contributes to research exploring inter-school networks and wellbeing enactment. The design principles offered, build on previous studies, including Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan's (2016) *"Essential features of effective networks in education."*

This study has also identified challenges to wellbeing enactment in Irish primary schools, building on the findings of Higgins and Booker (2022) and Dempsey and McCoy (2024). The findings place a renewed emphasis on the need for a whole-school approach to wellbeing enactment, as identified previously by Vilaça *et al.* (2019) and Cefai, Simões, and Caravita (2021). Specifically highlighted is the importance of all staff being aware of their responsibility to enact wellbeing, understanding the overlap and bidirectional significance of wellbeing and academic achievement, and recognising the interrelationship between the RSE, Stay Safe, and Wellbeing curricula.

The findings contribute to previous research advocating for the voices of children in developing the *Wellbeing Framework* (Dempsey and McCoy, 2024) and in co-designing wellbeing initiatives (Dempsey and McCoy, 2026) by identifying the need for pupil representation in a wellbeing network.

This research builds on existing research by O'Connor and Nohilly (2024) which recommended a regular on-site health professional, shared across schools. Participants in this study highlighted the difficulties experienced in accessing wellbeing supports for pupils and the critical importance of multidisciplinary teams on school grounds to provide the necessary supports. Involvement of NEPS, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, clinical psychology, CAMHS and CDNT were suggested.

The study contributes to policy discussions relating to networks in Irish education. Although policy documents, such as the *Wellbeing Framework* (DES, 2019) and LAOS 2022 (DoE, 2022a) have promoted networks, the study challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions that schools can simply network. It addresses the gap by identifying specific design principles for sustainable wellbeing networks. These principles provide a strategic roadmap for policymakers involved in designing wellbeing networks. The study also offers insights on wellbeing enactment and wellbeing networks for the DoEY and the Economic and Social Research Institute, who, at the time of writing, are currently reviewing and assessing the *Wellbeing Framework*. This review will inform an updated policy and a corresponding implementation plan for schools from 2026-2030 (DoEY, 2026c).

Finally, the research provides practical insights for educators, with key design principles to build networks that are grounded in the experiences and voices of school educators. Given that the *Wellbeing Framework* encourages the establishment of professional networks for principals and teachers to promote wellbeing and build school capacity (DES, 2019), the design principles proffered will help realise this potential. The design principles can also support schools participating in the DEIS Plus scheme in collaborating through clusters and networks, enabling them to implement the scheme effectively (DoEY, 2026b). These principles also have potential applicability to other educational networks beyond their focus on wellbeing enactment.

5.8 Concluding Remarks

This study commenced on the premise that pupil wellbeing is an ‘international policy priority in schools’ (Lisec and Gillett-Swan, 2026, p.1), given the fundamental changes and challenges in society impacting pupils' wellbeing. Given the concept's multifaceted and multi-dimensional nature, a systemic approach is required, considering the multiple layers of influence on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Educational networks were explored as a mechanism to support wellbeing enactment, specifically examining the challenges, design considerations, and sustainability factors from the perspectives of primary school educators.

Ultimately, the research supports the view that networks, when deliberately designed with input from those involved in and affected by the network's activities, can contribute to the enactment of wellbeing in primary schools. Networks have the capacity to shape how wellbeing is understood, at the individual and whole-school level, offering a structure to support and develop enactment, moving teachers from individualised recipients of policy to collectively engaging in creative, entrepreneurial enactment and collective problem solving.

Finally, undertaking this doctoral journey has been both an honour and a privilege, marking a significant milestone in the researcher's academic and professional life. The opportunity to delve deeply into wellbeing enactment and educational networks, as well as to listen and understand the perspectives of teachers and school leaders, has been deeply insightful and gratifying. This experience has enabled consistent engagement with a community of scholarly practitioners, for which the researcher is very grateful. The process has strengthened the researcher's analytical and critical thinking skills, aiding in the dissection of complex concepts and the evaluation of diverse perspectives. Furthermore, it has served as a powerful lens through which to examine and better understand the researcher's professional practice as a professional learning leader and teacher, enriching the desire to foster positive change within educational settings.

REFERENCES

Ames, H., Glenton, C. and Lewin, S. (2019) 'Purposive sampling in a qualitative evidence synthesis: a worked example from a synthesis on parental perceptions of vaccination communication', *BMC medical research methodology*, 19(1), pp. 26–9. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0665-4.

Armstrong, P. (2015) *Effective school partnerships and collaboration for school improvement: a review of the evidence.* London. Department for Education. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/467855/DFE-RR466_-_School_improvement_effective_school_partnerships.pdf (Accessed: 22/03/2025).

Atkinson, M., Springate, I., Johnson, F. and Halsey, K. (2007) *Inter-School Collaboration: A Literature Review*, *National Foundation for Educational Research*. National Foundation for Educational Research. Available at: https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/nozfozq1/inter_school_collaboration_a_literature_review.pdf.

Azorín, C.M. and Muijs, D. (2017) 'Networks and collaboration in Spanish education policy', *Educational Research (Windsor)*, 59(3), pp. 273–296. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2017.1341817.

Azorín, C. (2020) 'Leading Networks', *School Leadership & Management,* 40 (2-3), pp. 105-110. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2020.1745396.

Azorín Abellán, C. M. (2021) 'Networking in Spanish schools: Lights and shadows', *Revista Complutense de Educación*, *32*(4), pp. 537–546. https://doi.org/10.5209/rced.70768.

Bache, I., Reardon, L. and Anand, P. (2016) 'Wellbeing as a Wicked Problem: Navigating the Arguments for the Role of Government', *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 17(3), pp. 893–912. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-015-9623-y.

Ball, S.J. Maguire, M. and Braun, A. (2012) *How schools do policy : policy enactments in secondary schools*. 1st ed. London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203153185.

Barrero-Fernández, B., Mula-Falcón, J. and Domingo, J. (2023) 'Educational constellations: a systematic review of macro-networks in education', *International Journal of Educational Management*, 37(1), pp. 259–277. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-09-2022-0339.

Bartelink, N., Bessems., K. and Prevo, L. (2020) S*HE monitoring report 2020: Overall report of the SHE member countries.* Denmark: Schools for Health in Europe Network Foundation. Available at: https://www.schoolsforhealth.org/sites/default/files/editor/mapping/monitor-report-overall-2020.pdf (Accessed: 14/01/25).

Bartelink, N., Van Assema, P., Vennegoor, G. and Bessems, K. (2024) 'Implementation of the Health Promoting School Approach in Europe: A Cross-Sectional Study Among National Representatives', *The Journal of School Health*, 94(10), pp. 975–984. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13499.

Bautista, T.G., Roman, G., Khan, M., Lee, M., Sahbaz, S., Duthely, L.M., Knippenberg, A., Macias-Burgos, M.A., Davidson, A., Scaramutti, C., Gabrilove, J., Pusek, S., Mehta, D. and Bredella, M.A. (2023) 'What is well-being? A scoping review of the conceptual and operational definitions of occupational well-being', *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science*, 7(1). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/cts.2023.648.

Bell, G. and Potts, N. (2025) '*How schools are using innovative ways to support student wellbeing*.' Department for Education Teaching Blog, 16 May. Available at: https://teaching.blog.gov.uk/2025/05/16/innovative-ways-to-support-student-wellbeing/ (Accessed: 03/04/2026).

Bell, L. and Stevenson, H. (2015) 'Towards an analysis of the policies that shape public education: Setting the context for school leadership', *Management in Education*, 29(4), pp. 146–150. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020614555593.

Bessems, K., Bartelink N., and Prevo, L (2020) *SHE monitoring report 2020: Country-specific results of Ireland*. Denmark: Schools for Health in Europe Network Foundation. Available at:https://www.schoolsforhealth.org/sites/default/files/editor/mapping/ireland-monitoring-2020.pdf (Accessed: 15/01/2025).

Boeskens, L., Nusche, D. and Yurita, M. (2020) *'Policies to support teachers' continuing professional learning: A conceptual framework and mapping of OECD data',* OECD Education Working Papers, (235) Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.iden/247b7c4d-en.

Botez, N. (2018) 'From Erasmus to Erasmus Plus, 30 years in Europe, 20 years in Romania', *Economy Transdisciplinarity Cognition Journal*, 21(1), pp. 192–196.

Bourke, A., Irwin, J., McCabe, U. and Murphy, F. (2025) 'Exploring well-being and ill-being in education: disciplinary insights and curriculum perspectives', *Irish Educational Studies*, 45(1), pp. 1–17. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2025.2519145.

Bourke, R. (2021) *How do school networks operate to support DEIS schools? A case study analysis of two Transforming Education through Dialogue (TED) Project facilitated school networks*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Mary Immaculate College University of Limerick. Available at: https://dspace.mic.ul.ie/mic7/server/api/core/bitstreams/7bc2de3a-2139-4744-b404-5a56a12288b0/content (Accessed: 01/02/2025).

Bourke, R. (2023) 'Responding to complexity in disadvantaged school contexts: the role of school networks in building social capital', *Irish Educational Studies*, 42(4), pp. 1043–1064. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2023.2258499.

Bradfield, K.Z. and Exley, B. (2020) 'Teachers' accounts of their curriculum use: external contextual influences during times of curriculum reform', *Curriculum journal (London, England)*, 31(4), pp. 757–774. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.56.

Braun, A., Ball, S.J., Maguire, M. and Hoskins, K. (2011) 'Taking context seriously: Towards explaining policy enactments in the secondary school', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(4), pp. 585–596. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2011.601555.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2014) 'What can 'thematic analysis' offer health and wellbeing researchers?', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 9(1), pp. 26152–2. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v9.26152.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2019) 'Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), pp. 589–597. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) "One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?," *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), pp. 328–352. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide.* London: Sage.

Brennan, A. and Pennycook, C. (2025) 'Fostering teacher leadership for inclusion: the role of school-university partnerships and professional learning communities', *School Leadership & Management*, 45(5), pp. 446–466. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2025.2587117.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Brown, C. (2019) 'Exploring the current context for professional learning networks, the conditions for their success, and research needs moving forwards', *Emerald Open Research*, 1(3), pp.1-23. Available at: https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1108/EOR-03-2023-0001.

Brown, C. and Flood, J. (2020) 'The three roles of school leaders in maximizing the impact of Professional Learning Networks: A case study from England', *International Journal of Educational Research*, 99, pp.1-12. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2019.101516.

Brown, M., McNamara, G. and O'Hara, J. (2015) *'School Inspection in a Polycentric Context: The Case of Northern Ireland.'* Dublin: (EQI) Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection. Available at: https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/education-2011---2016/legislation/shared-education-bill/dublin-city-university.pdf (Accessed: 10/12/2024)

Brown, M., McNamara, G., O'Hara, J. and Shevlin, P. (2020) 'Polycentric inspection: A catalyst for sparking positive interactions in educational networks', *Evaluation*, 26(1), pp. 76-97. Available at: https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/1356389019895031.

Brown, R., Godwin, J., Edwards, A., Burdon, M. and Moore, G. (2023) 'A qualitative exploration of stakeholder perspectives on the implementation of a whole school approach to mental health and emotional well-being in Wales', *Health Education Research*, 38(3), pp. 241–253. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyad002.

Brown, C., Luzmore, R., O'Donovan, R., Ji, G. and Patnaik, S. (2024) 'How educational leaders can maximise the social capital benefits of inter-school networks: findings from a systematic review', *International Journal of Educational Management*, 38(1), pp. 213–264. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-09-2023-0447.

Bryceson, N. and Sheridan, L. (2022) 'The whole elephant: 'What works best' consultation practices of learning support teams in primary schools', *Australian Journal*

of Learning Difficulties, 27(2), pp. 201–221. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19404158.2022.2085755.

Buick, N. (2021) *High Level Independent Review of the Department of Education's Current Child Protection Policies and Processes.* Dublin: Department of Education.

Bumble, J.L., Raley, S.K., Biggs, E.E., Sanderson, K.A., Dean, E.E. and Shogren, K.A. (2025) 'The Importance of Network Intentionality: Examining Predictors of Interagency Collaboration for Secondary Special Educators', *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 48(3), pp. 212–226. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/21651434241261316.

