

Ireland

Country Overview

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Country name

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Introduction

Through the analysis of several Irish policies, from health and education sectors and national curricular frameworks related to all educational levels, including early childhood education and care (ECEC), it is evident that Ireland recognizes the relevance of addressing socioemotional wellbeing of children and adolescents. Educational settings are acknowledged in Ireland as pivotal contexts to accomplish this goal. Beyond policy and curricular frameworks with a significant SEL component, a number of evidence-based intervention programmes were also identified as a relevant approach in Ireland to support children's socioemotional well-being.

Development

Socioemotional learning (SEL) is recognized as a priority to 21st-century education in Ireland, as stated by Boylan and colleagues (2019, p. 22): "SEL is firmly embedded as a component of educational discourse in Ireland with policy and curriculum documents regularly referencing the holistic development of children and young people, using a lexicon that reflects international discourse on SEL. There is a clear acknowledgement of the rationale for SEL and its necessity".

Byrne and colleagues (2020) underline several Irish national policy documents released in the last decade that have important implications for the design and development of policies and practices to enhance students' wellbeing in schools. These policy documents include: (1) Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children and young people 2014–2020 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014); and (2) Wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice 2018 to from 2023 (Department of Education and Skills, 2018). The first policy framework endorses "the societal importance of raising physically and emotionally healthy young people and the development of socioemotional skills in children and young people underpins the policy outcomes in a number of ways. For example, under Outcome 1 the need for children to develop protective factors such as resilience, self-esteem, good social networks and to engage in community participation is noted, while under Outcome 2 the second stated aim is that children will have socioemotional wellbeing, which includes the capacity to self-regulate, to have empathy and to be emotionally resilient" (Boylan et al., 2019, p. 12). In its turn, the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice intends to provide "schools with a whole school, multicomponent and preventative approach to wellbeing promotion, based on international research and best practice" (DES, 2019, p. 34). As highlighted by Boylan and colleagues (2019, p. 16), this education policy builds on "existing guidelines and frameworks that address elements of wellbeing", such as Aistear (Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, 2009), and Wellbeing in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion (DES, HSE, & Department of Health, 2015a). The latter guidelines were developed by the National Educational Psychological Service with the purpose of complementing Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum and other current primary schools' good practices that addresses children's well-being and mental health taking into consideration a whole-school approach. Another relevant policy that is worth mentioning is the First 5 – an Irish Government ten-year policy strategy (2019-2028) to improve positive early experiences for all Irish children. One of its main goals is to support young children's positive mental health.

Young children's emotional well-being/literacy is one of the main topics of the Healthy Ireland Smart Start program, which draws on the Healthy Ireland framework (Department of Health, 2013) and is promoted by a partnership between HSE Department of Health Promotion and Improvement and the National Childhood Network (an Irish national voluntary organisation). This national program intends to promote young children's healthy lifestyle behaviours by providing information, training and resources to providers from preschools services across Ireland.

In what concerns Irish curricular frameworks related specifically to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings that are attended by children from birth to 6 years of age, which encompasses the junior infant (four-year-olds) and the senior infant (five-year-old) classes in the first two years of primary schools, Boylan and colleagues (2019, p. 22) stresses that "the curricular framework in ECEC settings places a very notable emphasis on the holistic development of the child and resonates to a very considerable degree with the aims and objectives of SEL." Indeed, Síolta (National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education) and Aistear (Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, 2009), two important frameworks in ECEC, endorse the importance of educational settings of promoting young children's socioemotional developmental domains (Boylan et al., 2019). For instance, two of the themes covered in Aistear are (1) Well-being (e.g., Aim 1: Children will be strong psychologically and socially), and (2) Identity and Belonging (e.g., Aim 1: Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories; Aim 2: Children will have a sense of group identity where the links between their family and community are acknowledged and extended; Aim 3: Children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights and views of others; Aim 4: Children will see themselves as capable learners).

