

# **Marino Institute of Education**

A Case Study into Junior School Teachers' Perspectives on Wellbeing.

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. The work was done under the guidance of Dr. Marian Farrelly at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

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Candidate

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## Abstract

The topic of wellbeing is currently a significant theme in educational research. It is clear from the literature that wellbeing is rarely explicitly defined due to its complex nature. However a person's wellbeing is something that must be protected in order to experience happiness and success in life. In terms of wellbeing and education, research suggests that there is a link between mental health, academic success and life opportunities and for this reason schools are seen to be crucial in promoting wellbeing. In this way, many Irish primary schools are now introducing the roll-out of specific wellbeing programmes to ensure that children are receiving emotional education from a young age. The *FRIENDS for Life* Programme, *The Incredible Years* Programmes and *Zippy's Friends* are examples of the latest evidence based intervention programmes that promote well-being in primary schools with a specific focus on resilience, childhood anxiety prevention and emotional wellbeing.

This study investigates into the topic of wellbeing in junior primary schools. In particular, it explores junior school teachers' wellbeing perceptions and practices. The objectives of the research are to examine teacher's understanding and perspectives on the importance of wellbeing and to explore teachers' understanding of the support frameworks available to them on a programme or school basis and their attitudes to these. This particular piece of research endeavours to analyse teachers' perceptions of the role of parents in the development of children's wellbeing and to investigate the specific challenges of the development of wellbeing in junior primary schools. In addition, the role of formalised testing and the impact it can have on children's wellbeing is explored. This case study is located in the constructivist research paradigm.



The research data finds that teachers feel responsible for the development of children's wellbeing in conjunction with children's parents. Participating teachers believe that a shared responsibility between teachers and parents is essential if children's holistic development is to be catered for. The interviewees recognise the need to teach emotional education but many feel under-resourced and underqualified to tackle it. Outside of the demands of the curriculum, participants report that children of junior school age require a vast amount of care and nurture and this can be emotionally and physically challenging for teachers. The data presents conflicting opinions on the impact of formalised testing in junior primary schools. The findings suggest that an emotional curriculum be introduced into primary schools and that teachers should be engaging in more continuous professional development in order to feel confident when teaching emotional education. Collaborative relationships between schools and parents should be treated with utmost respect and importance to support children's wellbeing. Overall, the results of this particular research emphasises the valuable role parents and teachers play in a child's life. As the research reminds us, academic achievement should not take precedence over a child's emotional development. Undeniably, safeguarding children's well-being is necessary for a successful and happy future.

## Chapter 1 – Introduction and Background

### 1.1 Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the topic of wellbeing in primary schools. The publication of *Wellbeing in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* (DES;HSE, 2015a), the *Aistear* Framework (NCCA, 2009a & 2009b) and the *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines* (2017) has generated more and more interest in children's mental health and wellbeing on a wider scale in education, from birth right up to the years of adolescence. Primary schools, and in particular schools under the DEIS scheme, are now advocating the roll-out of specific wellbeing programmes to ensure that children are receiving emotional education from a young age. This study aims to investigate wellbeing perspectives and practices of junior school teachers in three Dublin primary schools. Its purpose is to analyse and compare their perceptions of wellbeing in education as well as their own facilitation of wellbeing in their classrooms and schools. From a teachers' perspective, this study endeavours to discover the specific people and environments children require to enhance their overall development. The study uses a case study research design to explore wellbeing perspectives and practices of a community of junior primary school teachers. This method allows a rare opportunity to explore junior school teachers' approach to wellbeing practices in particular as literature suggests that the wellbeing of children should be promoted and enhanced from a young age. This chapter introduces the topic, the relevance of this particular research is discussed, the overall aim of the study is presented, the objectives are identified, and an outline of the study is provided.

