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When wellbeing goes to school: exploring the enactment of wellbeing in Junior Cycle in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Many education systems have placed a focus on student wellbeing, as issues relating to physical, mental, emotional and social well-being of young people become increasingly evident. Wellbeing was introduced as a dedicated area of learning into lower second level schooling in Ireland (Junior Cycle, ages 12–15 years) through the introduction of 400 hours of timetabled engagement within the Framework for Junior Cycle. Drawing on student surveys (n = 3612) and focus groups (n = 432) as well as teacher (n = 136), principal (n = 32) and parent (n = 60) interviews from a larger national four-year NCCA-funded longitudinal study, this paper explores how participants experienced the enactment of Wellbeing in Irish schools. The study found that the enactment of Wellbeing was influenced by four inter-related issues: (i) Wellbeing was not always perceived and experienced as something that was valued within Junior Cycle; (ii) Wellbeing was understood and experienced in a narrow way; (iii) Wellbeing was deemed to cause additional stress for students and (iv) Assessment continued to remain the dominant concern for students and staff. The paper considers the implications of the findings for the positioning and enactment of wellbeing within assessment-driven education systems.

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Enactment; curriculum; wellbeing; assessment; Junior Cycle

Introduction

There is a growing focus and emphasis on wellbeing across education systems internationally, as the needs of students and issues related to the physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing of young people become more apparent and acute (Council of Europe, 2023; Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012; European Commission, 2021). This is also the case in Ireland, where wellbeing has 'undoubtedly, … taken its place on the national agenda' (Nohilly & Tynan, 2022, p. 49). The focus on wellbeing within the education system in Ireland is reflected in early childhood, primary and lower second level curricula (Junior Cycle). Changes to Junior Cycle in the last decade resulted in 400 hours of Wellbeing[1] being allocated across the three-year cycle (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2015). The nomenclature used to refer to the topic of student wellbeing can differ slightly

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across international contexts. There are also variations in how exactly wellbeing is conceptualized and operationalized in schools worldwide. Nevertheless, across contexts, a curricular and pedagogical focus on the topic of wellbeing can create tensions, as the underpinning ideologies can be at odds with the dominant values of many education systems (Priestley et al., 2023). In the midst of pointed attention to wellbeing in curricula worldwide and in the context of gaps in largescale data about the wellbeing experiences of students aged 10–15 in particular (Marquez et al., 2023; Soutter et al., 2012; Thorburn, 2016), this paper makes a new contribution of international significance by providing rich, longitudinal and largescale insight into how students (aged 12–15), teachers, principals and parents experienced the enactment of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle. The paper draws on a subset of data from a larger four-year study funded by the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The paper begins by exploring how wellbeing is conceptualized, defined and approached across educational contexts internationally, including an overview of the emergence of the distinctive approach to Wellbeing in post-primary schools in Ireland.

Wellbeing: a diverse and multifaceted concept

In a comprehensive review of wellbeing literature, M et al. (2023) note the multifaceted nature of wellbeing and identified a range of philosophical approaches to wellbeing across contexts. These range from hedonic (pleasure/happiness) and eudaimonic (meaning/self-realization) to objective or subjective, to a capabilities approach, to individualist or collectivist culture approaches, to predominantly focused on health and mental health, to approaches that reside within positive psychology/flourishing narratives, to Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and to approaches that form part of a broader holistic education. These varied conceptualizations are echoed in the work of Hossain et al. (2023) who categorize wellbeing as being approached from one of the four following perspectives: Hedonic, Eudaimonic, Integrative (hedonic and eudaimonic aspects) and other approaches that include focusing on contextual, cultural, environmental aspects, spiritual dimensions and holistic dimensions.

This variety of conceptualizations and approaches is mirrored in education policy directives related to wellbeing internationally, wherein we find a lack of consensus on what constitutes good practice (Svane et al., 2019) and a spectrum of subject-bound, cross-curricular and whole-school approaches to wellbeing. For instance, in the UK, while there is whole-school guidance on creating a safe, calm, inclusive, and supportive learning climate, wellbeing is primarily addressed within the curricular area of Personal Social Health Education (PSHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). Statutory guidance on 'physical health and mental wellbeing' establishes broad learning outcomes for post-primary related to mental health, physical fitness, internet safety, drugs and alcohol, healthy eating and the body (Department for Education, UK, 2021). In contrast, Finland adopts a transversal competencies approach to embedding attention to the physical, mental, social and economic dimensions of wellbeing across all subject areas in lower secondary education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014). In contrast again, a whole school but less subject-based approach is taken in the Australian Student Wellbeing Framework (Education Services Australia, 2018). This

framework provides guidance on supporting student wellbeing through leadership, an inclusive school culture, incorporating student voice, fostering strong partnerships with families and the wider school community and is supported by a self-check/audit tool for schools.

Given the diversity of philosophical approaches to wellbeing and the acknowledgement that it is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional concept with reach across a multiplicity of disciplines and sectors (M et al., 2023; Soutter et al., 2014), it is perhaps then unsurprising that defining wellbeing is not a straightforward task. Reflecting the typically broad scope of definitions of wellbeing across social, psychological, affective as well as physical dimensions (Svane et al., 2019), Daly et al. (2024) have categorized the domains of young people's wellbeing as: physical health, mental and behavioural health, education and learning, economic stability, physical and psychological safety, social networks and relationships, community and belonging and a sense of purpose. In an international scoping review of students' perspectives on wellbeing, Hossain et al. (2023) arrived at a more education-specific definition of wellbeing as existing across eight dimensions: positive emotion, lack of negative emotion, quality relationships, engagement in school activities, accomplishment, a feeling of purpose at school, personal attributes like resilience and self-esteem and contextual influences such as school climate and support systems. Despite the breadth of such definitions, many contexts have found workable definitions for the purposes of education policy. For instance, wellbeing is defined in Irish educational policy as

> 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 (Department of Education & Skills, 2019, p. 10).