Burns, T. and Gottschalk, F. (2020), *Education in the Digital Age: Healthy and Happy Children*, Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/1209166a-en.

Byrne, D. (2022) 'A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis', *Quality & Quantity*, 56(3), pp. 1391–1412. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y.

Cahill, K. and O'Sullivan, D. (2022) 'Making a difference in educational inequality: reflections from research and practice', Irish Educational Studies, 41(3), pp. 473–485. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2022.2085763.

Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D. and Walker, K. (2020) 'Purposive sampling: complex or simple? Research case examples', *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 25(8), pp. 652–661. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987120927206.

Cefai, C., Simões, C. and Caravita, S. (2021) *'A systemic, whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing in schools in the EU'.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/200445c0-227d-11ec-bd8e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en (Accessed: 01/01/2025).

Centre for School Leadership (2021) *Learning to Be a School Leader in Ireland*. Available at: https://oide.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Learning-to-be-a-School-Leader-in-Ireland-Downloadable-Publication-1.pdf

Chapman, C. (2019a) 'From Hierarchies to Networks: Possibilities and Pitfalls for Educational Reform of the Middle Tier', *Journal of Educational Administration*, 57(5), pp. 554–570. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-12-2018-0222

Chapman, C. (2019b) *Making Sense of Reform: Where Next for Scottish Education?* Manchester, UK. Available at: https://policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/making-sense-of-education-reform-where-next-for-scottish-education/ (Accessed: 01/02/24).

Chapman, C. and Hadfield, M. (2010) 'Realising the potential of school-based networks', *Educational Research*, 52(3), pp. 309–323. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2010.504066.

Chapman, C. and Muijs, D. (2014) 'Does school-to-school collaboration promote school improvement? A study of the impact of school federations on student outcomes', *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 25(3), pp. 351–393. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2013.840319.

Chapman, C. and Pino-Yancovic, M. (2026) 'Educational networks as catalysts for cultural change: a tale of two systems', *Journal of Educational Change*, 27(1), pp. 1–28. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-025-09540-5.

Chapman, C. and Sammons, P. (2013) *School Self-Evaluation for School Improvement: What Works and Why?* Berkshire: CfBT Education Trust. Available at: https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED546801. (Accessed: 17/3/25)..

Children First Act 2015. (No. 36 of 2015). Dublin: Stationery Office.

Cho, E. and F. Yu (2020), 'A review of measurement tools for child wellbeing', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 119, pp. 1-26. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105576.

Clark, S., Porath, S., Thiele, J., and Jobe M. (2020) *Action Research.* Kansas: New Prairie Press.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2007) *Research Methods in Education*. New York: Routledge.

Community National Schools (2025) *Who We Are.* Available at: https://cns.ie/who-we-are/ (Accessed: 14/10/2025).

Constantinides, M. and Eleftheriadou, S. (2023) 'The Role of Leadership in Communities of Learning Kāhui Ako: A Systematic Literature Review', *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 58(2), pp. 341–359. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-023-00295-2.

Cooper, C. and Lhussier, M. (2026) 'Adolescent health: from individual risk behaviours to wellbeing ecosystems: learning from the paradigm shift', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. London: Routledge, pp. 359–373. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2025.2449844.

Cordingley, P., Higgins, S., Greany, T., Buckler, N., Coles-Jordan, D., Crisp, B., Saunders, L., Coe, R. (2015) *Developing Great Teaching: Lessons from the international reviews into effective professional development.* London: Teacher Development Trust. Available at: https://tdtrust.org/research/developing-great-teaching/?utm_source=adwords&utm_term=&utm_campaign=&utm_medium=ppc&hsa_src=x&hsa_ad=&hsa_acc=8691751010&hsa_grp=&hsa_kw=&hsa_tgt=&hsa_net=adwords&hsa_ver=3&hsa_mt=&hsa_cam=22519381656&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=22519383513&gclid=CjwKCAjwkbzEBhAVEiwA4V-yqpfTZA0FaUJw8rXnN3j_gmBPpkBDkKqpyeToxpMqUyese3Vd9uW7mRoC7sQQAvD_BwE (Accessed: 03/08/2025).

Creswell, J.W. (2003) *Research Design. Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Design.* 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J.W. (2007) *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design : Choosing Among Five Approaches.* 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Creswell, J.W. (2012) *Educational research: planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research.* 4th ed. International ed. Boston, Mass: Pearson.

Creswell, J.W. (2018) *Research Design*. 5th ed. London: Sage Publications.

Crotty, M.J. (1998) *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. 1st edn. London: SAGE Publications, Limited.

Cummings, C., Dyson, A., Muijs, D., Papps, I., Pearson, D., Raffo, C., Tiplady, L., Todd, L and Crowther, D. (2007) '*Evaluation of the Full Service Extended Schools initiative: Final report'* (Research Rep. No. RR852). Tecis Ltd. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267221180_Evaluation_of_the_Full_Service_Extended_Schools_Initiative_Final_Report (Accessed: 11/03/2025).

Cunnane, T., Gorman, A. and Furlong, C. (2025) 'An exploration of the communicative, relational, and dialogic practices of middle leaders for teacher professional learning in four Irish primary schools', *Professional Development in Education*, pp. 1–17. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2025.2577210.

Curren, R., Boniwell, I., Ryan, R. M., Oades, L., Brighouse, H., Unterhalter, E., Kristjánsson, K., de Ruyter, D., Macleod, C., Morris, I. and White, M (2024). Finding consensus on well-being in education. *Theory and Research in Education.* 22(2), pp. 117-157. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/14778785241259852

Daly, A. and Stoll, L. (2018) 'Looking back and moving forward: where to next for networks of learning?' In Brown, C. and Poortman, C. (eds). *Networks for Learning: effective collaboration for teacher, school and system improvement*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-9.

Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., Gardner, M. (2017) *Effective Teacher Professional Development.* Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

Darmody, M. and Smyth, E. (2011) *Job Satisfaction and Occupational Stress among Primary School Teachers and School Principals in Ireland*. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. Available at: https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/assets/uploads/2023/08/job-satisfaction-and-occupational-stress-among-primary-school-teachers-and-school-principals-in-ireland.pdf (Accessed: 20/04/2026).

Darmody, M. and Smyth, E. (2016) 'Primary school principals' job satisfaction and occupational stress', *International Journal of Educational Management*, 30(1), pp. 115–128. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-12-2014-0162.

De Lima, J.Á. (2010) 'Thinking more deeply about networks in education', *Journal of Educational Change*, 11(1), pp. 1–21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-008-9099-1.

Demir, E.K. (2021) 'The role of social capital for teacher professional learning and student achievement: A systematic literature review', *Educational research review*, 33. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2021.100391.

Dempsey, C., Farrell, E. and 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. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2025.101489.

Dempsey, C. and McCoy, S. (2024) *Qualitative Assessment of the Irish 2018 Wellbeing Framework in Education*. Working Paper No. 793. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/WP793_2.pdf. (Accessed: 09/04/2026).

Dempsey, C. and McCoy, S. (2026) *Supporting student wellbeing in school contexts: A narrative review*. ESRI Research Series, No. 223. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. Available at: https://www.e\sri.ie/publications/supporting-student-wellbeing-in-school-contexts-a-narrative-review (Accessed: 12/02/2026).

Denee, R. (2024). ‘The network professional learning community approach: an effective model for individual and group learning’, *Teacher Development*, *28*(3), pp. 330–346. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2024.2307588

Denscombe, M. (2017) *The Good Research Guide: for small-scale social research projects. 7*th ed. Maidenhead, Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Education.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014) *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020.* Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/23796/961bbf5d975f4c88adc01a6fc5b4a7c4.pdf (Accessed: 09/11/2024).

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2017) *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*. Dublin: Government Publications. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/children-first-national-guidelines-for-the-protection-and-welfare-of-children-2017/ (Accessed: 11/04/2026).

Department of Children, Disability and Equality (2019) *Growing up in Ireland.* Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/organisation-information/growing-up-in-ireland/ (Accessed: 09/04/2026).

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2022) *2021 Update: An Indicator Set for Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children and young people 2014–2020*. Dublin: Government Publications. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/better-outcomes-brighter-future-indicator-set-report-2022.pdf. (Accessed: 05/05/2026).

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2023) *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*. Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at:

https://www.cypsc.ie/_fileupload/Documents/homepage/young-ireland-2023-2028.pdf. (Accessed: 05/05/2026).

Department of Education and Science (2007) *Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support. Guidelines for Teachers.* Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/special-educational-needs-a-continuum-of-support-guidelines-for-teachers-primary-schoo.pdf (Accessed: 16/02/2026).

Department of Education (DoE) (2018) *Schools funded to work together on Experimental Projects, as Minister Bruton rewards Excellence and Innovation.* Dublin. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/273a4b-schools-funded-to-work-together-on-experimental-projects-as-minister/?referrer=http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2018-press-releases/PR2018-04-02.html (Accessed:06/10/24).

Department of Education (DoE) (2021) *Action Plan to Support the Growth Phase of Cosán: the National Framework for Teachers' Learning*. Dublin. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/service/25737e-professional-development/#the-teaching-council (Accessed on: 14/09/24).

Department of Education (DoE) (2022a) *Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools.* Dublin. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b1bb3-looking-at-our-school-2022/ (Accessed on: 14/09/24).

Department of Education (DoE) (2022b) *School Self-Evaluation: Next Steps September 2022 – June 2026.* Dublin. Circular Letter 0056/2022. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/e0383-school-self-evaluation-next-steps-september-2022-june-2026/www.gov.ie) (Accessed: 14/04/2025).

Department of Education (DoE) (2022c) *Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying*. Dublin. The Stationary Office. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/52aaf-cinealtas-action-plan-on-bullying/#bi-cinealta-procedures-to-prevent-and-address-bullying-behaviour-for-primary-and-post-primary-schools (Accessed: 16/12/2024).

Department of Education (DoE) (2023a) C*ineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying Implementation Plan 2023-2027.* Dublin. The Stationary Office. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publications/?q=Cine%C3%A1ltas%3A+Action+Plan+on+Bullying+Implementation+Plan&sort_by=relevancy&type=general_publications#search_result_label_id (Accessed: 16/12/2024).

Department of Education (DoE) (2023b) *Department of Education Counselling in Primary Schools Pilot (CPSP) 20232025 Guidelines for Schools.* Dublin. The Stationary Office. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/baa33-further-information-on-strand-1-of-the-counselling-in-primary-schools-pilot/ (Accessed: 17/01/2025).

Department of Education (DoE) (2024a) *Bí Cineálta Procedures to Prevent and Address Bullying Behaviour for Primary and Post-Primary Schools.* Dublin. The Stationary Office. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/bullying-information-for-parents-and-students/ (Accessed: 16/12/2024).

Department of Education (DoE) (2024c) *Minister Foley announces details of grant scheme for schools in Strand Two of the Counselling in Primary Schools pilot.* Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/e7c79-minister-foley-announces-details-of-grant-scheme-for-schools-in-strand-two-of-the-counselling-in-primary-schools-pilot/ (Accessed: 17/01/2024).

Department of Education (DoE) (2025a) *Initial teacher education and professional development section.* Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/initial-teacher-education-and-professional-development-section/#what-we-do (Accessed: 03/08/2025).

Department of Education (DoE) (2025b) *Directory of Wellbeing Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) Primary Schools 2024/2025.* Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/aca1d-wellbeing-information-for-primary-schools/#teacher-professional-learning-directory (Accessed: 06/03/2025).

Department of Education (DoE) (2026) *Supports for the redeveloped Primary Curriculum: Grants to primary schools for the purchase of resources and materials to support the implementation of the Wellbeing Curriculum in the redeveloped primary curriculum*. Dublin: Department of Education.

Department of Education and Skills (2011) *Circular Number 0008/2011. Circular to the Management Authorities, Principal Teachers and Teachers of Primary Schools.* Dublin. Available at: https://circulars.gov.ie/pdf/circular/education/2011/08.pdf (Accessed on:19/02/2026).

Department of Education and Skills (2013) *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/anti-bullying-procedures-for-primary-and-post-primary-schools.pdf (Accessed on: 11/04/2026).