## **1.2 Relevance of this Research**

While personal and professional interests provide motive and opportunity for this study, the researcher's main motivation stems from a desire to heighten awareness of wellbeing practices in junior schools and to celebrate the hard work that is already happening in schools in an effort to enhance children's wellbeing. Meaningful educational experiences can significantly contribute to a child's social and emotional growth. 21<sup>st</sup> century living can be demanding and challenging, thus it is imperative that the youth of today are given the opportunity to develop personal qualities and skills such as, resilience and perseverance in order to live a happy and successful life. Despite the fact that current literature and educational frameworks advocate the teaching of emotional education, it appears that this is still quite a new phenomenon for Irish primary schools. Indeed, there is thirty minutes a week allocated to the teaching of Social, Personal and Health Education through the use of the *Social, Personal and Health Education Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999b); however, is this really enough for our children? Do the children of Ireland deserve more time to explore themselves in terms of their feelings and the validity of their feelings, to discover coping strategies that works best for them when struggling to deal with life challenges and to learn how to establish positive relationships to support them in their daily lives?

## **1.3 Overall Aim of the Research**

The overall aim of this research is to examine teachers' own attitudes to wellbeing and to investigate how the wellbeing of children is met through the practice of the teacher and of the school. Ultimately, the purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of what the term wellbeing represents in education and how children's wellbeing can impact on their education. It is hoped that this in-depth understanding

can facilitate positive change and bring about meaningful improvements to wellbeing practices in junior primary schools.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

This research involves carrying out twelve semi-structured interviews in an attempt to understand participating teachers' perceptions of wellbeing and their experiences of establishing emotional educational strategies in their classrooms to promote the wellbeing of the children in their care.

The objectives of the study are:

- To review the relevant literature pertaining to the topic of wellbeing on a national and international level.
- To examine teacher's understanding and perspectives on the importance of wellbeing.
- To explore teachers' understanding of the support frameworks available to them on a programme or school basis and their attitudes to these.
- To analyse teachers' perceptions of the role of parents in the development of children's wellbeing.
- To investigate the particular challenges of the development of wellbeing in junior primary schools.

#### **1.5 Outline Structure of the Study**

Chapter one introduces the topic of wellbeing in education and highlights the relevance of this particular research. It presents the overall aim that drives the research as well as outlining the objectives of the study.

Chapter two presents a review of the literature relevant to the topic of wellbeing. The international struggle of defining wellbeing is discussed and the link between wellbeing and educational achievement is examined. Following this, academic resilience and buoyancy will be explored to gain a deeper understanding of what it means for a child to cope with daily setbacks to life changing adversities. The need for and impact of formalised testing in primary schools is also examined. In addition, equality in education and early childhood education is investigated with particular reference to wellbeing. Finally, the issue of child protection is scrutinised as the protection and safety of children is a primary concern for all schools to successfully support children's wellbeing.

Chapter three describes the methodological approach adopted for the purpose of this research. The context of the study is explored along with the important role educational research plays in relation to practitioners' own professional development, knowledge and expertise in the field of education. The research philosophy underpinning the research is described. The reason for selecting a qualitative approach to the research is presented. The use of a case study research design is explained and justified. A detailed account of how the research was conducted, including the data collection process and the data analysis is provided. Ethical considerations involved in the research are identified and discussed as are limitations of the research design.

Chapter four presents and discusses the findings of the research. The findings are analysed, compared and contrasted in the light of the findings from the literature review. Participating teachers' understanding of wellbeing is examined in this chapter. The main theme identified is the valuable role that both parents and teachers play in the development of children's wellbeing. This idea of a shared responsibility between both parties is a recurring theme throughout the chapter. Other key findings, such as, the

significance of children's nutrition and rest to their wellbeing are presented, the purpose of formalised testing and the impact it can have on children's wellbeing is identified, emotional educational strategies are discussed and participating teacher's lack of confidence in this particular area of education is highlighted.