In light of the multi-dimensional scope of wellbeing and the variety of ways that the concept of wellbeing is approached in lower secondary school internationally, questions remain regarding how wellbeing can be effectively embedded into curricula and pedagogical practice in schools. Indeed, in this vein, Nohilly and Tynan (2022) make an important distinction between learning *about* and learning *for* wellbeing. They argue that learning *about* wellbeing takes place within the curricular space and through school/classroom events that focus on wellbeing. In comparison, learning *for* wellbeing takes a more holistic approach recognizing that the entire schooling experience should contribute to the students' wellbeing. Underpinned by a commitment to developing the student's self-acceptance, personal growth and autonomy, engaging experiences are provided across school life to enable students to develop a positive sense of the self and develop supportive relationships with others. Nohilly and Tynan (2022) argue that the learning *for* wellbeing approach moves from a more instrumentalist to a more holistic approach to wellbeing in schools. However, such holistic visions are not divorced from systemic issues of school culture, investment and resourcing, and are therefore much more difficult to achieve (Nohilly & Tynan, 2022). Ultimately, as Svane et al. (2019) and Nohilly et al. (2023) have suggested, more research is required to inquire into these moves, exploring whether the original intentions and visions of wellbeing directives match up to their enactment in practice.

Enactment

The use of the term 'Enactment', rather than implementation, acknowledges that curriculum change is a messy, complex and non-linear process (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2010; Maguire et al., 2015). Teachers do not just 'implement' curriculum changes in a passive manner as prescribed by others. Rather they filter and refract such changes through dominant belief systems, structures and contexts (Curtner-Smith, 1999).

When faced with change, individuals engage in a process of sense-making through which they individually and collectively construct meaning about the nature and purpose of a change (Hargreaves, 2009; März & Kelchtermans, 2013). Through this process, individuals or groups attempt to align changes within or around existing belief systems and contexts (Ketelaar et al., 2012). As a result, intended curriculum changes are (re)-interpreted, (re)-contextualized and adapted when enacted in schools. Such a process is reflected in the work of Ball et al. and others (Alvunger et al., 2021; Ball et al., 2012; Skerritt, 2023), who illustrate how policies go through a process of 'interpretation and translation' resulting in changes being 'enacted' through this 'interpretation'. Alvunger et al. (2021, p. 273) reflect this process when they note that:

> . . . curriculum making is a highly dynamic and transactional process of interpretation, mediation, negotiation and translation, . . . framed by particularities and contextual factors . . . producing multifarious meaning.

The macro, mezzo and micro contexts are important (Cornbleth, 1990; Gleeson, 2010; Scanlon et al., 2023). Sundberg (2022), for example, notes that enactment of change is influenced, not only by local and school contexts but also by external pressures, beliefs and demands. Therefore, wider sociopolitical, cultural, and philosophical values impact and influence how curriculum changes are enacted at a local level (Gleeson et al., 2002; Hinde, 2004; Karseth, 2006). While teachers may genuinely engage with and believe in specific curriculum changes, the existing contexts can constrain the extent to which they can enact it (Ball et al., 2012). If curriculum changes challenge or contradict dominant socio-cultural values, change is unlikely to occur in a way that was intended. Curriculum coherence, the alignment between the stated curriculum goals/values, modes of delivery and assessment, can support (or hinder) enactment, and influences how teachers make sense of and attach meaning to a curriculum change (Johnson et al., 2020; Lange & Meaney, 2012; Sullanmaa et al., 2019). An incoherent curriculum will impact on the extent to which the curriculum can be fully enacted.

The above can ultimately lead to 'slippage' (MacDonald, 2003) or refraction between the conception of curriculum change (what is intended), versus its enactment (how it is understood, experienced and performed by teachers and students in schools and classrooms). This may mean that a curriculum with a focus on wellbeing, for example, may be enacted in schools/classrooms differently than what was intended by policy and curriculum makers (Priestley et al., 2021).

Setting some relevant context

The framework for Junior Cycle: development and focus

The Framework for Junior Cycle, introduced in 2015, replaced the preceding Junior Certificate programme which stood as a long-established course for lower second level education (ages 12–15 years). Prior to the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle, recognition of the need for reform was widespread (NCCA, 2010; Smyth et al., 2006). There was an acknowledgement that the Junior Certificate was heavily subservient to the Leaving Certificate exam (at the end of senior cycle), resulting in forms of learning that were "too focused on preparation for the examination' (NCCA, 2010, p. 29). Reform of the Junior Certificate began in 2010 with the release of a consultative paper *Innovation and Identity: Ideas for a new Junior Cycle* (NCCA, 2010).

The first version of the Junior Cycle Framework, titled '*A Framework for Junior Cycle*' (Department of Education and Skills, 2012), was published in 2012 following this consultative process (NCCA, 2011). Despite the almost unanimously endorsed need for change, the Framework was met with strong opposition from the teacher unions (Gleeson, 2022) who disagreed with the Minister's inclusion of school-based, teacher-graded, assessment for national certification as a dimension of the Framework. Following a lengthy period of industrial action and mediation, a dual approach to assessment at Junior Cycle was proposed (Travers, 2015). This compromise removed the role of teachers in the grading of their own students' work for national certification. A new draft *Framework for Junior Cycle* was published in 2015 (DES, 2015).

The *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES, 2015) aims to provide schools with 'greater flexibility to design programmes suited to the needs of their students and to the individual context of the school' (DES, 2015, p. 7), giving schools greater freedom and choice to respond to their local context and school culture. Under this framework, each school's programme is guided by twenty-four statements of learning, eight principles and eight key skills, intended to provide a structure for schools to design their Junior Cycle programme (the framework is available here: A Framework for the Junior Cycle). The Junior Cycle programme comprises subjects, short courses, an area of learning titled Wellbeing, additional learning experiences and, priority learning units (PLUs) appropriate to the needs of students with significant special educational needs. Under the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015), individual schools are provided with the discretion to decide on the combination of subjects, short courses or other learning experiences offered to their students.