Department of Education and Skills (2015) *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/3249/framework-for-junior-cycle-2015-en.pdf.

Department of Education and Skills (2016) *Looking at Our School 2016, A Quality Framework for Primary Schools*. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/looking-at-our-school-2016-a-quality-framework-for-primary-schools.pdf (Accessed: 16/04/2026).

Department of Education and Skills (2017) *Action Plan for Education 2017*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/action-plan-for-education-2017.pdf

Department of Education and Skills (2017) *DEIS Plan 2017: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools.* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/deis-plan-2017/ (Accessed: 16/04/2026).

Department of Education and Skills (2018) *School Leadership in Ireland and the Centre for School Leadership: Research and Evaluation.* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/school-leadership-in-ireland-and-the-centre-for-school-leadership-research-and-evaluat.pdf (Accessed: 16/04/2026).

Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2019) *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023.* Dublin. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/24725/07cc07626f6a426eb6eab4c523fb2ee2.pdf (Accessed: 14/09/2024).

Department of Education and Skills, Department of Health, Health Services Executive and National Educational Psychological Service (2015) *Well-Being in Primary Schools; Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion.* Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/25111/35c956d4d15a41e4a82ccd36ce37db4b.pdf (Accessed: 10/11/2024).

Department of Education and Youth (2025a) *Circular Number 0067/2025. Circular to the Boards of Management and Principal Teachers, Teaching Staff of Primary Schools and Special Schools and CEOs of ETBs.* Dublin. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/circulars/primary-curriculum-for-primary-and-special-schools/ (Accessed: 12/04/2026).

Department of Education and Youth (2025b) *Child Protection Procedures for Schools 2025*. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/policy-information/child-protection-procedures-in-schools/ (Accessed: 11/04/2026).

Department of Education and Youth (2025c) *A Guide to Inspection in Primary Schools and Special Schools*. Dublin: Department of Education,.Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/09fe3ad4/A_Guide_to_Inspection_in_Primary_Schools_and_Special_Schools.pdf (Accessed: 01/09/2025).

Department of Education and Youth (2026a) *DEIS Strategy to 2035: Ten-Year Strategy to Address Educational Disadvantage*. Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at:

https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/policy-information/deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/. Accessed: 12/04/2026.

Department of Education and Youth (2026b) *DEIS Strategy- Implementation Plan 2026-2028. A three year implementation plan to address educational disadvantage.* Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/bb37ab95/DEIS_Plus_Scheme_and_Implementation_Plan.pdf (Accessed: 02/05/2026).

Department of Education and Youth (2026c) *Review of the Department of Education & Youth's Wellbeing Policy Statement & Framework for Practice*. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/review-of-the-department-of-education-youths-wellbeing-policy-statement-framework-for-practice/. Accessed (02/05/2026).

Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) (2015) *Sharing Works: A Policy for Shared Education.* Available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/sharing-works-policy-shared-education (Accessed: 20/03/2025).

Department of Health (2013) *Healthy Ireland: A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing 2013–2025.* Dublin: Department of Health. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/healthy-ireland-framework.pdf (Accessed: 09/04/2026).

Department of Health (2025) *Review of Healthy Ireland Framework (2013 – 2025) & Strategic Action Plan (2021 -2025) Summary Report*. Dublin: Department of Health. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/dc71dc2c/Healthy_Ireland_Framework_Review_20132025_Summary_Report_2025_vf.pdf (Accessed: 05/05/2026).

Department of Health and Children (2000) *The National Children's Strategy: Our children: their lives: executive summary*. Dublin: The Stationery Office. Available at: https://www.lenus.ie/server/api/core/bitstreams/2576de77-3671-4340-84ee-bc4871de091e/content (Accessed: 09/04/2026).

Devine, D., Ioannidou, O., Sloan, S., Martinez-Sainz, G., Symonds, J., Bohnert, M., Greaves, M., Moore, B., Smith, K., Crean, M., Davies, A., Jones, M., Barrow, N., Crummy, A., Gleasure, S., Samonova, E., Smith, A., Stynes, H. and Donegan, A. (2024) *Children's School Lives: Equalities in Children's School Lives – The Impact of Social Background (2019 to 2023)*, Report No. 8A. Dublin: UCD School of Education. Available at: https://cslstudy.ie/downloads/CSL_8a_Social_Class.pdf (Accessed: 11/04/2026).

Díaz-Gibson, J., Civís-Zaragoza, M. and Guàrdia-Olmos, J. (2014) 'Strengthening education through collaborative networks: leading the cultural change', *School leadership & Management*, 34(2), pp. 179–200. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2013.856296.

Díaz-Gibson, J., Zaragoza, M., Daly, A., Mayayo, J., Romaní, J. (2017) 'Networked leadership in Educational Collaborative Networks', *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, 45(6), pp. 1040–1059. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216628532.

Dublin City University (DCU) (2025) *Changemaker Schools Network in Numbers.* Available at: https://www.dcu.ie/dcu-changemaker-schools-network/changemaker-schools-network-numbers (Accessed: 04/05/2026).

Duffy, G. and Gallagher, T. (2017) 'Shared Education in contested spaces: How collaborative networks improve communities and schools', *Journal of Educational Change*, 18(1), pp. 107–134. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-016-9279-3.

Durkheim, E. (1972) *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dyson, A., Kerr, K., Raffo, C. and Wigelsworth, M. (2012) *Developing Children's Zones for England. Save the Children.* London: Save the Children.

Earl, L. and Katz, S. (2007) 'Leadership in networked learning communities: defining the terrain', *School Leadership & Management*, 27(3), pp. 239–258. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701379503.

Ehren, M., Janssens, F., Brown, M., McNamara, G., O'Hara, J. and Shevlin, P. (2017) 'Evaluation and decentralised governance: Examples of inspections in polycentric education systems', *Journal of Educational Change*, 18(3), pp. 365–383. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-017-9297-9.

Ehren, M. and Perryman, J. (2018) 'Accountability of school networks: Who is accountable to whom and for what?', *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, 46(6), pp. 942–959. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217717272.

Eldh, A.C., Årestedt, L. and Berterö, C. (2020) 'Quotations in Qualitative Studies: Reflections on Constituents, Custom, and Purpose', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, pp. 1-6. Available at: Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920969268.

Emerson, E. and Hatton, C. (2007) 'The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents with Learning Disabilities in Britain', *Advances in Mental Health and Intellectual Disabilities*, 1(3), pp. 62–63. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/17530180200700033.

Engward, H., Goldspink, S., Iancu, M., Kersey, T. and Wood, A. (2022) 'Togetherness in Separation: Practical Considerations for Doing Remote Qualitative Interviews Ethically', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211073212.

Enoch, J., Subramanian, A. and Willig, C. (2023) '"If I don't like it, I'll just pop the phone down!": Reflecting on participant and researcher experiences of telephone interviews conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic', *SSM. Qualitative research in health*, 4, pp. 100351-. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2023.100351.

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) (2026) *Multi-disciplinary team*. Available at: https://www.european-agency.org/resources/glossary/multi-disciplinary-team#:~:text=A%20multi%2Ddisciplinary%20team%20is,collaboratively%20within%20inclusive%20education%20settings. (Accessed: 18/02/2026).

European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2018) *Networks for learning and development across school education.* Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/school-governance5-theme-networks.pdf (Accessed: 13/04/2026).

European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2024) *Wellbeing and mental health at school Guidelines for school leaders, teachers and educators.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Noticias_documentos/wellbeing_and_mental_health_at_school-guidelines_for_school_leaders_teachers_and_educators.pdf (Accessed: 13/04/2026).

Farghaly, A. (2018) 'Comparing and Contrasting Quantitative and Qualitative Research Approaches in Education: The Peculiar Situation of Medical Education', *Education in Medicine Journal*, 10(1). Available at: https://doi.org/10.21315/eimj2018.10.1.2

Farrell, E. (2020) 'Researching Lived Experience in Education: Misunderstood or Missed Opportunity?', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920942066.

Farrell, E., Symonds J, Devine D, Sloan S, Crean M, Cahoon A, Hogan J (2024), 'What does well-being mean to me? Conceptualisations of well-being in Irish primary schooling', *Health Education*, 124(1-2), pp. 49–62. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/HE-03-2024-0023.

Farrelly, G., O'Higgins Norman, J. and O'Leary, M. (2017) 'Custodians of silences? School principal perspectives on the incidence and nature of homophobic bullying in

primary schools in Ireland', *Irish Educational Studies*, 36(2), pp. 151–167. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2016.1246258.

Feys, E. and Devos, G. (2015) 'What comes out of incentivized collaboration: A qualitative analysis of eight Flemish school networks', *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, 43(5), pp. 738–754. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214535738.

Finning, K., White, J., Toth, K., Golden, S., Melendez-Torres, G.J. and Ford, T. (2022) 'Longer-term effects of school-based counselling in UK primary schools', *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 31(10), pp. 1591–1599. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01802-w.

Foley, B., Stringer, G. and Wheeler, I.S. (2025) 'Are the Kids All Right? What students are saying about their social and emotional health', *Independent School*, 84(2), pp. 49–53. Available at: https://research-ebsco-com.dcu.idm.oclc.org/linkprocessor/plink?id=d1f07fc2-1d77-3940-a807-f6dbb53f2c39

George, M.S. Gaitonde, R., Davey, R., Mohanty, I. and Upton, P. (2023) 'Engaging participants with research findings: A rights-informed approach', *Health Expectations: An International Journal of Public Participation in Health Care and Health Policy*, 26(2), pp. 765–773. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13701.

Gibbs, G. R (2007) *Analyzing Qualitative Data, Qualitative Research Kit.* London, England: SAGE Publications, Ltd

Gilleece, L., Rawdon, C. and Surdey, J. (2023) *An evaluation framework for teachers' professional learning in Ireland.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

Gorman, A. and O'Higgins Norman, J. (2024) 'Enacting anti-bullying procedures in dynamic school environments: insights from primary school principals in the Republic of Ireland', *Irish Educational Studies*, pp. 1–21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2024.2424250.

Goswami, H., Fox, C. and Pollock, G. (2016) 'The Current Evidence Base and Future Needs in Improving Children's Well-Being Across Europe: Is There a Case for a Comparative Longitudinal Survey?', *Child Indicators Research*, 9(2), pp. 371–388. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-015-9323-5.

Government of Ireland. *Education Act*. 1998 Dublin: Stationery Office.

Government of Ireland (1999) *Primary School Curriculum.* Dublin: The Stationary Office. Available at: https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/c4a88a62-7818-4bb2-bb18-4c4ad37bc255/PSEC_Introduction-to-Primary-Curriculum_Eng.pdf. (Accessed: 15/09/2024).

Government of Ireland (2000) *National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives.* Dublin: The Stationery Office. Available at: https://www.cypsc.ie/_fileupload/Documents/Resources/National%20Children%27s%20Strategy%20-%20our%20children,%20their%20lives.pdf. (Accessed: 09/11/2024).

Government of Ireland (2019) *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019–2028.* Dublin: The Stationery Office. Available at: www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/31184/62acc54f4bdf4405b74e53a4afb8e71b.pdf#page=nullAccessed: (10/11/2024).

Government of Ireland (2024) *Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 20242033: Every Learner from Birth to Young Adulthood.* Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/literacy-numeracy-and-digital-literacy-strategy/ (Accessed: 16/04/2026).

Government of Northern Ireland. *Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland).* 2016. Belfast: The Stationery Office.

Govorova, E., Benítez, I. and Muñiz, J. (2020) 'Predicting Student Well-Being: Network Analysis Based on PISA 2018', *International Journal of Environmental*

Research and Public Health, 17(11), pp. 1-18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17114014.

Graham, A., Powell, M.A. and Truscott, J. (2016) 'Facilitating student well-being: relationships do matter', *Educational Research (Windsor)*, 58(4), pp. 366–383. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2016.1228841.

Gray, N., Desmond, N., Ganapathee, D., Beadle, S. (2022) 'Breaking down silos between health and education to improve adolescent wellbeing', *BMJ (Online)*, 379, pp. 1-4. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2021-067683.

Gray, J. and Hackling, M. (2009) 'Wellbeing and retention: a senior secondary student perspective', *Australian Educational Researcher*, 36(2), pp. 119–145. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03216902.