Chapter five concludes the research. The researcher's conclusions based on the interpretation of the data are presented. These conclusions underpin the researcher's recommendations for a more effective approach to wellbeing practices in schools. Areas that the researcher feels require further research are identified.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Chapter one examined the background, focus and objectives of this particular study as well as the overall structure of the paper. This chapter will review the literature surrounding the topic of wellbeing both on a national and international level. In particular, the role of wellbeing in education will be explored in order to gain a greater understanding of the value placed on wellbeing in our schools today. Literature concerning the idea of academic resilience and buoyancy will be investigated in an attempt to recognise that all children require some level of emotional support regardless of socioeconomic differences. The need for and impact of formalised testing in primary schools will be examined. In addition, equality in education and early childhood education will be discussed with particular reference to wellbeing. Finally, the issue of child protection will be studied as the protection and safety of children is a primary concern for all schools to support children's wellbeing.

### **2.2 Wellbeing**

Internationally, interest in wellbeing has increased in recent years. Although the topic of wellbeing is used and applied in a variety of systems, be it in education, health, politics or government policy – it is rarely explicitly defined (Dodge, Daly, Huyton & Sanders, 2012; McLellan & Steward, 2014; Soutter, 2011). McNaught (2011) believes that wellbeing cannot be easily defined “because of its inherent complexity” (as cited in La Placa, McNaught & Knight, 2013, p. 116). In their research, Dodge et al. (2012, p. 223) aim to create an actual definition of wellbeing instead of focusing on “dimensions

or descriptions of wellbeing” which they believe takes up a lot of the research on this particular topic. The authors propose a new definition of wellbeing as the balance point between an individual’s resource pool and the challenges they face. Using a visual representation of a see-saw, they state “stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing, and vice-versa” (Dodge et al., 2012, p. 230).

Similarly, La Placa, McNaught, & Knight (2013) discuss McNaught’s definitional framework of wellbeing, they believe the main benefit of it is “its attempt to establish a common language and conceptual boundaries in a field of study which has been difficult to make sense of” (La Placa et al, 2013, p. 122). The authors argue that the framework endeavours to provide clarity and holism to research and practice and it may be deemed useful in the creation and design of wellbeing interventions as well as wellbeing policy development. McNaught’s definitional framework of wellbeing considers all aspects of wellbeing as the individual perspective does not take over as such. Thus in an attempt to define wellbeing, the framework consists of four areas of wellbeing; individual wellbeing, family wellbeing, community wellbeing and societal wellbeing.

In 2010, former British Prime Minister, David Cameron, spoke about the critical role wellbeing plays in society today. He firmly believes that people’s self-worth and wellbeing increases when they have more control over their lives – by allowing them become “authors of their own destiny”. He makes particular reference to relationships and how peoples’ wellbeing often depends on the quality of their relationships with others which plays a prominent role in McNaught’s definitional framework of



wellbeing and is also a major focal point for this study. According to Fieldhouse and Bannigan (2014) wellbeing has been studied from two viewpoints – a sociological one which focuses on social capital and a psychological one which focuses on mental capital. From a sociological stance, wellbeing is considered a relational experience where participation and inclusion in society are at the heart of its very being. Wellbeing and mental capital places “less emphasis on relationships” and instead focuses on “what is personally derived and internalised by the individual” (Fieldhouse & Bannigan, 2014, p. 18). However, the authors argue that wellbeing may not be something that is either one of these but in fact, both. They use the phrase “psychosocial phenomenon” to describe how both social experience and psychological state together contribute to a person’s healthy wellbeing and is defined by Nelson and Prilleltensky, “wellbeing consists of individual components (personal, relational and collective needs) and of the synergy created by all of them together. In the absence of any one component wellbeing cannot really be achieved” (as cited in Fieldhouse & Bannigan, 2014, p. 19). The complex task of defining wellbeing dominates much of the current literature surrounding the topic. However, the relationship between wellbeing and educational achievement among children is something that cannot be overlooked.