The Framework for Junior Cycle adopts a dual approach to assessment, through the inclusion of Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) and final summative examinations. However, despite these changes, in the vast majority of subjects, 90% of the students' final grade is determined by the external state examination.

Wellbeing at Junior Cycle

The Framework for Junior Cycle (DES, 2015) placed new emphasis on student wellbeing through situating Wellbeing as a 'new area of learning' in the curriculum. Student wellbeing was deemed to be 'at the heart of the vision for junior cycle' (NCCA, 2021, p. 15). The inclusion of Wellbeing as a dedicated area of learning was influenced by the growing

international awareness of the importance of student wellbeing in school curricula. Evidence suggested that an increasing number of teenagers were engaging in risky behaviour relating to drug and alcohol (mis)use, as well as sexual activity (O'Brien, 2008). Concerns regarding mental health, as well as high suicide rates amongst Irish adolescence, also highlighted the need to place a specific focus on wellbeing (UNICEF, 2007). School dropout, particularly amongst certain cohorts of students, as well as high levels of stress caused by academic pressure all highlighted the need to pay particular attention to student wellbeing (Farrell & Mahon, 2022; Lynch & Lodge, 2002). Ensuring a focus on wellbeing at Junior Cycle also supported coherency with a similar focus in early childhood and primary education (O'Brien et al., 2024).

Informed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development (NCCA, 2021), the Framework for Junior Cycle set out to include learning experiences that supported the physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing of students, supporting them to develop relevant life skills, as well as forming a sense of connection and belonging within their community (NCCA, 2017, p. 8). Within the Wellbeing policy, student wellbeing was deemed to be present when:

> . . . students realise their abilities, take care of their physical wellbeing, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and have a sense of purpose and belonging to a wider community'. (NCCA, 2021, p. 13)

Through the development of this policy, it was directed that students would learn about wellbeing in dedicated timetabled classes. Additionally, the Wellbeing policy also focuses on learning for wellbeing, prioritizing the whole school being a respectful and caring learning environment (NCCA, 2021). This whole-school endeavour focused on culture; curriculum; relationships and policy and planning (NCCA, 2021, p. 20). Rather than seeking 'sustained positive feelings and attitudes', Wellbeing focuses on 'Well-becoming', emphasizing resilience, acknowledging that life can be challenging, and negative moods are expected at certain times in one's life (NCCA, 2021, p. 11).

In 2017, guided by a dedicated Wellbeing specification, schools were required to allocate a minimum of 300 hours of timetabled engagement to the newly ring-fenced area of Wellbeing, with the plan to increase this to 400 hours by 2020, once schools had come to terms with the changes. Guidelines were issued on what could be included in these allocated hours. Schools were provided with a certain degree of autonomy regarding the nature of this timetabled engagement (DES, 2019) and a whole-school approach to Wellbeing was advocated (NCCA, 2017). Timetabled hours were normally made up through the provision of particular subjects such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), and Physical Education (PE). Schools could also include other areas in their Wellbeing programme, 'such as guidance related learning, school-developed short courses and/or units of learning related to aspects of wellbeing designed to meet the needs of their students' (NCCA, 2021, p. 43), as well as extracurricular activities[2] (Nohilly & Tynan, 2022). Wellbeing was linked directly with the *Framework for Junior Cycle* through a number of related statements of learning, as well as the Key Skill 'Staying Well'.

Schools have discretion regarding the nature and format of assessment within Wellbeing. The NCCA guidelines indicate that student wellbeing should be assessed in relation to six main indicators of wellbeing, including, 'being active, responsible,

connected, resilient, respected and aware' (NCCA, 2017, p. 45). However, the 2021 guidelines indicate that teachers should not assess 'where the student is situated on the continuum of wellbeing or mak[e] a statement about the student's subjective state of wellbeing' (NCCA, 2021, p. 81). Rather, assessing students' learning focuses on 'gathering evidence of what the student has learned about wellbeing, i.e. the knowledge, skills and dispositions students have gained' (NCCA, 2021). The guidelines place an emphasis on formative assessment, reflection and feedback and note the importance of not over-assessing students.

Students complete CBAs in relation to work they do in their timetabled Wellbeing classes. This component, as well as other relevant areas of learning and results from state examinations are reported in a Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA). The Inspectorate (of the Department of Education and Youth) also review and report on schools' Wellbeing programmes during the Whole-School Evaluation process.

A dedicated support service, Junior Cycle for Teachers (now restructured as Oide), was established to provide continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers in all areas related to the Framework, including Wellbeing. Oide have dedicated teams on Wellbeing offering whole-school and subject-specific CPD. The Oide Wellbeing team continue to offer ongoing support through CPD and resources to teachers to support with the enactment of Wellbeing. Oide does not publicly list the qualifications and background of its team members; however, they are typically qualified and experiences teachers and leaders. In terms of Wellbeing, team members would typically have expertise in the areas of SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education), RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education), Physical Education (PE), Child Protection, Antibullying and Restorative Practice.

It is within this context, that the current study aimed to explore how schools (teachers, principals, students and their parents) experienced the enactment of Wellbeing within Junior Cycle. The paper aims to answer the following research question: *How do students, teachers, principals and parents experience the enactment of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle?*

Methodology

The findings presented in this paper are part of a National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)-funded four-year longitudinal study exploring the enactment of the Framework for Junior Cycle in Irish schools. While the larger study drew on interviews with stakeholders (including members of the dedicated support services), as well as interviews and surveys with principals and teachers in a representative sample of 100 schools (please see McGarr et al., 2022, 2023), this paper draws exclusively on a subset of the data, case study data. This representative sample of 100 schools included post-primary schools, Youthreach Centres and Special Schools, all of whom offer the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.