Grissom, J.A., Egalite, A.J. and Lindsay, C.A. (2021) *How principals affect students and schools. A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research.* New York: Wallace Foundation. Available at: https://wallacefoundation.org/report/how-principals-affect-students-and-schools-systematic-synthesis-two-decades-research. (Accessed: 04/03/2025).

Grootaert, C., Narayan, D., Nyhan Jones, V. and Woolcock, M. (2004) *Measuring Social Capital: An Integrated Questionnaire*. Washington, D.C: World Bank. Available at: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/515261468740392133/pdf/281100PAPER0Measuring0social0capital.pdf (Accessed: 23/04/2026).

Hadar, L.L. and Brody, D.L. (2021) 'Interrogating the role of facilitators in promoting learning in teacher educators' professional communities', *Professional Development in Education*, 47(4), pp. 599–612. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1839782.

Harford, J., Bruton, R. and Fleming, B. (2026) 'Perspectives on education policy-making in Ireland, 1990–2025', *Irish Educational Studies*, pp. 1–19. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2026.2614088.

Hargreaves, A. (2025) ‘The dark side of networks: and the implications for school leadership’, *School Leadership & Management*, 45(1), pp. 1–6. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2025.2454157.

Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2012) *Professional capital : transforming teaching in every school.* New York; Teachers College Press

Hargreaves, E., Quick, L. and Buchanan, D. (2025) ‘Shifting the focus: seven recommendations from children highlighting conditions that enhance intentional engagement in curriculum-work and participatory wellbeing’, *Education, 3-13*, 53(7), pp. 1071–1084. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2025.2529873.

Harris, A., Azorín, C. and Jones, M. (2023) ‘Network leadership: a new educational imperative?’, *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 26(5), pp. 919–935. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.1919320.

Harris, A. and Jones, M. (2010) ‘Professional learning communities and system improvement’, *Improving Schools*, 13(2), pp. 172–181. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480210376487.

Head, B.W. and Alford, J. (2015) ‘Wicked Problems: Implications for Public Policy and Management’, *Administration & Society*, 47(6), pp. 711–739. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399713481601.

Hennessey, A., MacQuarrie, K, Bagnall, C and Squires, G. (2023) ‘Embedding a whole school culture for supporting teacher and pupil wellbeing: A Well Schools case study example’, *The Psychology of Education Review (Online)*, 47(2), pp. 22–28. Available at: https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsper.2023.47.2.22.

Hennessey, A., MacQuarrie, S., Pert, K., Mason, C and Verity, L. (2025) ‘Advocating for a holistic culture of school wellbeing—an evaluation of the Well Schools whole school approach to pupil and teacher wellbeing’, *Frontiers in Education*, pp. 1–15. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1675773

Hernández, E., Navarro, M., López, A and Ordóñez, R. (2013). Study of school education networks in Andalusia (Spain): key to analysis from the evaluation of teachers centers´ advisors. *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, 5(2), pp. 88 – 100. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312295387_Study_of_school_education_networks_in_Andalusia_Spain_key_to_analysis_from_the_evaluation_of_teachers_centers_advisors.

Hickey, B. (2025) *The sky is the limit: The Evolution of Corpus Christi Primary School as a Centre of Wellbeing.* Limerick: Corpus Christi Primary School. Available at: https://www.bps.org.uk/power-threat-meaning/research-publications (Accessed: 08/12/2025).

Higgins, E. and Booker, R. (2022) 'The implementation of a whole school approach to mental health and well-being promotion in the Irish primary school context', *Health Education Journal*, 81(6), pp. 649–666. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/00178969221105319.

Higgins, E., and Booker, R. (2023) 'What are the main factors that are thought to impact upon the implementation of a whole school approach to student mental health and wellbeing in schools? A systematic review', *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 13(2), pp. 77-94. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v13i2.2833

Hill, M., Farrelly, N., Clarke, C. and Cannon, M. (2024) 'Student mental health and well-being: Overview and Future Directions', *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 41(2), pp. 259–266. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/ipm.2020.110.

Hoke, A., Keller, C., Grimm, C, Lehman, E. and Sekhar, D. (2024) 'Impact of Wellness Policy Review, Wellness Council Activity, and Student Health Objectives on Overall School Wellness Climate', *The Journal of School Health*, 94(3), pp. 235–242. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13324.

Holzer, J., Bürger, S., Samek-Krenkel, S., Spiel, C. and Schober, B. (2021) 'Conceptualisation of students' school-related wellbeing: students' and teachers' perspectives', *Educational research (Windsor)*, 63(4), pp. 474–496. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2021.1987152.

Inchley, J., Currie, D., Budisavljevic, S., Torsheimm, T., Jåstad, A., Cosma, A,, Kelly, C. and Már Arnarsson, A. (2020). *Spotlight on adolescent health and well-being. Findings from the 2017/2018 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey in Europe and Canada. International report. Volume 1. Key findings.* Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe. Available at: https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/9789289055000 (Accessed: 08/12/2024).

International Labour Organization (2024) *Transforming the teaching profession: Recommendations and summary of deliberations of the United Nations Secretary General's High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession*. Geneva: International Labour Office. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/industries-and-sectors/education/WCMS_912921/lang--en/index.htm (Accessed: 06/10/24).

Jesacher-Roessler, L., Nesseler, K., Schneider, C. and Bremm, N. (2026) 'Facilitating professional learning networks: the challenging role of hierarchical power structures', *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 11(1), pp. 27–43. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-10-2024-0176.

Jones, M., Azorín, C., Chapman, C., & Harris, A. (2023) Leading professional networks: different perspectives. *School Leadership & Management*, *43*(1), pp. 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2023.2175564

Jourdan, D., Simar, C., Deasy, C., Carvalho, G. and McNamara, P. (2016) 'School health promotion and teacher professional identity', *Health Education*, 116(2), pp. 106–122. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/HE-07-2014-0078.

Kawulich, B.B. (2005) 'Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method', *Forum, Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2).

Kessler, R.C., Berglund, P., Demler, O., Jin, R., Merikangas, K.R. and Walters, E.E. (2005) 'Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication', *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62(6), pp. 593–602. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.593.

King, F. (2014) 'Evaluating the impact of teacher professional development: an evidence-based framework', *Professional Development in Education*, 40(1), pp. 89–111. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2013.823099.

King, F., Brennan, A. and Gorman, A. (2024) 'Teacher Professional Learning in the Republic of Ireland: Policy development to policy enactment', in *Innovation in Teacher Professional Learning in Europe*. 1st edn. United Kingdom: Routledge, pp. 53–64. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003322610-5.

Kirkham, J. (2023) 'Envisaging a whole-school approach to wellbeing: The "wellbeing tree"', *Education, Research and Perspectives*, 50, pp. 1–35.

Kitching, A.E. (2018) 'Mind-Shifts for Enhancing the Engagement of Educational Psychologists in the Promotion of Holistic School Wellbeing', *Educational and Child Psychology*, 35(3), pp. 8–19. Available at: https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsecp.2018.35.3.8.

Kitzinger, J. (1995) 'Qualitative Research: Introducing focus groups', *BMJ*, 311(7000), pp. 299–302. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.311.7000.299.

Kivunja, C. and Kuyini, A.B. (2017) 'Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts', *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(5), p. 26-41. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v6n5p26.

Klassen, A.C., Creswell, J., Plano Clark, V.L., Smith, K.C. and Meissner, H.I. (2012) 'Best practices in mixed methods for quality of life research', *Quality of Life Research*, 21(3), pp. 377–380. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11136-012-0122-x.

Krouwel, M., Jolly, K. and Greenfield, S. (2019) 'Comparing Skype (video calling) and in-person qualitative interview modes in a study of people with irritable bowel syndrome – an exploratory comparative analysis', *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 19(1), pp. 219–219. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0867-9.

Kvale, S. (2007) *Doing Interviews*. Qualitative Research Kit. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Lalucan, M. (2025) 'Exploration of the Relationship Between Teachers' Instructional Competence: Implications for Professional Development and Mental Well-Being Support', *Psychology Education*, 38(5), pp.437-465. Available at: https://doi.org/10.70838/pemj.380503

Lapadat, J.C. and Lindsay, A.C. (1999) 'Transcription in Research and Practice: From Standardization of Technique to Interpretive Positionings', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(1), pp. 64–86. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049900500104.

LaRusso, M., Romer, D. and Selman, R. (2007) 'Teachers as builders of respectful school climates: Implications for adolescent drug use norms and depressive symptoms in high school', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 37/4, pp. 386-398. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10964-007-9212-4.

Leeuwestein, H., Kupers, E., Boelhouwer, M., Van Dijk, M. (2026) 'Differences in Well-Being at School Between Young Students With and Without a Refugee Background', *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 57(1), pp. 80–88. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-024-01690-6.

Leont'ev, A. N. (1978) A*ctivity, consciousness, and personality.* Translated by M. J. Hall. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Lever, N., Orenstein, S., Jaspers, L., Bohnenkamp, J., Chung, J., & Hager, E. (2024) 'Using the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model to Support Mental

Health in Schools', *The Journal of School Health.*, 94(2), pp. 200–203. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13322.

Lim, W. M. (2025) 'What Is Qualitative Research? An Overview and Guidelines', *Australasian Marketing Journal*, *33*(2), pp. 199-229. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry.* Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage Publications.

Lisec, J. and Gillett-Swan, J. (2026) 'Scoping review of student wellbeing policies for Australian school systems', *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-025-09410-0.

Lodico, M.G., Spaulding, D.T. and Voegtle, K.H. (2006) *Methods in Educational Research: From Theory to Practice*. John Wiley and Sons.

Louis, K.S., Murphy, J. and Smylie, M. (2016) 'Caring Leadership in Schools: Findings From Exploratory Analyses', *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 52(2), pp. 310–348. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X15627678.

Lunney, L., Gavin, A., Költő, A., Walker, L., Nic Gabhainn, S., and Kelly, C. (2025) *Trends in Health Behaviours, Outcomes and Contexts: 1998-2022. The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study.* Dublin: Department of Health. Available at: https://universityofgalway.ie/media/healthpromotionresearchcentre/hbscdocs/nationalreports/HBSC-Ireland-Trends-Report-1998-2022-.pdf (Accessed: 14/04/2026).

MacGregor, S. and Friesen, S.L. (2026) 'Reframing failure: lessons from educational leaders facilitating multi-tiered systems of support', *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 11(1), pp. 58–74. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-09-2024-0168.

MacIntyre, D. and Lawlor, M. (2016) *The Stay Safe Programme, 1st and 2nd Class.* Revised edition. Dublin.

Maguire, M., Ball, S. and Braun, A. (2010) 'Behaviour, classroom management and student "control": enacting policy in the English secondary school', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 20(2), pp. 153–170. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2010.503066.

Maksimovic, J. and Evtimov, J. (2023) 'Positivism and Post-Positivism as the Basis of Quantitative Research in Pedagogy', *Research in Pedagogy*, 13(1), p. 208. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5937/IstrPed2301208M.

Malmqvist, J., Hellberg, K., Möllås, G., Rose, R. and Shevlin, M. (2019) Conducting the Pilot Study: A Neglected Part of the Research Process? Methodological Findings Supporting the Importance of Piloting in Qualitative Research Studies. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *18*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691987834

Marquez, J. and Main, G. (2021) 'Can Schools and Education Policy Make Children Happier? A Comparative Study in 33 Countries', *Child Indicators Research*, 14(1), pp. 283–339. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-020-09758-0.

Marsh, K. and Blackwell, I. (2025) 'COVID couldn't catch him there': can outdoor learning benefit primary school-aged children after a global health crisis?', *Education 3-13*, 53(2), pp. 293–306. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2023.2182162.

Marshall, C. and Rosman, G. (2006) *Designing Qualitative Research.* 4th ed. London: Sage Publications.

Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative Researching.* Second Edn. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Maxwell, J. (2012) *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach.* London: Sage Publications.

McCoy, S. and Byrne, D. (2024) ‘Shadow Education Uptake in Ireland: Inequalities and Wellbeing in a High-Stakes Context’, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 72(6), pp. 693–719. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2024.2331476.