### **2.3 Wellbeing and Educational Achievement**

The Primary School Curriculum outlines that by providing children with a successful and happy school experience their self-esteem and self-confidence levels are enhanced which in turn motivates them to learn (NCCA, 1999a). Similarly, Noddings (2003) believes that the role of education is to support people in becoming their best selves, to learn how to be happy. Danby & Hamilton (2016) are of the opinion that there is a link between mental health, academic success and life opportunities and for

this reason schools are seen to be crucial in promoting wellbeing. Children who are anxious, angry, or depressed are not in the best psychological state to focus on learning tasks at school and their behaviour can reflect these negative emotions (Roffey, 2016). The Irish Primary Principals' Network reports that anxiety has replaced neglect as one of the most serious problems facing children (O' Brien, 2018).

Ultimately the idea of wellbeing in education derives from the importance of care in education. Noddings (2007) maintains that “the ethic of care begins its theorizing with basic human relationships” (p. 182). Hayes (2007) would be in agreement with Noddings as a nurturing pedagogy is discussed in her research paper. This type of pedagogy “fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue and planning, leading to the shared construction of knowledge” (NCCA, 2007, p. 7). Hayes believes that the word ‘nurture’ is more active and engaging than ‘care’ and that positive and engaging interactions between adult and child are what a nurturing pedagogy represents.

The role of educators is to empower the child to become active agents in their own learning and decision making which supports their psychological wellbeing (NCCA, 1999a). Young people need to be given the emotional tools to express and discuss their feelings in an attempt to develop emotional resilience (Barry, 2018); therefore it is crucial that classroom practitioners do not lose sight of the role they can play through positive interactions with the children in their care. Noddings (2005) is also of the opinion that responsiveness is at the heart of caring and that it is the job of the educator to connect with the child to make both lives, that of the carer and the cared for, ethically better. The Primary School Curriculum clearly states that “a relationship of trust between teacher and child creates an environment in which the child is happy in school and motivated to learn” (NCCA, 1999a, p. 20). Providing children with choice,

being responsive and allowing them to make decisions for themselves helps children in becoming more resilient, builds their emotional stability and in turn supports them when they are faced with problems in their own lives. In Ireland, the publication of *Wellbeing in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* (DES;HSE, 2015a) has generated more and more interest in children's mental health and wellbeing. According to the guidelines, wellbeing can be defined as

The presence of a culture, ethos and environment which promotes dynamic, optimal development and flourishing for all in the school community. It encompasses the domains of relationship, meaning, emotion, motivation, purpose, and achievement. It includes quality teaching and learning for the development of all elements related to healthy living whether cultural, academic, social, emotional, physical or technological with particular focus on resilience and coping (DES; HSE, 2015a, p. 9).

The holistic development of the child is emphasised in this definition of wellbeing and recognises that wellbeing in primary schools is determined by many factors, namely, the environment, relationships within that environment and by teaching and learning. It also highlights how important it is not to focus solely on academic achievement in our schools. Recognising the holistic development of children is not a new idea in Irish education, in fact it is one of the key principles of the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999a). Undeniably wellbeing is for all which is why a caring approach to education is needed, the simple reason being many children face greater challenges than others.

## 2.4 Academic Resilience Vs Academic Buoyancy

Academic resilience is a recurring theme throughout current educational literature in terms of wellbeing and educational achievement. Academic resilience, in its broadest sense, refers to “a student’s capacity to overcome acute or chronic adversities that are seen as major assaults on educational processes” (Martin & Marsh, 2009, p. 353). Roffey (2016) maintains that children facing these adversities often are not dealing with one at a time, instead they are multiple and interactive. Although it has been recognised that resilience derives from interactive and positive relationships between family, community and school, research suggests that the promotion of protective factors in the school context can positively impact children’s wellbeing. A whole-school framework for wellbeing is proposed whereby resilience is fostered by “supportive relationships, high expectations with clear and consistent boundaries, opportunities to participate and contribute, teaching social and emotional skills such as co-operation, communication skills and problem-solving, giving pupils agency, and working collaboratively with families” (Roffey, 2016, p. 33). Not unlike the definition of wellbeing highlighted in *Wellbeing in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* (DES;HSE, 2015a) the holistic development of the child is of vital importance in Roffey’s proposed whole-school framework for wellbeing in an attempt to achieve academic success and lifelong happiness. According to Rutter (2006) a resilient person is described as having “high levels of self-confidence, good social problem-solving skills and a heightened sense of self-efficacy” (as cited in Ruttledge, Devitt, Greene, Mullany, Charles, Frehill & Moriarty, 2016).