Case study schools

Ten post-primary schools, one Youthreach Centre and one Special School were randomly selected from the larger representative sample, ensuring representation in terms of school type, size, location, gender and DEIS status (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools). Post-primary schools in Ireland cater for students between the ages of 12 and 18

Table 1. Number of participants per research instruments.

Research instruments	Case study 1	Case study 2	Total
Student surveys	1830	1782	3612
Student focus groups	213	219	432
Teacher interviews	73	63	136
Principal (and senior management) interviews	20	12	32
Parent interviews	30	30	60

years of age. While different schools exist, they can be generally categorized into two types, voluntary secondary schools and publicly managed schools under the management of the Education and Training Board (ETB). Voluntary secondary schools are either mixed or single-sex schools originally established by religious orders. While the schools are technically private entities, they are state funded. The ETB-managed schools are publicly managed, and state funded. Special Schools are educational institutions specifically designed to support children and young people (typically aged 4–18) who have complex special educational needs that cannot be adequately met in mainstream schools. Youthreach Centres are centres to support young people aged 15–20 who have left school early without formal qualifications or vocational training. The inclusion of the Special School and Youthreach Centre aimed to ensure that the voices of students in these setting, which are often excluded from curriculum evaluation studies, were captured. To maintain anonymity, these schools are named by number within the findings, school 1–10. The Special School and Youthreach Centre are named as such, to ensure perspectives from these settings are captured, where relevant (please see McGarr et al., 2022, 2024 for more details).

All 12 case study schools were visited on two occasions (Spring, Year 2 and Autumn, Year 4 of the study) and data collection associated with these visits consisted of interviews with teachers, principals and parents, as well as surveys and focus groups with students, as outlined in Table 1:

It was not the intention of the case studies to compare schools with each other or to make judgements about 'good' or 'poor' implementation of the Junior Cycle Framework. Instead, the case studies visits focused on producing rich descriptions of the enactment of curriculum change in these contexts.

Data collection

Following ethical approval from the authors' institution (2020_11_26_EHS) and guided by ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, student assent, parental consent and right to withdraw, teachers, principals, students and parents were invited to participate in the study.

The student survey explored students' experiences of teaching, learning and assessment; student voice; experiences of Short Courses; and Wellbeing at Junior Cycle, and was administered to first, second, and third year students (visit 1) and second, third and Transition Year[3] students (visit 2).

Focus group participants were chosen at random from all consenting students (with parental consent) across each year group. Each focus group normally consisted of 8–10 students. Each discussion began with an 'icebreaker' exercise where students actively

responded to prompts related to their experiences of the Junior Cycle. Subsequent questions then explored their views and experiences of the Framework for Junior Cycle in greater depth and asked for their perspectives on the changes, if any, they would like to see within the Junior Cycle.

The teacher and principal interviews were semi-structured in nature to facilitate the exploration of additional topics raised by participants. The interviews explored participants' understanding, views and experiences of the Junior Cycle, encouraging them to consider the aspects that were/were not enacted as intended, the supports and challenges to enacting the curriculum and the changes, if any, they would like to see occur. All teachers in each case study school were invited to participate in an interview. All those who consented to participate were interviewed.

Parents were asked in their interview to reflect on their child's experiences of Junior Cycle. While parents had freedom to raise any issues of relevance to them in terms of this Junior Cycle experience, Wellbeing emerged as a core area parents discussed. The analysis subsequently triangulated these parental perspectives with the views of the students, teachers and school principals. Parent interviews took place online, after the case-study school visits, at a time that suited each parent.

Participation in the research was voluntary. During each case-study visit, any teacher, parent or student (within the allocated year groups) who wanted to take part in the research was facilitated to do so as the authors wanted to capture all perspectives. Therefore, some teachers, parents, students volunteered to take part at both timepoints, others at just one. This approach aimed to capture all available perspectives from all who volunteered.

A number of steps were taken to ensure validity and credibility in this mixed methods study. The student survey was developed based on the principles of the Junior Cycle and underwent pilot testing in a local school. The systematic and careful selection of schools to maintain a representative sample also strengthened the validity of the study. Focus groups and interviews were also piloted in advance of use. To strengthen the credibility of the work, triangulation was used to compare findings across the different research tools, and these themes were subsequently reviewed and confirmed for accuracy. The study also maintained a detailed audit trail of all data collected and coded.

Data analysis

Quantitative data (student survey data) was analysed using the statistical research software packages, Qualtrics and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS V.29).

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and read by members of the research team for familiarization. This data was analysed using an inductive approach to thematic analysis, with themes being generated via bottom-up coding. This approach ensured that all relevant themes within the data, relating to Wellbeing, were captured (Lewins, 2008). Using Braun and Clarke's (2012) steps for thematic analysis; the transcripts were read and codes identified. Trustworthiness was supported via cross-checking across research team members. Emerging codes were synthesized into macro-level themes reflecting the overarching issues relating to Wellbeing. Throughout the process, priority was placed on ensuring the voice of participants was captured (Bryman, 2012) and themes were supported with sufficient data.

The two case-study visits in each school took place within a relatively short time frame and while there was overlap between participants across the two visits, some differences did occur.[4] Analysis of the data identified consistency across the dominant themes from both rounds of case-study visits. The focus of this paper, therefore, is not on comparing differences between the two timepoints, rather we adopt a holistic view of the entire data set with the intention of exploring the enactment of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle. Similarly, the paper does not compare across the different school types. Schools were selected to ensure a mix of schools across a range of variables (single-sex or co-education, patronage type, size, location, DEIS/Non-DEIS) but did not include a school in each category. There was also only one Youth Reach Centre and one Special School. Across the 10 post-primary schools, there was a mix of co-educational and single sex, a mix of schools in terms of size, a mix of rural and urban schools, rather than one of each. The large range of variables included in the selection of these schools resulted in a small number of schools within each category. This meant that a comparative study was not possible.