Regarding infant classes (first two years of primary school), since its introduction in 2009, primary school teachers should use the Aistear curriculum framework to complement and extend the areas of Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999a). While Aistear emphasises holistic and integrated learning, the primary school curriculum is more subject-based, presenting the content of children's learning through divided curriculum areas, and allocating time for specific subject areas (Gray & Ryan, 2016). The Primary School Curriculum has seven curriculum areas, including SPHE, where SEL contents can be taught (Boylan et al., 2019). The SPHE curriculum is divided into three strands: Myself, Myself and others, and Myself and the wider world. Resources (e.g., lesson plans) to support SPHE curriculum are available for teachers (DES, 1999b).

Assessment

Both Aistear and SPHE curriculum consider assessment as an important component for improving children's learning opportunities in educational settings. Therefore, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) provides guidelines for good practice regarding assessment to help practitioners to enhance children's learning and development across Aistear's themes (http://www.ncca.biz/Aistear/pdfs/Guidelines_ENG/Assessment_ENG.pdf). SPHE curriculum also includes information about the key roles of assessment and the most appropriate tools teachers could use. "Assessment in SPHE guides the teacher in improving the learning experiences for the child and in continually refining and developing the programme to suit individual needs, interests and abilities" (DES, 1999b, p. 8).

The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2018) requires that all schools by 2023 should develop and implement a Wellbeing Promotion Process with the support of the School Self-Evaluation, also including assessment of the interventions' impact. Note also that the Circular to Management Authorities of all Primary Schools (Circular No. 0042/2018 from the Department of Education and Skills, which provides best practice guidelines in the use of programs and/or external facilitators in promoting wellbeing) highlights, among other issues, that the evaluation of impact should be implemented by schools who use well-being promotion programs.

Finally, it is important to note that socioemotional development and wellbeing are one of the main domains assessed over time in Growing up in Ireland – a longitudinal study that follows the development trajectories of two Irish representative cohorts of children: an Infant Cohort and a Child Cohort. Specifically, this study collected data about different aspects of children's social and

emotional well-being during their first 5 years of life (N = 11 100) such as behaviour, and social skills (e.g., assertiveness, empathy, and self-control). The main goal of this study is to inform Government policies.

Intervention

In Ireland, “the curriculum at all levels affords opportunities to embed SEL and teach social and emotional skills in formal education using a variety of approaches” (Boylan et al., 2019, p. 22). Evidence-based intervention programs are considered one of the approaches to promote SEL (Boylan et al., 2019; DES, HSE, & Department of Health, 2015b). Therefore, it is noteworthy to highlight some universal SEL programs that have already been or are being delivered in Irish educational settings for children up to 7 years of age. For example, Buddy Bench Ireland (<https://buddybench.ie>) is a non-profit organisation that offers children’s mental health initiatives for schools, including Buddy Bench Aware Program (BBAP) – a series of universal and age-appropriate intervention programs that intends to enhance “a culture of self-expression, listening, tolerance, resilience, and mutual support” (Quinn & McGilloway, 2018, p. 4). For preschool children, the BBAP includes the Little Buddies (3-6 years). Since 2015, this new and emergent intervention program has been delivered to about 222 Irish primary schools. Preliminary findings from a pilot study, which assessed the perceived effectiveness of the BBAP in several primary schools, revealed that BBAP was well received by children, parents, and teachers (Quinn & McGilloway, 2018).

The Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Training Program (IYTP; originally developed in the USA, and later implemented in other European countries) and the Zippy’s Friends (originally developed in the UK), two well-known universal interventions, have also been implemented in Irish primary schools. The IYTP aims to promote teachers’ classroom management competences and children’s social and emotional skills. Findings from a group randomised controlled trial, conducted with teachers and children of Junior or Senior Infant classes (the first and second year of primary school respectively), revealed that high-risk children improved their behaviour in the classroom as reported by teachers (Hickey et al., 2015). In its turn, Zippy’s Friends, another universal school-based program for children aged 5 to 8 years of age, intends to help young children cope better with everyday adversities. In Ireland, this program was piloted with children (7-8 years) from disadvantaged primary schools as part of SPHE curriculum. When compared with the control group, children from the intervention group showed significant improvements in a number of emotional literacy skills (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, and social skills), which were also observed in a 12-month follow-up.

Lastly, to our best knowledge, Fun Friends (4-7 years), a school-based anxiety prevention and resilience-building program, originally developed in Australia, is also being implemented in Irish primary schools by trained teachers with the support of psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Service (Department of Education, n.d.).

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