While the development of resilience in young children plays a vital role in education, research indicates that resilience typically focuses on the minority of children in society, such as, ethnic groups, chronic underachievers or students with

learning disabilities. Through their work on academic resilience, Martin & Marsh (2008, 2009) recognise the majority of children who do not face chronic adversities but who do face daily challenges in their academic life coining the term ‘academic buoyancy’. Simply put, academic buoyancy describes one’s ability to negotiate the ups and downs of everyday academic life (Martin & Marsh, 2009). It is concerned with building on strengths and underlining the proactive rather than reactive approaches to challenges and setbacks. Examples of such challenges and setbacks include low-level stress and confidence, dips in motivation and engagement, dealing with negative feedback and typical daily pressures (Martin & Marsh, 2008). Seeing as wellbeing is for all, not just a select few, the notion of academic buoyancy is something that could contribute to the holistic development of children in education. Research carried out by Miller, Connolly & Maguire (2013) was heavily influenced by Martin & Marsh’s three key proximal dimensions of academic buoyancy, which include, psychological factors (self-esteem & psychological health), school engagement factors (school environment & enjoyment of education) and family and peer relationship factors (parent relations & peer relationships). The main aim of this research was to test the relationship between wellbeing and educational achievement. The authors argue that these six indicators provide us with an idea of the type of issues that need to be tackled with children in order to build up a general level of buoyancy. Interestingly their findings suggest that neither deprivation nor gender demand a targeted approach to wellbeing and instead recommend that a more universal approach to the promotion of wellbeing across a school would be appropriate in order to improve educational achievement (Miller et al, 2013; Roffey, 2016).

In Ireland, principals are urging the Department of Education to be “more proactive in providing targeted training and funding for wellbeing programmes in

schools” (O’ Brien, 2018). The *FRIENDS for Life* Programme has been piloted in recent years with the aim of reducing childhood anxiety through the promotion of emotional resilience. Anxiety is considered the greatest threat to wellbeing in school-aged children and adolescents (NBSS, 2013; Danby & Hamilton, 2016). The *FRIENDS for Life* programme recognises how important teachers are in the lives of children; this is demonstrated in the way teachers are invited to become lead facilitators in the delivery of the programme following training from the National Educational Psychological Service. As school is deemed a secure base for many children, school-based mental health programmes are considered superior to clinical settings as they “provide opportunities for normalisation, social interactions, modelling, peer and group feedback and exposure to possible feared interpersonal contexts and/or school situations” (NBSS, 2013, p. 4). Using behavioural, physiological and cognitive strategies, children are taught how to identify specific feelings related to emotional distress, how to relax, how to change negative thoughts into positive ones, and how to overcome everyday problems (Ruttledge et al., 2016). The skills based programme is taught over ten sessions and reports claim that the team teaching method works very well as educators feel supported by their colleagues. The four main sources of worry children experience are highlighted in the ‘*FRIENDS for Life*’ Research Project Overview and Findings and include tests/schoolwork, bullying, loss/death and other fears (NBSS, 2013). Research carried out in 27 Irish primary schools found that the implementation of the *Friends for Life* programme resulted in positive outcomes for students including “improved emotional wellbeing, greater coping skills and an enhanced sense of connectedness with school” (Ruttledge et al., 2016, p. 69). Anxiety affects educational attainment which is why the implementation of school-based mental

health programmes such as *FRIENDS for Life* is essential in protecting the wellbeing of all children.