As previously outlined, the paper is guided by the following research question: *How do students, teachers, principals and parents experience the enactment of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle?*

Limitations of the research

As with all research, this study is bound by certain limitations, the majority of which are methodological and therefore considered here. Firstly, while the sample sizes were high in terms of individual data sets (i.e. student survey responses), the study included 12 sites. These sites may not be representative of all schools. Schools that did not volunteer to become case study sites may have had different experiences of enacting Wellbeing. Similarly, participants were volunteers and, again, may not be representative of the wider cohort. Additionally, while core sections of the research explored the concept of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle, this was but one dimension of the changes brought about by the Framework i.e. CBAs, Short courses, PLUs. A study focused solely on Wellbeing may have provided additional or alternative findings.

Main findings

Our analysis of the data identified four inter-related themes that answered the research question: *How do students, teachers, principals and parents experience the enactment of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle?* Firstly, we found that participants largely experienced the enactment of Wellbeing as something that was not highly valued within Junior Cycle. Secondly, we found that Wellbeing tended to be understood and experienced in a narrow way. Thirdly, we found that Wellbeing was often considered to add to and cause stress for students in Junior Cycle. Finally, we found that the summative state assessment continued to remain the priority for many within Junior Cycle. These themes guide the presentation of the findings.

The value of wellbeing?

The value attributed to Wellbeing was mixed across participants. While some welcomed and valued its inclusion, our analysis determined that a focus on Wellbeing was not highly valued across all participants.

Some participants, including students, teachers, parents and principals, valued the focus on Wellbeing at Junior Cycle. Parents, for example, didn't want schooling to be '*all academic learning*' (Parent, School 7, Visit 1). Students' social and personal development and sense of belonging to the school community was core to how parents perceived the purpose of schooling, supporting students to '*learn about themselves and learn empathy*' (Parent, School 7, Visit 1).

When teachers and principals spoke positively about the enactment of Wellbeing in the school, they focused on the value the school placed on Wellbeing. These schools were perceived as places that had a caring school culture which prioritized students' wellbeing. Teachers and principals believed that Wellbeing was now considered a dimension of all teachers' role, stemming across subjects:

> Wellbeing has lifted the school . . . our Wellbeing coordinator, she has designed a programme based on the needs of our kids . . . it is fantastic (Teacher, School 9, Visit 2)

> Wellbeing is incorporated into everything. For me, if it works as a programme, Wellbeing will happen naturally. We have safe spaces and calm corners (Teacher, Special School, Visit 2)

> The Junior Cycle has definitely helped the focus on Wellbeing . . . what the Junior Cycle has done is made it clear that it is everyone's responsibility (Principal, School 5, Visit 2)

Some focus group students welcomed the focus on Wellbeing and the space Wellbeing classes provided, feeling that the school cared about them and their wellbeing. Students attending the Special School, for example, described the focus on kindness in the school, with kindness being rewarded through class awards and certificates. Students in other schools spoke about how, as a non-examination subject, Wellbeing classes provided a welcome space for students, resulting in a classroom environment that was '*kind of relaxing . . . it gives us a change to relax instead of our brain going 100 miles per hour, so I find that helpful*' (Student, School 7, Visit 1). Similarly, another student in a different school explained how:

> I think Wellbeing is a really good class, as it's like a 40-minute class for us every week. It's a good opportunity to just not have an exam to work towards (Student, School 3, Visit 1)

The student survey data shows somewhat mixed views however, with 57% and 50% of students strongly agreeing/agreeing with the statement '*my wellbeing is supported in the school*' (visit 1 and visit 2, respectively).

However, at the same time as recognizing the intrinsic value of a focus on Wellbeing, many teachers, parents and students also frequently questioned the effectiveness of the approach to Wellbeing and to Wellbeing classes in schools. Many, including teachers, students, and parents, felt that Wellbeing classes were not valued and were perceived as a '*doss class*' (Parent, School 8, Visit 2). Others felt that there was too much emphasis on Wellbeing within the revised Junior Cycle, resulting in it being *'overkill and tick the box*' (Teacher, School 5, Visit 2), '*lip-service*' (Teacher, School 3, Visit 2) and '*a bit excessive*' (Parent, School 3, Visit 2). Such a view was further expressed by a teacher in School 10, who questioned:

> If we have 5 or 6 subjects such as Wellbeing, Digital Wellbeing, SPHE, CSPE, Religion, is it overcrowded? Are students seeing this as too much? (Visit 1)

Student survey data reflects these views, with only 54% (visit 1) and 49% (visit 2) of students strongly agreeing/agreeing with the statement '*Focusing on my wellbeing has a positive impact on my learning*'.

Narrow understandings of wellbeing

Our analysis of the data identified that participants' understandings and experiences of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle was narrow.