McCoyd, J.L.M. and Kerson, T.S. (2006) ‘Conducting Intensive Interviews Using Email: A Serendipitous Comparative Opportunity’, *Qualitative Social Work: QSW : Research and Practice*, 5(3), pp. 389–406. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325006067367.

McElvaney, R., Judge, D. and Gordon, E. (2017) *The Primary Schools Counselling Study (PSCS): Demand and Provision in Ireland*. Dublin: Dublin City University. Available at: https://www.stpatricks.ie/media/2044/pcscreport_nov17.pdf (Accessed: 22/04/2026).

McGuire, F., Vijayasingham, L., Vassall, A., Small, R., Webb, D., Guthrie, T. and Remmie, M. (2019) ‘Financing intersectoral action for health: a systematic review of co-financing models’, *Globalization and Health*, 15(1), pp.1-18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-019-0513-7.

McHugh, R. (2023) ‘A six-component conceptualization of the psychosocial well-being of school leaders: devising a framework of occupational well-being for Irish primary principals’, *International journal of leadership in education*, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print), pp. 1–33. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2023.2218112.

McMullen, J., George, M., Ingman, B., Kuhn, A., Graham, D. and Carson, R. (2020) ‘A Systematic Review of Community Engagement Outcomes Research in School-Based Health Interventions’, *The Journal of School Health*, 90(12), pp. 985–994. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12962.

Mental Health Commission (2023) *Independent review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the State by the Inspector of Mental Health Services*. Dublin: Mental Health Commission. Available at: https://www.mhcirl.ie/sites/default/files/2023-

07/Mental%20Health%20Commission%20Independent%20Reviews%20of%20CAMHS%20services%20in%20the%20State.pdf (Accessed: 07/08/2025).

Meyers, A.B., Tobin, R., Huber, B., Conway, D. and Shelvin, K. (2015) *'Interdisciplinary Collaboration Supporting Social-Emotional Learning in Rural School Systems', Journal of Educational and Psychological consultation,* 25(2–3), pp. 109–128. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2014.929956.

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994) *Qualitative data analysis: an expanded sourcebook.* 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Miller, K.H. and Bice, M.R. (2014) 'The Coordinated School Health Program: Implementation in a Rural Elementary School District', *Health Educator*, 46(1), pp. 20-24.

Minkkinen, J. (2013) 'The Structural Model of Child Well-Being', *Child Indicators Research*, 6(3), pp. 547–558. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-013-9178-6.

Morrissey, B., Keating, S. and King, F. (2024) 'Enacting a child safety education programme in special education contexts', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 163, pp. 1-11. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.107735.

Muijs, D. (2011) *Doing Quantitative Research in Education with SPSS*. 2nd edn. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Muijs, D. (2015) 'Collaboration and Networking Among Rural Schools: Can It Work and When? Evidence From England', *Peabody Journal of Education*, 90(2), pp. 294–305. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2015.1022386.

Muijs, D., Ainscow, M., Chapman, C. and West, M. (2011) *Collaboration and Networking in Education*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Muijs, D. and Rumyantseva, N. (2014) ‘Coopetition in education: Collaborating in a competitive environment’, *Journal of Educational Change*, 15(1), pp. 1–18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-013-9223-8.

Muijs, D., West, M. and Ainscow, M. (2010) ‘Why network? Theoretical perspectives on networking’, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 21(1), pp. 5–26. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09243450903569692.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, Guidelines for good practice.* Dublin. Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/6306/guidelines-for-good-practice.pdf (Accessed: 10/11/2024).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2021) *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines*. Dublin: NCCA. Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/5062/updated-guidelines-2021_en.pdf (Accessed: 11/04/2026).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools.* Dublin: NCCA. Available at: https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/84747851-0581-431b-b4d7-dc6ee850883e/2023-Primary-Framework-ENG-screen.pdf (Accessed: 22/09/2024).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2024) *Curriculum Specification for Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. Dublin: NCCA. Available at: https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/759a3a1d-9736-40d4-9f57-234443d2a344/SC-SPHE-Spec-JULY-24-p9.pdf (Accessed: 11/04/2026).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2025) *Wellbeing Specification for Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin. Available at: https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/02a962e9-82d2-4ed2-8ac8-259d7ac70f9f/Primary-Wellbeing-Spec-ENG-INT.pdf (Accessed: 21/10/2025).

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2013) *Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Schools*. NCSE Policy Advice Paper No. 4. Trim: NCSE.

Available at: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Supporting_14_05_13_web.pdf (Accessed: 14/02/2026).

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2014) *Educational Experiences and Outcomes for Children with Special Educational Needs. A Secondary Analysis of Data from the Growing Up in Ireland Study.* NCSE Research Reports No. 17. Trim: NCSE. Available at: https://www.erc.ie/documents/ncse_educational_outcomes_children_with_sen.pdf.

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2025a) *Mission-Vision.* Available at: https://ncse.ie/mission-vision (Accessed: 05/03/2025).

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2025b) NCSE *Relate. A Regulation-First Approach to Reframing Behaviour and Supporting Student Engagement and Participation.* Trim. NCSE. Available at: https://ncse.ie/relate (Accessed: 08/02/2026).

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2026) *Special Schools*. Available at: https://ncse.ie/special-schools (Accessed: 10/02/2026).

Nohilly, M. and Treacy, M. (2024) 'Teachers' perceptions of enabling and hindering factors in child abuse disclosures', *Child Protection and Practice*, 3. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chipro.2024.100064.

Nohilly, M., and Tynan, F. (2022) 'The evolution of Wellbeing in educational policy in Ireland: Towards an interdisciplinary approach', *International Journal of Wellbeing,* 12(1), pp. 42-53. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v12i1.1663

Nohilly, M., Tynan, F., Martin, R., Pope J., Bowles, R., Dillon, M., Farrelly, G., Harmon, M., Kitching N., La Cumber G., Ní Chroinín D. and O'Sullivan L. (2023) *A Systematic Literature Review to Support Curriculum Specification Development for the area of Wellbeing.* National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/6229/ncca_a-systematic-literature-review-to-support-the-curriculum-specification-development-for-the-area-of-wellbeing.pdf

Nolan, A. and Smyth, E. (2021) *Health and Wellbeing in Childhood and Adolescence*. ESRI Research Bulletin. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RB202127_0.pdf. (Accessed: 09/04/2026).

North East Inner City (2026) *City Connects Programme*. Available at: https://www.neic.ie/city-connects-programme (Accessed: 24/04/2026).

O'Brien, N., O'Brien, W. and Goodwin, J. (2024) 'Wellbeing in education unveiled: teachers' insights in Irish post-primary education', *Discover Education* 3(243), pp.1-22. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-024-00307-3

O'Connor, E. and Nohilly, M. (2024) 'When I started teaching you wouldn't notice any of that': teachers' perceptions of the issues facing children and adolescents' mental health and well-being', *The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education, and Practice*, 19(4), pp. 213–226. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/JMHTEP-12-2022-0100.

OECD (2010) 'Shanghai and Hong Kong: Two Distinct Examples of Education Reform in China', in *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA for the United States*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/programmes/edu/pisa/publications/national-reports/pisa-2009/profiles-by-country-economy/Shanghai%20and%20Hong%20Kong%20PISA%202009.pdf (Accessed: 24/04/2026).

OECD (2012) *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools.* Paris: OECD Publishing.

OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results: Ready to Learn (Volume III): Students' Engagement, Drive and Self-Beliefs*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264201170-en

OECD (2015a) *Improving schools in Scotland: an OECD perspective*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://sces.org.uk/download/improving-schools-in-scotland-an-oecd-perspective/ (Accessed: 14/04/2025).

OECD (2015b), *Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills.* Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264226159-en.

OECD (2015c), *Education Policy Outlook 2015: Making Reforms Happen*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-policy-outlook-2015_9789264225442-en.html.

OECD (2017), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Students' Well-Being. Paris: OECD Publishing.* Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2015-results-volume-iii_9789264273856-en.html. (Accessed: 12/11/2024)

OECD (2019a), *PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework*, PISA, Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/b25efab8-en

OECD (2019b), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students' Lives*, PISA, Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/acd78851-en.

OECD (2020a) *Education Policy Outlook in Ireland*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2020/12/education-policy-outlook-in-ireland_a2b63d91/978e377b-en.pdf (Accessed: 16/04/2026).

OECD (2020b), *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume II): Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/19cf08df-en.

OECD (2021a) *Measuring What Matters for Child Well-being and Policies*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/e82fded1-en

OECD (2021b) *Teachers Getting the Best out of Their Students: From Primary to Upper Secondary Education,* TALIS. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/5bc5cd4e-en.

OECD (2023) *Educational Research and Innovation Supporting Teachers to Foster Creativity and Critical Thinking: A draft professional learning framework for teachers and leaders*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/projects/edu/teaching,-learning-and-assessing-creative-and-critical-thinking-skills/Draft%20Professional%20Learning%20Framework.pdf (Accessed: 14/04/2025).

OECD (2024a) 'The PISA Happy Life Dashboard: Visualising Key Indicators on Student Well-being from the PISA Survey*', Exceptional meeting of the PISA Governing Board.* Virtual Conference, 19th March 2024. Paris: OECD Publishing, pp. 1-65. Available at: https://one.oecd.org/document/EDU/PISA/GB(2024)1/en/pdf (Accessed: 31/10/2024).

OECD (2024b) *OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland, Reviews of National Policies for Education.* Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/3433784c-en (Accessed: 07/08/2025).

OECD (2025a) *Student's well-being.* Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/students-well-being.html (Accessed: 06/01/2025).

OECD (2025b) *Education at a Glance 2025: Ireland Country Note*. Paris: OECD. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/09/education-at-a-glance-2025-country-notes_9749f4ff/ireland_f81e6f58/1ed5ff68-en.pdf (Accessed, 19/02/2026).

OECD (2025c) *School Partnerships Addressing Child Well-Being and Digital Technology*, Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/01/school-

partnerships-addressing-child-well-being-and-digital-technology_22a95b7f/3c946a99-en.pdf (Accessed: 22/04/2026).

OECD (2026) *Why and how to measure children's subjective well-being. OECD Policy Insights on Well-being, Inclusion and Equal Opportunity*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/78eb787c-en (Accessed 04/04/2026).

O'Hara, J., Brown, M., McNamara, G. and Shevlin, P. (2020) 'The Potential, Limitations and Evaluation of Education Networks in a Monocentric System', *Revista de Investigación Educativa*, 38(1), pp. 33-52. Available at: DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.6018/rie.397201.

O'Hara, J., Shevlin, P., Brown, M. and McNamara, G. (2021) 'Educational networks: a key driving force for school development in a time of crisis and change," in *SHS Web of Conferences*. Les Ulis: EDP Sciences, pp. 1-6. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20219802003.

O'Higgins Norman, J., Berger, C., Yoneyama, S. and Cross, D. (2022) 'School bullying: moving beyond a single school response to a whole education approach', *Pastoral Care in Education*, 40(3), pp. 328–341. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2022.2095419.

Oide (2025) *About Oide*. Available at: https://oide.ie/about/ (Accessed: 01/02/2025).

Olson, T., Hegbloom, C. and Egan, C.A. (2021) 'Whole School Approach: Connecting Schools to Community Resources to Enhance School Health', *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 92(3), pp. 5–12. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2020.1866721.

Osmond-Johnson, P., Campbell, C., & Faubert, B. (2019). Supporting professional learning: the work of Canadian teachers' organizations. *Professional Development in Education*, *45*(1), 17–32. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2018.1486877

Panhwar, A.H., Ansari, S. and Shah, A.A. (2017) 'Post-positivism: An effective paradigm for social and educational research', *International Research Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 45(45), pp. 253-259.

Peel, K.L. (2020) 'A Beginner's Guide to Applied Educational Research Using Thematic Analysis', *Practical Assessment, Research and Evaluation*, 25(2). Available at: https://doi.org/10.7275/ryr5-k983.

Pliogou, V. and Tromara, S. (2026) 'Racist bullying and childhood marginalization in multicultural school settings: evidence-based and resilience-oriented interventions in primary education', *Frontiers in Education*, pp. 1–5. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1750921 .