Firstly, Wellbeing was frequently described and perceived as largely relating to stress management. Students often welcomed such a focus, asserting *'it helps us cope when we're stressed*' (Student, School 10, Visit 1). Helping students cope with stress, the workload demands experienced at Junior Cycle and examination stress were commonly understood as central dimensions of Wellbeing:

> We do Wellbeing every Monday … we learn how to detect stress and deal with workload. It's very helpful because sometimes you get stressed with the workload (Student, School 9, Visit 2)

> In SPHE, we look at ways of destressing and planning everything that we do (Student, School 1, Visit 2)

Again, however, many questioned the effectiveness of such Wellbeing interventions at Junior Cycle with a number of teachers, and at times parents and principals, noting the high levels of stress amongst students, with one teacher, for example, explaining how *'I've never in my life seen the levels of anxiety that we have in students'* (Teacher, School 3, Visit 2). These interviewees believed that Wellbeing classes didn't always support students in this regard. For example,

> I am all for Wellbeing … certainly, it's good if it's improving wellbeing but if you listen to teachers and students in 3rd year and all the efforts are made in terms of Wellbeing and they are stressed … Intention versus the reality … the reality is it is posing more problems in wellbeing (Principal, School 2, Visit 2)

> They are Wellbeinged [sic] out. They can do nothing for themselves now … They have no resilience. They just can't cope … they need to stand on their own two feet a bit more … they are going to have to cope with things … I just think its overdone … complete overkill (Principal, School 4, Visit 2)

> They don't engage well with Wellbeing classes and then they are getting stressed about their maths or their language and the teacher only has so many hours to do it. It's counter-productive. They are focusing on their wellbeing but then they are stressing out when they aren't on top of their maths or languages. It's a balancing act and it's a shared responsibility between family and school (Parent, School 3)

Potential reasons for the high level of stress noted by participants are further explored later in the findings.

Secondly, some principals and teachers felt constrained by what counted towards the 400 hours of Wellbeing, believing that more took place within school life in relation to Wellbeing than was captured within these hours. These

interviewees felt that aspects of wellbeing that would have otherwise occurred during the school day were lost with the changes. A teacher in School 2, for example, explained how '*since it has become timetabled, we have lost so much in terms of wellbeing. I think it was a lot more when wellbeing was in the ethos of the school*' (Visit 2). Some called for the recognition of Wellbeing hours to be broadened to capture non-timetabled school activities. For example, the principal in School 2 argued that '*not everything we do for wellbeing counts, as it is not formalised*'. Similarly, the principal in School 5 felt that *'[the approach is] overly formalised and rigid—our priority was always wellbeing'*.

Wellbeing as a cause of and contributor to stress

Wellbeing appears to contribute to student stress within Junior Cycle. The addition of formal Wellbeing classes, through SPHE, CPSE, PE or other Wellbeing classes, appears to have acted as an additional stressor for some students due to the additional workload these classes contributed to their experiences at Junior Cycle.

Our analysis suggests that the enactment of Wellbeing was, at times, influenced by a more traditional academic approach to teaching and learning, adding to student's workload and stress. Many students, for example, explained how, while they enjoyed aspects of Wellbeing class, these inevitably became about work, completing homework or worksheets, rather than focusing on initiatives that actively supported their social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, environmental or physical wellbeing. As such students reported that such classes did not always have an overly positive impact on their wellbeing. Many described how Wellbeing classes *'nearly adds more stress'* (Student, School 3, Visit 1). This is further reflected below:

> We do get a good bit of Wellbeing but there's obviously more that we can be doing. We enjoy Wellbeing class a lot. Like we used to do walks, but we don't really do walks anymore. Everything relates back to work somehow even in Wellbeing class and even SPHE. Like we watch a movie, but then we have to fill out a worksheet on it. Like it's just never fully relaxed (Student, School 1, visit 1)

> Most of the time they are bored … they are talking about talk … I'd prefer wellbeing to be taught a skill and something fun instead of being taught to talk and write (Parent, School 3)

Parents also spoke about the stress and the additional workload Wellbeing classes contributed to their child's experiences of Junior Cycle, with homework, for example, being frequently assigned within such classes:

> My child is heavily involved in sport. One evening, she had athletics training, came home, quick shower, back out for a match. She came home from the match at about 10 at night and she said, '*oh no, I've Wellbeing homework to do'* and she cried … She has also said 'my *mindfulness colouring is stressing me out*!' I see the benefit of it but are we targeting the audience in the right way, at the right time? I don't know. (Parent, School 3, visit 2)

The sustained prioritization and focus on assessment

Assessment, particularly summative state examinations at the end of the three years, remained a central concern and priority for participants within this study. It appears that

despite a specific focus on Wellbeing, academic considerations continued to take precedence for students and staff. This continued prioritization of assessment appears to create a tension related to the enactment of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle and how participants experienced Wellbeing within the Framework.

The dominance of assessment is reflected in the fact that the majority of focus group students believed the purpose of Junior Cycle was to provide students with experience of a state examination in order to prepare for the Leaving Certificate examinations. Students in the Youthreach Centre, for example, believed that Junior Cycle was '*a practice, that shows you what the Leaving Cert is about*' (Youth Reach) while students in School 4 understood the Junior Cycle as '*preparing us for the Leaving Cert … [it] kind of gives us an example of what a state exam would be'*. Parents held similar views, perceiving the Junior Cycle as a '*trial run … introducing them to the state exam … the only relevance is that it's a state exam'* (School 5, visit 2).

We see evidence of the dominant focus on examinations also through the forms of classwork students engage in. Student survey responses show a decline in pair and group work as students' progress through Junior Cycle with the priority shifting towards examination preparation in second and third year. For example, Transition Year students were more likely to state that the most common type of learning they experienced during their Junior Cycle was working on their own (72%), in comparison to 53.6% for 3rd years and 45.8% for 2nd years (visit 2).

Interview and focus group data also highlights the continued focus and prioritization of assessment. The sustained emphasis on examinations, along with the additional workload associated with CBAs, was noted by participants to have resulted in an increase in student stress at this stage of education. This created tensions with the enactment of Wellbeing, as reflected in the student and teacher data below:

> The year one teachers, they weren't as strict in terms of studying and doing well in the exams. Obviously, they want to see you to do well, but it wasn't the main focus. The main focus was just understanding, but in year two, it's more or less like, *'Okay, you have to do well in the exams'* and then sometimes it's just kind of a bit of fear mongering, because they're just like, *'Oh, if you don't want to do well, you don't go to college'* and it's like, *'okay, I don't think Trinity College, if I do apply, are gonna look at my Christmas exams from second year* (Student, School 6, Visit 1)

> They say they are putting Wellbeing at the centre of junior cycle … but I can see it so clearly that Wellbeing is not at the centre of their education … the exam is at the centre (Teacher, School 5, Visit 2)

Within contexts where achievement in the state examination remained the main priority, Wellbeing classes were considered '*overkill'* and *doss classes'* and curtailing valuable time needed for exam subjects. The reduction in the number of classes in some examination subjects to facilitate Wellbeing was cited as a concern, particularly by teachers. A teacher in School 8, for example, felt that '*the emphasis on Wellbeing may impact teaching time for other subjects*' (Visit 2) while another explained how *'I don't have 5 periods a week now, I have 4 … because Wellbeing has come in'* (School 3, Visit 1). This, and the additional class time required to complete CBAs, resulted in teachers feeling under pressure to complete specifications and cover all of the relevant content for exams within a shorter time frame:

> The number of CBAs is ridiculous, and I do think that is impacting on Wellbeing. It's a very anxious period for students. As an SPHE teacher, that galls me. I'm like—just get rid of Wellbeing, that is how I feel about it . . . considering it isn't even a grade for them, it's just a descriptor, what is the point? (Teacher, School 5, Visit 2)

> Eight weeks of CBAs, and then you have students being taken out for these different things to do with Wellbeing. And that's all excellent. And it's brilliant. But we are missing time from class, and I don't know that the courses have compensated for that (Teacher, School 1, Visit 1)

> The Wellbeing hours are great. It is just the extent of them. Whatever about needing them, it is cutting down everything else. They are getting all that stuff in other subjects. I really think it is curtailing what we can do as well (Teacher, School 2, Visit 1)

Student focus groups were frequently dominated by conversations around workload and stress as students attempted to balance a focus on CBAs, homework, preparing for assessment and engaging with Wellbeing classes. According to students, this led to increased stress as they struggled to cope with these differing, and at times, competing dimensions of Junior Cycle. The following excerpts, while long, reflect this view in more detail:

> I think it's hard for time management, to balance everything when we're getting like piles and piles of homework but also being expected to do like two or three hours of study per night, but then they're also saying it's important for our Wellbeing to get out and go outside and play football or whatever. It's very hard to get it all in and they're telling you to get an early night so you can be refreshed for the morning, but I just find this like very difficult to do (Student, School 1, Visit 1)

> . . . so it feels like the work never ends. Like even on the weekends, we might finish our homework from that week, but we'll always have a project, or a test for the next week, or like just, there's always something to do and it's always like one on top of another and then we don't really have time for other activities outside of school, because they're always telling us we need to do sports, we need to do music, we need to have other things, but like, with all the tests and stuff, we can't and then sometimes, it feels like we don't have enough time to study in tests. So, we don't do as well as we could do because like we're trying to fit the studying in with activities, homework, and then in the last few days, we had three or four CBAs and then it feels like we can't really relax, because there's always something to be thinking about that we need to do (Student, School 3, Visit 1)

Discussion

The paper aimed to answer the research question: *How do students, teachers, principals and parents experience the enactment of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle?* This study found that, while frequently welcomed as a core aspect of schooling, the enactment of Wellbeing was affected by a number of factors resulting in Wellbeing being experienced in a way that does not match the spirit and vision that was originally intended. Students, teachers, principals and parents spoke about experiencing Wellbeing as a stressor, as something that was not always valued or as a restrictive policy that hampered a school's capacity to actually support students' wellbeing. We also found a certain level of incoherence within the Framework for Junior Cycle. While the intent of the curriculum change was to reduce the emphasis on assessment and involve students more actively in their learning, summative assessment remained a central concern for participants in this study, resulting in

students experiencing an incoherent, workload heavy and stressful curriculum. This appears to have a negative impact on their wellbeing, as they struggle with increased workload, additional Wellbeing classes, as well as continued pressure to study and perform in the exams.

When placed within an education system dominated by a scholar academic ideology (Schiro, 2012), a more learner centred focus on wellbeing is challenged. Priestley et al. (2023, p. 17), for example, argue that 'curriculum contestation occurs when these ideologies come into conflict', noting that while curriculum may espouse an orientation towards learner-centred ideologies, this can frequently be experienced as a secondary focus, with a more economic driven or knowledge focused ideology remaining the main priority. This creates 'tensions and contradictions' within this curriculum (Mutch, 2000, p. 20). These tensions are particularly exacerbated when a curriculum is incoherent, as we found the enactment of the Framework to be. Within an incoherent curriculum, assessment determines the values of a curriculum irrespective of the stated curriculum aims. As noted by Brown (2001, p. 1):

> Large-scale assessment programs play an important role in the communication of values and the expectations of what is considered worthy of recognition and reward. As a consequence, the design and operation of an assessment system can influence teacher behaviour and what the students consider to be important.

Not only did the dominant ideologies around the prioritization of assessment impact on the value placed on Wellbeing, but they also impacted on how wellbeing was understood. Understandings of Wellbeing appear to be filtered through a more scholar academic ideology, resulting in, for example, homework being allocated within Wellbeing classes or the frequent use of worksheets as a pedagogical approach. The benefit of Wellbeing was also viewed in terms of how it supported students in dealing with the stresses of the academic system—ultimately enabling them to achieve within the exams. While acknowledging that mental health and related stress is a core concern for young people today (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012), this is just one dimension of wellbeing. Focusing mainly on 'stress' also positions wellbeing from a negative deficit perspective (Fattore & Mason, 2009).