Poortman, C. L., Brown, C. and Schildkamp, K. (2022) 'Professional learning networks: a conceptual model and research opportunities', *Educational Research*, 64 (1), pp. 95-112. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2021.1985398.

Poortman, C.L. and Lai, M.K. (2026) 'Guest editorial: The role of facilitators in professional learning networks: achieving valued network outcomes', *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 11(1), pp. 1–4. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-01-2026-205.

Prenger, R., Poortman, C. L., & Handelzalts, A. (2017) 'Factors influencing teachers' professional development in networked professional learning communities', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *68*, pp. 77–90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.08.014

Prenger, R., Poortman, C.L. and Handelzalts, A. (2019) 'The Effects of Networked Professional Learning Communities', *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(5), pp. 441–452. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117753574.

Provan, K.G. and Kenis, P. (2008) 'Modes of Network Governance: Structure, Management, and Effectiveness', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(2), pp. 229–252. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum015.

Purnell, J.Q., Dougherty, N.L., Kryzer, E.K., Bajracharya, S., Chaitan, V.L., Combs, T., Ballard, E., Simpson, A., Caburnay, C., Poor, T.J., Pearson, C.J., Reiter, C., Adams, K.R. and Brown, M.(2020) 'Research to Translation: The Healthy Schools Toolkit and New Approaches to the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model', *The Journal of School Health*, 90(12), pp. 948–963. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12958.

Putnam, R.D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rasberry, C.N. *et al.* (2015) 'Lessons Learned From the Whole Child and Coordinated School Health Approaches', *The Journal of School Health*, 85(11), pp. 759–765. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12307.

Rawdon, C., Sampson, K., Gilleece, L., Cosgrove, J. (2020) *Developing an evaluation framework for teachers' professional learning in Ireland: Phase 1 Desk-based research.* Dublin: Educational Research Centre. Available at: https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ERC-TPL-Wellbeing-Literature-Review-Report_Final.pdf (Accessed: 05/06/2025).

Requejo, J., Strong, K., Agweyu, A., Billah, SM., Boschi-Pinto, C., Horiuchi, S., Jamaluddine, Z., Lazzerini, M., Maiga, A., McKerrow, N., Munos, M., Park, L., Schellenberg, J. and Weigel, R. (2022) 'Measuring and monitoring child health and wellbeing: recommendations for tracking progress with a core set of indicators in the Sustainable Development Goals era', *Lancet Child Adolescent Health*, 6(5), pp. 345-352. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/s2352-4642(22)00039-6

Rincón-Gallardo, S. and Fullan, M. (2016) 'Essential features of effective networks in education', *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 1(1), pp. 5–22. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-09-2015-0007.

Rittel, H., and Webber, M. (1973) 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning', *Policy Sciences*, 4(2), pp. 155–169. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730.

Roni, S.M., Merga, M.K. and Morris, J.E. (2020) *Conducting Quantitative Research in Education*. Berlin/Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.

Rossman, G. and Rallis, S (2017) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research: Learning in the Field*. Fourth edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Runions, K. C., Pearce, N., and Cross, D. (2021) *How can schools support whole-school wellbeing? AISNSW Wellbeing Literature Review A Review of the Research*. New South Wales: AISNSW. Available at: https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/Resources/WAL%204%20%5BOpen%20Access%5D/AISNSW%20Wellbeing%20Literature%20Review.pdf (Accessed: 22/01/2025).

Salomon, G. (1991) 'Transcending the Qualitative-Quantitative Debate: The Analytic and Systemic Approaches to Educational Research', *Educational Researcher*, 20(6), pp. 10–18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X020006010.

Salmons, J. (2014) *Qualitative Online Interviews: Strategies, Design, and Skills*. Second edn. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Sammons, P., Mujtaba, T., Earl, L., & Gu, Q. (2007) 'Participation in network learning community programmes and standards of pupil achievement: does it make a difference? *School Leadership & Management*, 27(3), pp. 213–238. Available at: https://doi-org.dcu.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/13632430701379412.

Schleicher, A. (2015) *Proposals for PISA 2018 international questionnaire options.* Paris: OECD.

Schleicher, A. (2016) *Teaching Excellence through Professional Learning and Policy Reform: Lessons from Around the World*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2016/02/teaching-excellence-through-professional-learning-and-policy-reform_g1g649c8/9789264252059-en.pdf (Accessed: 16/04/2026).

Schulze, S. (2003) 'Views on the combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches', *Progressio*, 25(2), pp.8-20.

Schuster, R.C, Brewis, A., Wutich, A., Safi, C., Vanrespaille, T., Bowen, G., SturtzSreetharan, C., McDaniel, A. and Ochandarena, P. (2023) 'Individual interviews versus focus groups for evaluations of international development programs: Systematic testing of method performance to elicit sensitive information in a justice study in Haiti', *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 97, pp. 1-10. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2022.102208.

Scotland, J. (2012) 'Exploring the Philosophical Underpinnings of Research: Relating Ontology and Epistemology to the Methodology and Methods of the Scientific, Interpretive, and Critical Research Paradigms', *English Language Teaching (Toronto)*, 5(9), pp. 9–16. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n9p9.

Scottish Government (2021) *Whole School Approach Framework for Schools to Support Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2021/08/whole-school-approach-mental-health-wellbeing/documents/whole-school-approach-mental-health-wellbeing/whole-school-approach-mental-health-wellbeing/govscot%3Adocument/whole-school-approach-mental-health-wellbeing.pdf (Accessed: 21/04/2026).

Sefotho, M. (2015) 'A Researcher's Dilemma: Philosophy in Crafting Dissertations and Theses', *Journal of Social Sciences,* 42:1-2, 23-36, DOI: 10.1080/09718923.2015.11893390.

Shevlin, P and Brown, M. (2023) *'Towards Civic and Public Engagement. The Continuing Journey and Impact of the DCU/EQI Shaped Professional Learning Research Network. Looking Back and Looking Forward.'* Dublin: (EQI) Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection. Available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/towards-civic-and-public-engagement-continuing-journey-and-impact-dcueqi-shaped-professional (Accessed: 30/09/2024).

Shulman, L. (1986) 'Paradigms and Research Programs in the Study of Teaching: A Contemporary Perspective', In Witrock, M.C (ed.), *Handbook of Research in Teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 3-36). New York: Macmillan.

Siegel, H. (2015) 'John White on the aims of education', In: Suissa, J. Winstanley, C. and Marples, R. (eds) *Education, Philosophy and Well-Being: New Perspectives on the Work of John White.* London: Routledge, pp. 112–124.

Sinnema, C., Daly, A. J., Liou, Y.-H., and Rodway, J. (2020) 'Exploring the communities of learning policy in New Zealand using social network analysis: A case study of leadership, expertise, and networks.' *International Journal of Educational Research*, *99*, 101492, pp. 1-16. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2019.10.002.

Sloan, S., Martinez Sainz, G., Devine, D., Symonds, J., Ioannidou, O., Moore, B., Davies, A., Bohnert, M., Stynes, H., Senior, J., Osborne, K., Crean, M,. Barrow, N., Grieves, M., Gleasure, S., Donegan, A., Samonova, E., Farrell, E., O'Giobuin, R., Smith, A., Farrell, J. (2024). *Children's School Lives: Children's Wellbeing in Irish Primary Schools (2019 to 2023).* Report No. 7. UCD Dublin: NCCA. Available at: https://ncca.ie/media/rspn05qa/csl-report-number-7.pdf. (Accessed: 14/04/2025).

Sobh, R. and Perry, C. (2006) 'Research Design and Data Analysis in Realism Research', *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (11/12), pp. 1194–1209. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560610702777.

Soultatou, P., Vardaros, S. and Bagos, P.G. (2023) 'School Health Services and Health Education Curricula in Greece: Scoping Review and Policy Plan', *Healthcare*, 11(12), pp. 1-9. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11121678.

Spratt, J. (2016) 'Childhood wellbeing: what role for education?', *British Educational Research Journal*, 42(2), pp. 223–239. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3211.

Stahl, N.A. and King, J.R. (2020) ‘Expanding Approaches for Research: Understanding and Using Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research’, *Journal of Developmental Education*, 44(1), pp. 26–28.

Stankov, L. (1999) ‘Mining on the “no man’s land” between intelligence and personality’, in *Learning and individual differences: Process, trait, and content determinants*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 315–337. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/10315-014.

Street, H. (2018) *Contextual wellbeing: creating positive schools from the inside out.* Perth: Wise Solutions.

Symonds, J.E., Devine, D., Sloan, S., Martinez Sainz, G., Davies, A., Stynes, H., Ioannidou, O. and Bonhert, M. (2025) ‘Children’s School Lives - A National Cohort Study of Primary Schooling in Ireland’, *European Psychologist*, 30(3), pp. 190–201. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000538.

Taylor, K. L., Kenny, N. A., Perrault, E., and Mueller, R. A. (2022). Building integrated networks to develop teaching and learning: the critical role of hubs. *The International Journal for Academic Development*, *27*(3), pp. 279–291. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2021.1899931

The Teaching Council Ireland (TCI) (2016) *Cosán Framework for Teachers' Learning.* Available at: https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/publications/teacher-education/cosan-framework-for-teachers-learning.pdf (Accessed: 14/09/2024).

The Teaching Council Ireland (TCI) (2024) *Féilte Bursary Scheme 2024*. Available at: https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/feilte-bursary-scheme-2024/ (Accessed: 23/10/24).

The Teaching Council (TCI) (2025) *Féilte Bursary scheme 2024 Summary of projects and professional learning.* Available at: https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/assets/uploads/2025/12/Feilte-2024-ePublication-ENG.pdf (Accessed: 11/12/2025).

Thielking, M., Skues, J. and Le, V.-A. (2018) 'Collaborative Practices Among Australian School Psychologists, Guidance Officers and School Counsellors: Important Lessons for School Psychological Practice', *The Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 35(1), pp. 18–35. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/edp.2018.4.

Tuli, F. (2010) 'The Basis of Distinction Between Qualitative and Quantitative Research in Social Science: Reflection on Ontological, Epistemological and Methodological Perspectives', *Ethiopian Journal of Education and Science*, 6(1), pp. 97-108. DOI: 10.4314/ejesc.v6i1.65384.

Tulsa (2026) *About Us.* Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/about/ (Accessed: 30/01/2026).

Turner, C. (2026) *Disadvantaged schools marked down by Ofsted on achievement*. *Tes Magazine*, 20 March. Available at: https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/disadvantaged-schools-marked-down-by-Ofsted-on-achievement (Accessed: 24/03/2026).

Tynan, F and Nohilly, M. (2021) 'Wellbeing in the primary school: The perspective of pupils' in Leavy, A and Nohilly, M (eds.) *Perspectives on Childhood.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 108-132.

UNESCO (2022a) *UNESCO strategy on education for health and well-being.* Paris: UNESCO. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381728 (Accessed: 11/01/2025).

UNESCO (2022b) *The relevance and contributions of education for health and well-being to the advancement of human rights, sustainable development & peace.* Paris: UNESCO. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381535 (Accessed: 11/01/2025).

UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP (2023) *Ready to learn and thrive: School health and nutrition around the world*. Paris: UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP. Available at:

https://www.unicef.org/media/135076/file/Ready_to_Learn_and_Thrive_Report.pdf (Accessed: 21/04/2026).

UNESCO (2025) *Transforming education through health and well-being: A briefing note*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: https://media.unesco.org/sites/default/files/webform/ed3002/396443eng.pdf (Accessed: 31/03/2026).

United Nations (1989) *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. London: UNICEF UK. Available at: https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/ (Accessed: 25/01/2025).

UNICEF (2023) *Progress on Children's Well-Being: Centring child rights in the 2030 agenda – For every child, a sustainable future.* New York. Available at: https://data.unicef.org/resources/sdg-report-2023/. (Accessed: 13/11/2024).

UNICEF (2025) *Innocenti Report Card 19: Child well-being in an unpredictable world*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti – Global office of Research and Foresight. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/11111/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Report%20Card-19-Child-Wellbeing-Unpredictable-World-2025.pdf (Accessed: 14/04/2026).