The approach to Wellbeing evident in these findings largely reflects a focus on *learning about Wellbeing* (Nohilly & Tynan, 2022), positioned as it is within timetabled periods. The technicist and bureaucratic nature of curriculum reform, and schooling, impacted here (Fink, 2003; Noddings, 2017; Sultana, 1992) with Wellbeing being rationalized, departmentalized and ordered to fit into an existing, rigid schooling system. It highlights the structural limitations and inability of many current education systems to respond to 21st century demands and needs. Within such systems, it is therefore unsurprising that the approach to Wellbeing remained in the *learning about Wellbeing* space.

While Wellbeing hours were intended to support the focus on and development of student wellbeing, many school principals and teachers experienced wellbeing in a restrictive and narrowed manner. Many participants felt that wellbeing was a natural part of the school ethos and something the school always valued, a stance which is supported by the research literature (Tynan & Nohilly, 2018). Our findings indicate that the changes were considered by participants to introduce a more formal and rigid structure which, ironically, had a negative impact on many students' wellbeing. While aspects of

school life beyond the classroom, such as whole-school initiatives supported students' wellbeing, these were not always captured within the 400-hour requirement. Neither was the centrality of relationships for one's wellbeing. Indeed, we suggest that the everyday human elements of *doing* wellbeing work at school will potentially become less of a priority as schools prioritize and direct their available energies towards achieving a version of Wellbeing work that can be officially accounted for within the prescribed 400 hours. *Learning for* wellbeing acknowledges this and focuses on students 'whole experience of school life … both within and beyond the classroom' (Tynan & Nohilly, 2018, p. 49). We believe that the implementation requirements for Wellbeing needs to move beyond counting hours of Wellbeing to include a greater focus on *Learning for* wellbeing. We introduce a new framing here, *Learning as* wellbeing, where all aspects of school learning and life, all subject areas and curriculum, build towards and contribute to one's wellbeing. If this is to be effective, the broader context of the school environment and education system needs to be supportive of students' wellbeing. A holistic view and understanding of wellbeing, beyond the allocation of timetabled hours, needs consideration. This includes ensuring that organic and unexpected aspects of school life that support wellbeing are valued and captured and that wellbeing is experienced across and within all subjects, curriculum and aspects of school life. It also means addressing the tensions and incoherence, both inherent and enacted, within the current Framework for Junior Cycle. Without consideration of this wider incoherence, where assessment continues to dominate the experiences of Junior Cycle, a focus on wellbeing is likely to remain 'tick the box' and undervalued. This is clearly articulated by Farrell and Mahon (2022, p. 53) who argue that:

> If we approach the increasingly pressing issue of mental health in a formalised way (e.g. 400 timetabled hours), we risk diminishing the very essence of the teacher—student relationship. And we risk losing the actual authenticity of human encounter. Because what really matters to any student's well-being is not one-off curricular input—a session on mindfulness practice, say, or a dedicated week of mental health promotion ('five ways to well-being', for example) —but meaningful and sustained relationship with the peers and adults in their lives.

While wellbeing is deemed to be the responsibility of every teacher, the current formalized approach results in Wellbeing as a siloed timetabled endeavour, positioned within SPHE or related programmes. This bestows the position for Wellbeing in the hands of SPHE teachers (or equivalent) and inoculates teachers of other subject areas, who can get on with the task of preparing students for assessment. This is supported by the work of Nohilly and Tynan (2022, p. 50) who found that 'teachers continue to teach their subject areas without consideration of the key skill of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle or the Wellbeing indicators, which are a feature of the junior cycle Wellbeing guideline'. Again, such an approach ignores the wider school climate, the centrality of relationships and prevents sufficient focus on *learning for and as wellbeing*.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the international research by providing rich, longitudinal and largescale understandings of how a number of key educational stakeholders experienced the enactment of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle. A core strength of this study are

the multiple perspectives it draws on to capture a clear understanding of how schools experience the enactment of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle. Central to this understanding are the views and experiences of students and parents, perspectives that can often be overlooked in curricular research. While the study found that a focus on wellbeing was often welcomed and viewed as a core aspect of schooling, it raises concerns regarding the enactment of Wellbeing at Junior Cycle. We found that Wellbeing programmes and classes were not always valued and were narrowly understood as relating to stress management and ironically often caused stress. We found that despite curricular aims to the contrary, summative assessment remained a dominant concern and priority within Junior Cycle. This curriculum incoherence and the persistent prioritization of examination results means that, within such contexts, Wellbeing is unlikely to ever hold parity of esteem. For Wellbeing to be truly valued and enacted, we need to look more widely at the entire education system within which it is placed, ensuring that it offers a coherent curriculum that actually positions students' wellbeing at its centre. Consideration also needs to be given to the wider school climate and culture and how this supports *learning for and as* wellbeing, moving beyond the mere quantification of Wellbeing hours. If these were to occur, wellbeing may actually be able to go to school and be enacted as intended!

Notes

1. Wellbeing at Junior Cycle has a number of dimensions. Firstly, Wellbeing is a principle underpinning the Framework for Junior Cycle. Wellbeing is also a curricula dimension of Junior Cycle, with students engaging in 400 hours of formal curriculum. An individual's wellbeing is a related but separate issue encompassing social, emotional and psychological aspects (Nohilly & Tynan, 2022). The differences between these are expressed where possible within the paper, with the use of an upper-case W when referring to a curricula requirement and a lower-case w when discussing an individual's wellbeing
2. Schools, depending on their context and needs, may also have access to Home-School Liaison Officers, Student Support Teams and Chaplains to support students' wellbeing.
3. Transition Year is an optional one-year programme offered between Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle and focuses on the students broader social and personal development.
4. Participation in the study was voluntary, as per ethical approval, and while all relevant students, teachers and parents were invited to participate during both visits, they were free to withdraw from the study and not participate in the study at any stage. As a result, some teachers, parents and students, for example, choose not to take part during the second visit, while new teachers, students and parents also volunteered to take part during the second visit. This resulted in differences across the data set between the two visits.

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