Vilaça, T., Darlington, E., Rosário, R., Bessems, K., Velasco, M and Velasco, V. (2019) *SHE mapping report: Lessons learnt from policies and practices of SHE member countries.* Haderslev, Denmark: Schools for Health in Europe Network Foundation (SHE). Available at: https://repositorium.uminho.pt/server/api/core/bitstreams/ce959c97-6ea9-48d0-9ce4-7aa4c0488adc/content. (Accessed: 17/05/2026).

Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walsh, M. and Higgins, A. (2021) *City Connects Pilot Project An evidence-based system being piloted in 10 DEIS primary schools in Dublin.* Available at:

https://irelandseducationyearbook.ie/downloads/IEYB2021/YB2021-Primary-04.pdf (Accessed: 24/04/2026).

Walsh, T. (2023) *Redeveloping the primary school curriculum in Ireland*, *Policy File*. The Brookings Institution. Available at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED626338.pdf (Accessed: 05/10/24).

Weare, K. and Nind, M. (2011) 'Mental health promotion and problem prevention in schools: what does the evidence say?' *Health Promotion International,* 26, pp. i29– i69. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dar075.

Weemer, M., Eberline, A., Lee, J., Kybartas, T. & Jones, E. (2023) 'A Framework for Implementing a District-Wide School Wellness Needs Assessment: Using the WSCC Model', *The Physical Educator*, 80(2), pp. 443–468. Available at: https://doi.org/10.18666/TPE-2023-V80-I4-11375.

Welsh Government (2020) School and community-based counselling operating toolkit (revised 2020). Cardiff. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/school-and-community-based-counselling-operating-toolkit.pdf (Accessed: 21/01/2025).

White, J., Whelan, J., Brown, M., Collins, F. and Burke, D. (2025) 'Fostering teacher agency: insights from the DCU changemaker schools network', *Irish Educational Studies*, pp. 1–22. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2025.2453742.

Willgerodt, M.A., Walsh, E. and Maloy, C. (2021) 'A Scoping Review of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model', *The Journal of School Nursing*, 37(1), pp. 61–68. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1059840520974346.

Wind, M.E.D., Klaster, E. and Wilderom, C.P.M. (2021) 'Leading Networks Effectively: Literature Review and Propositions', *Journal of Leadership Studies (Hoboken, N.J.)*, 14(4), pp. 21–44. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21728.

Wolters, A. (1989) 'On the idea of worldview and its relation to philosophy', In: Marshall, P. Griffioen, S and Mouw, R.J (Eds.): *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science (Christian Studies Today).* Lanham, MD: University Press of America, pp. 14-25.

World Health Organization (1998) *WHO's Global School Health Initiative: Helping Schools to Become 'Health Promoting Schools'*, Geneva. Available at: http://apps.who.int/inf-fs/en/fact092.html (Accessed: 13/11/2024)

World Health Organization (WHO) (2005) *Promoting mental health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice.* Geneva: WHO Available at: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9241562943 (Accessed: 02/03/2025)

World Health Organization (2014) *Preventing suicide: A global imperative*. First edition. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.

World Health Organization (2024) Health Promoting Schools. Available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/health-promoting-schools#tab=tab_1(Accessed: 01/01/2025)

World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (2025) *A healthy start for a healthy life: a strategy for child and adolescent health and well-being in the WHO European Region 2026–2030*. Copenhagen: World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. Available at: https://iris.who.int/items/25a64625-75ac-4c15-a550-d4a17a73a97a (Accessed: 04/04/2026).

Wylie, C. (2016) *Communities of learning. Kāhui Ako: The emergent stage: Findings from the NZCER national survey of primary and intermediate schools 2016.* Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research. Available at: https://www.nzcer.org.nz/sites/default/files/downloads/NZCER%20COL%20Report%20final.pdf (Accessed: 23/03/2025)

Yin, R.K. (2009) *Case study research. Design and methods*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

APPENDIX A- EMAIL INVITATION TO PRINCIPALS FOR INTERVIEWS

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research on Wellbeing and School Networks

Dear (Principal's Name),

I hope this message finds you well during this busy third term.

My name is Aisling Boylan, and I am a third-year doctoral student on the Doctor of Education programme at Dublin City University (DCU) Institute of Education. I am currently undertaking research supervised by Dr. Alan Groman (alan.gorman@dcu.ie) and Professor Martin Brown (martin.brown@dcu.ie) from the School of Policy and Practice.

The study explores the opportunities and challenges of networks in supporting wellbeing enactment in Irish primary schools. I am particularly interested in capturing the insights of teachers, middle leaders, principals and deputy principals who have been or are involved in the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) wellbeing promotion review and development cycle and have engaged with The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (WPSFP) 2019. This includes teachers, middle leaders, principals and deputy principals who may have designated responsibility for wellbeing.

Further details can be found in the attached Participant Information Sheet, which outlines the purpose of the study, what participation involves, and how data will be handled ethically and securely. This research has received ethical approval from the DCU Institute of Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

If you are happy to support this research, I would be very grateful if you could share the attached **Invitation email**, **Participant Information Sheet** and **Informed Consent Form** with any relevant staff member.

Participation will involve a 45–60 minute one-to-one Zoom interview in July or August 2025 at a time that suits the participant. Fifty schools are being approached to share this research invitation with members of their staff.

Thank you in advance for your time and support. Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Warm regards,

Aisling Boylan
Email: aisling.boylan27@mail.dcu.ie

Phone: +447464448664

APPENDIX B- EMAIL INVITATION TO PRINCIPALS REQUESTING TO SHARE WITH RELEVANT STAFF

Dear Sir/ Madam,

I hope this message finds you well during this busy third term.
My name is Aisling Boylan, and I am a third-year doctoral student on the Doctor of Education programme at Dublin City University (DCU) Institute of Education. I am currently undertaking research supervised by Dr. Alan Groman (alan.gorman@dcu.ie) and Professor Martin Brown (martin.brown@dcu.ie) from the School of Policy and Practice.

This research has received ethical approval from the DCU Institute of Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study exploring the opportunities and challenges of networks in supporting wellbeing enactment in Irish primary schools. I'm particularly interested in the experiences of teachers, middle leaders, principals and deputy principals who have been or are involved in the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) wellbeing promotion review and development cycle and have engaged with The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (WPSFP) 2019. This includes teachers, middle leaders, principals and deputy principals who may have designated responsibility for wellbeing.

Fifty schools are being approached to share this research invitation with members of their staff.

Participation involves a one-to-one Zoom interview (approximately 45–60 minutes), which will take place in July or August 2025 at a time that is convenient for you.

Attached to this email are:

- A **Participant Information Sheet** outlining the full details of the study, including what's involved, ethical considerations, and how your data will be managed.
- An **Informed Consent Form** for you to complete and sign should you wish to participate.

A scanned copy or clear photo of the signed consent form is acceptable.
Please return your signed consent form by email. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me directly at **aisling.boylan27@mail.dcu.ie**.
Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to research in the area of wellbeing in Irish primary schools.

Kind regards,

Aisling Boylan
Email: aisling.boylan27@mail.dcu.ie
Phone: +447464448664

APPENDIX C- PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Introductory Statement
This research is being conducted by Aisling Boylan, a third-year doctoral student on the Doctor of Education programme in the Dublin City University, Institute of Education. This research is being supervised by Dr. Alan Groman and Professor Martin Brown from the School of Policy and Practice. This research is self-funded and has received ethical approval from the DCU Institute of Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

What is this research about?
This research aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of networks in supporting wellbeing enactment, as perceived by principals and teachers in Irish primary schools. These insights will be framed around the four key areas of wellbeing outlined in the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice: Culture, Relationships, Curriculum and Policy.

Why is this research being conducted?
Globally, there is extensive research on the challenges within Wellbeing in Education and the impact of schools addressing wellbeing in isolation. Reviewing and promoting wellbeing provision is a national priority in Irish primary schools at present, at a time when there is also a growing momentum for a more networked education system. Networks are increasingly promoted in policy as a mechanism to support wellbeing enactment within and between schools. However, a review of the literature reveals a notable gap in understanding principals and teachers' perspectives on both the opportunities and challenges networks present for wellbeing enactment in the Irish primary school context. This research is being conducted to fill this gap in the literature.

Why have you been invited to take part?
You have been invited to take part in this research as a primary school teacher, middle leader, principal or deputy principal who has been or is involved in the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) wellbeing promotion review and development cycle and have engaged with The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (WPSFP) 2019. This includes teachers, middle leaders and deputy principals/ principals who may have designated responsibility for wellbeing. You are being invited to take part as I am interested in capturing your experiences and contextual knowledge on the topic of Wellbeing in Education and interschool networks. I am interested in how interschool networks might support Wellbeing in Education.

What will happen if you decide to take part in this research study?
You will be invited to take part in a one-to-one Zoom interview, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes at a convenient time. With your permission, Zoom interviews will be audio-recorded and AI-assisted Zoom transcription will be utilised. Zoom interviews will be protected using encrypted links, individual meeting passwords, and the waiting room feature. The recording will be transcribed for analysis by me following the interview.

How will your data be used?
The data you provide will be used to improve my understanding of the challenges of whole school wellbeing enactment and the opportunities and limitations of educational networks to support wellbeing enactment. These insights will be used to develop a design for a wellbeing network. Due to the nature of face-to-face online interaction, identifying information such as your real name will be identifiable. However, data will be anonymised as part of the process of transfer of audio to my DCU google drive. All digital files with recording and identifiers will be immediately deleted four weeks after the interviews have been conducted and transcribed. Anonymised transcriptions will be retained. Transcripts will contain no identifying information, ensuring privacy and confidentiality.

The anonymised data will be used for my doctoral thesis and publications and will be retained for five years after graduation, potentially changing if the University embargoes the study. The data will then be subject to secure, confidential disposal. The outcomes of this research may be disseminated at national conference presentations and may appear in research publications. All data will be anonymized before disseminating this research at presentations and in publications. No participant data will be shared directly.

Participants' have the right to access their own personal data from Aisling Boylan. The data protection officer at DCU: Mr Martin Ward is responsible for handling any data protection concerns arising from the research and can be contacted at *data.protection@dcu.ie*. Furthermore, if you have a complaint concerning the use of personal data you may lodge this complaint with the Irish Data Protection Commission.

How will your privacy be protected (including any legal limits to confidentiality)?
Please note that confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

What are the benefits of taking part in this research study?
The benefits for you include an opportunity to share your experiences, insights, and perspectives relevant to your school context, which may affirm your professional voice. Secondly, engaging in the interview process provides an opportunity for you to reflect and critically consider your own approach to wellbeing enactment, collaboration and leadership. This input may help influence practice and policy.

What are the risks of taking part in this study?
Participation in this study is not expected to carry any risks, but if any of the questions posed cause any unexpected emotional or psychological distress to you, I will pause the conversation, check in with you, and offer to reschedule or terminate the session. Following any such incident, you will be encouraged to contact the Employee Assistance Service for additional support and will be provided with the relevant contact information.

Can you change your mind at any stage and withdraw from this study?
This study is voluntary, and you can decline to answer, pause, or withdraw from the interview without consequence. Your data can be removed up to the point of data anonymization, which is four weeks following the date of interview. You should refer to the contact details section at the bottom of this sheet to withdraw consent.

How will you find out what happens with this project?
At interview the researcher will offer to send an extract of the final study to participants following graduation. Findings may be presented at national and international conferences and may be published in peer-reviewed journals. The thesis will also be available publicly through the DCU online depository system, Doras.

Contact details for further information:
If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact the researcher, please email aisling.boylan27@mail.dcu.ie or Tel 00447464448664. The supervisor's contact details are alan.gorman@dcu.ie and martin.brown@dcu.ie.
If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University IOE Faculty Research Ethics Committee, c/o DCU IOE, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail ioefrec@dcu.ie.

Yours sincerely,
Aisling Boylan

APPENDIX D- INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Research Study Title
Exploring the opportunities and challenges of networks in wellbeing enactment as perceived by principals and teachers in the Irish primary school setting

This research is being conducted by Aisling Boylan, a third-year doctoral student on the Doctor of Education programme in the Dublin City University, Institute of Education. This research is being supervised by Dr. Alan Groman (alan.gorman@dcu.ie) and Professor Martin Brown (martin.brown@dcu.ie) from the School of Policy and Practice. This research has received ethical approval from the DCU Institute of Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Clarification of the purpose of the research
The main purpose of the study is to explore the opportunities and challenges of educational networks in supporting wellbeing enactment, as perceived by principals and teachers, in the Irish primary school setting.

Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Participant Information Sheet
Participant – please complete the following ***(Circle Yes or No for each question)***

I have read the Participant Information Sheet (or had it read to me)	*Yes*	*No*
I understand the information provided in the Participant Information Sheet	*Yes*	*No*
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	*Yes*	*No*
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	*Yes*	*No*
I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped and AI-assisted Zoom transcription will be utilised.	*Yes*	*No*
I am aware that my data will be stored in the researcher's password protected DCU Google Drive folder	*Yes*	*No*
I understand that participation in this study is voluntary, and I may withdraw up to the point of data anonymization, which is four weeks following the date of interview.	*Yes*	*No*
I understand the arrangement to protect the confidentiality of my data including that confidentiality is subject to legal limitations	*Yes*	*No*
I understand that my anonymised data will be kept for five years after the researcher graduates, and will be altered if the university places the study under embargo	*Yes*	*No*
I consent to the use of my anonymised data to be used in future articles and presentations and for this doctoral thesis	*Yes*	*No*
I am aware of the purpose my data is being used for	*Yes*	*No*
I am aware of the identity of the data controller, the Irish Data Protection Commission if I have a complaint regarding the use of my personal data	*Yes*	*No*

Signature: I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participants Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX E- INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Background and Role

1. How long have you been teaching, and how long at this school?
2. Could you tell me about your role in the school and its general context?
3. Do you have any additional qualifications/ experience relating to wellbeing in education? Please describe….

Understanding Wellbeing in Your School

1. What does 'wellbeing' mean in your school? What does it look like, feel like, sound like?
2. How do you currently nurture wellbeing in your school?
3. Who is involved in the promotion of wellbeing in your school?
4. How is wellbeing promotion evident in your school? (Is it embedded across your school – in leadership, teaching, relationships, and culture?

Whole School Wellbeing Practices

1. What role does school leadership (for example, the principal) play in supporting a whole-school approach to wellbeing?
2. Are there specific systems, structures or routines in your school that help support wellbeing *(e.g. committees, timetabled activities)?*
3. Have national policies (Such as…) influenced your school's approach to wellbeing?
4. Have you engaged in a cycle of SSE where wellbeing promotion was the focus?
5. What areas did you decide to focus on and what impact did your endeavours have?
6. What challenges have you faced in implementing wellbeing policies or programs?
7. How confident do you feel about teaching wellbeing related topics *(e.g. SPHE, RSE, Stay Safe)?*
8. What professional learning have you had, and what additional supports would you like to see being put in place to ensure high levels of success in this area?
9. What barriers have you encountered [or observed] when trying to implement a whole-school wellbeing initiative?

Staff Wellbeing

1. In what ways does your school support the wellbeing of staff, either formally *(like programmes or training)* or informally *(peer support, leadership practices)?*
2. What pressures or challenges do teachers face in promoting pupil wellbeing while managing their own wellbeing?
3. How could a network of schools help support teacher and staff wellbeing?

External Supports and Partnerships

1. Does your school receive any external supports for wellbeing *(for example, counselling services pilot, Education Welfare Teams, NEPS, HSE, Oide)?*
2. How have these worked for you and for your school?
3. Could organisations such as NEPS, Oide, the Inspectorate and/or the HSE play a role in a wellbeing network?
4. What might they offer, and what challenges could arise from their involvement?

Sharing Practices and Resources

1. Can you describe any programmes, materials, or approaches your school uses to promote pupil wellbeing?
2. Do you see potential for schools in a network to reflect, collaborate and share ideas, curriculum resources or teaching strategies related to wellbeing?
3. What might that look like in practice (e.g. joint lesson planning, visits, online resource libraries)?
4. What challenges could schools face when collaborating through a network (e.g. time, curriculum differences)?
5. What types of supports or resources (for example, shared training, funding, time) would help make a wellbeing network sustainable, meaningful and worthwhile for schools like yours?

Current Networks and Collaborations

1. Have you connected with other schools or organisations to share ideas or collaborate on initiatives? If so, can you describe the purpose of that network or collaboration and your experience?
2. Who was involved in that collaboration *(teachers, principals, external partners, etc.)?*
3. How have any connections or networks influenced your thinking or practice around wellbeing?
4. What opportunities could a wellbeing network offer for collaboration or professional relationships among teachers, leaders, and even students across schools?
5. What factors can help or hinder schools in engaging meaningfully in these types of networks *(for example, shared goals, trust, time commitments, or different school contexts)?*
6. Do you think that being part of a network could reduce feelings of isolation among teachers or principals? How? *What do you think the benefits of being a part of a network might be?*

Design and development of a Wellbeing Network

1. If a new inter-school network to support wellbeing was to be developed, who should be involved (e.g. teachers, principals, parents, experts, community members)?
2. What should be the main goals or purposes of such a wellbeing network *(for example, sharing ideas, influencing policy, supporting transitions, driving school improvement)?*
3. Would having shared goals across the network be helpful? Why or why not?
4. What would encourage you or other staff to join and stay engaged in a wellbeing network? *(For example: incentives, trusting relationships between schools, similar school contexts)*

5. What would discourage you or other staff to join and stay engaged in a wellbeing network?

Network Leadership and Sustainability

1. How should a wellbeing network be led or coordinated (e.g. rotating leadership, a steering group)?
2. What role should school leaders *(principals, deputy principals)* have in supporting the network's work?
3. Should network activities be guided by external bodies or experts *(e.g. Department of Education, inspectorate)?* In what ways might that be helpful or not?
4. How could we evaluate the network's activities or impact *(for example, through reports, school surveys, feedback sessions [focus groups, etc.])?*
5. Would having a clear framework or guidelines be useful for schools wanting to set up a wellbeing network? How might that help? How might that not help?

Conclusion

1. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered, particularly around wellbeing or networks?
2. Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX F- SAMPLE CODEBOOK- THEME 3

Theme	Category	Code	Sub Code	Anchor Quote
THEME 3				
Wellbeing Network Composition, Purpose and Accountability	Network goals and structure	Key stakeholder groups	Multi-stakeholder approach	'Who's involved in a child's life from 0 to 18?..'Every actor needs to come to the table and look at what part they have to play in getting our children to where they need to be.' **(Tracey)** Involves- 'Clinical psychologist, your family support worker, your homeschool liaison coordinator, principal deputy principal for us, the local parish priest, community centre manager.' **(Tracey)** 'Like having the outside perspectives, you know the person from the local authority, the local guard, the youth justice worker, the youth worker, like you need to have representation from, I think, right across the community landscape. You know, otherwise it becomes very insular and something like an echo chamber, teacher A is talking to Teacher B, who's talking to Teacher C.' **(Sean)** 'You need to have, I suppose a level of experience, then, within the statutory land, a level of experience and understanding of the statutory landscape that you can identify the right people to actually engage with you to move programs forward. Otherwise it just becomes tokenistic.' **(Sean)** 'I would say from the teacher training colleges to be there and listening to that as well, because they will never get down as far as we've dug to get that information.' **(David)** 'Also bring heterogeneous groupings

				together, as well, to really blow their minds as such on different things.' **(David)** 'It's hard, obviously, to get everybody around the table at the same time, particularly people like NEPS, they're obviously really busy doing assessments and so on, critical incidents..but yeah, there's definitely a space for everybody..now, the more I think about it, is probably the pupils, hearing from them, hearing what their challenges are…Wouldn't it be great to get the pupils together from a mental health, wellbeing perspective, and get them talking about the challenges in their area, and what they feel could improve, or needs to be improved in their community**…**I suppose it'd be really interesting to hear from them about technology and what they feel its impacts are, the lack of sporting facilities in the area, how does that impact them? their wellbeing, their opportunity to be part of a team, or to be physically fit.' **(John)** 'I think, in terms of having pupils involved, I think that should probably be school-led. Possibly even just noting how meetings go, say, with our student Council, and how we work…We bring their ideas to the meetings, and vice versa. We bring the meeting ideas back to the kids.' **(Niamh)** Could be similar for Parents Association- 'Rather than you know, everybody attending everything. It's maybe a kind of a filtration…a channel of communication.' 'I think parents only see a snippet of what we do and to understand the exact challenges…. I think we have maybe a more wholesome or fulsome understanding of that (school-specific challenges), as teachers.' **(Niamh)**

				‘At my point of life, I'd have a lot of interest, but I can imagine for someone who is trying to rear, maybe a few small babies and toddlers this would be a deterrent, however, if it wasn't overly scheduled, I think we would get a nice smattering across the population of experienced and maybe younger teachers and varying levels of experience. And I think we need all the voices to make it balanced.’ **(Louise)** ‘They (external bodies) can come in and do a little bit of professional learning with people, but they could also sit there in a kind of a conversational capacity just to temper and make sure that everything is on the right message, you know, to keep the messages straight.’ **(Louise).** ‘NEPS, it's great to learn. You know the ins and outs, who they are and what they do, but also, you know, having a more specific kind of session on how do I manage a child who has gone through bereavement.’ **(Eve)** ‘I don't know would I bring in parents, community members. Perhaps you could have guest speakers like parents, and you could have people from the community if they have something to offer in terms of wellbeing and having them involved in a session. But I wouldn't necessarily have them in the network fully, you know…I feel like you might have too many chefs in the kitchen.’ **(Eve)** **‘**If you could get sports teams, sports coaches involved, because a lot of children, you know, there's a lot of children who… they're the people that they look up to, and that's their escape.’ **(Orla)**
Wellbeing Network	Network goals	Shared purpose		‘That's where networks need to move towards, actually looking at meaningful, like

Composition, Purpose and Accountability	and structure			taking tangible projects. Not just sitting around talking about the level of need..Oh, look..It's awful in the schools now we've no supports. We need NEPs, we need HSE, we all know that. But let's actually take tangible projects that we can work towards and move things forward.' **(Sean).** 'There needs to be something to almost hang your coat on by the end of it..Look, we all love sharing best practice..but it can turn into…this is what we do in my school'.., and then we all head off, and we do get great ideas, and I've gone to schools and and implemented them (the ideas). But I think we need to be really careful with that, there needs to be a strong outcome…whether it's a wellbeing drive, whether it's the implementation of an area wide program.' **(Stephen).** 'If the group themselves can see the value for your school and your school's self-evaluation process in that being one of the goals, then you're going to get a more authentic outcome and endeavor by the network.' **(Stephen).** 'I would say that you would start from where your development plans are going, the direction the school is going and you're looking for similarities and definitely differences as well as why is one school not looking at that yet your school is. And so you're trying to match and trend schools by their development plans. So I think that boils back to the way that schools put their SSE in place. The language they're using. So people can identify comparisons and differences. And that's where, then you get to taper schools together. And so you're trying to match and trend schools by their development plans.' **(David)**

				‘If someone doesn't have a development plan they’re shooting the dark, they'll never get as much out of that whole process. And to be honest, they'll be basically like window plants. They're just there for show, and there's been no depth to what actually learning is taking place.’ **(David)** ‘Like, you know, we go back to the four domains, their relationships, culture and curriculum, and so on. Maybe they're a starting point. Um is to focus on particular domains, to really zoom in on across an area. So over a 4-year cycle, you would have four of the domains.’ **(David)** ‘Everyone seems to just go to the mindfulness piece or the yoga piece or the movement break…To give it that broad sense of what wellbeing promotion could be, and maybe to zone in on different aspects for a little while, and say, well, we'll just look at culture and environment here for the first term, or for the first few sessions, and then we'll just look at policy and planning. And I suppose if you give each area a nice enough amount of time and air and oxygen, people's understanding could broaden, and then they could actually see the links between the 4 key areas.’ **(Louise)** ‘Each session could be focused on an area (key area of wellbeing), and then one policy deep dive. But then something practical with that…Each session should have a mixture of methodologies and takeaways.’ **(Louise)** ‘If we're not changing policy or affecting system change, we're at nothing.’ **(Tracey)**