## **2.5 Wellbeing and Formalised Testing**

Assessment is considered a key component of the learning and teaching cycle as it supports teachers in identifying the short term and long term learning needs of the child and informs future planning. The role of assessment is widely supported as it is seen to help the child in becoming more self-aware as a learner as well as ensuring quality in education (NCCA, 1999a). There are a number of classroom assessment methods teachers are invited to use; self-assessment, conferencing, portfolio assessment, concept mapping, questioning, teacher observation, teacher-designed tasks and standardised testing (NCCA, 2007). Research suggests that there is a need to strike a better balance between classroom and large-scale assessment as “it is essential to recognize that one type of assessment does not fit all purposes or contexts of use” (Pellegrino, 2014, p. 68). Perhaps if a better balance between the two was established children may feel success more frequently.

Testing was named a main worry for children in 2013 (NBSS, 2013) and very often test results and scores are used to determine whether a child is successful in school or not. Gibbons & Silva (2011) report that parent’s overall perception of school quality is dominated by academic performance. Irish primary schools use standardised testing as a way of reporting to parents on their child’s achievement and progress in specific subject areas. Since 2011 the Department of Education and Skills requests that Irish primary schools administer standardised achievement tests in English reading and Mathematics at the end of second, fourth and sixth classes. Standardised achievement tests provide information on whether pupils performed better or worse than a

hypothetical average student (DES, 2016). According to the NCCA (2007), standardised testing has two main strengths; it indicates achievement compared to performance nationally and secondly it helps to identify children's learning strengths and weaknesses. The results of standardised tests are included in children's school report cards at the end of the school year and parents are informed whether their child achieved a score that is considered well above average/above average/high average/average/low average/below average or well below average compared to children of the same age around the country.

The purpose of administering standardized tests is "to establish whether a child is making appropriate progress and, if not, to put in place the necessary measures to address the child's particular learning needs" (Wall, 2007). Research indicates that children from marginalised communities experience difficulty undertaking standardised tests as their experience with the language used might be very limited whereas other children are comfortable with the language as they may have heard certain words being used in a familiar context before (Mac Ruairc, 2009). Likewise, Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh (2004) refer to the development of linguistic capabilities among classes noting that those whose class codes are synonymous with schooling itself are at more of an advantage than others in terms of assessment and academic success. One could argue that the use of standardised testing hinders the holistic development of children as it focuses solely on academic achievement ignoring other qualities that are essential to student success, however, it can be considered a reliable methodology for teachers who are struggling to identify whether or not a child requires additional resources in the form of learning support which can be difficult to ascertain when using other forms of assessment. Barblett & Moloney (2010) believe that children are spending much of their school time preparing for tests which can happen when teachers



feel the need “to teach to the test” due to mounting pressures from parents and schools. Teachers can lose sight of what is of greatest worth to the class or to particular individuals due to this narrowing of instruction (Pellegrino, 2014). Perhaps teaching students how to respond more effectively to anxiety and stress will help to minimize the effects of standardized testing on students’ well-being.

## **2.6 Wellbeing and Equality in Education**

Having examined the prominent role formalised testing plays in maintaining standards, it is evident that the development of children’s literacy and numeracy skills are considered an essential part of formal schooling in Ireland. However, according to Baker et al. (2004), school should be an enabling and enriching experience for young people “that not only develops their capabilities, but also reinforces their sense of well-being and self-esteem” (p. 143). As mentioned previously, providing children with choice and allowing them to make decisions for themselves supports children in becoming more resilient, which is an example of the impact of education on one’s own personal development. Interestingly this is also considered an essential component of equality. In particular, Equality of Condition, as explained by Baker et al. (2004), stands for conditions not associated necessarily with material objects but instead focuses on the respect people have for others, their power in society, the love they experience and the love they can give to others as well as the quality of their working and learning experiences. Ultimately Equality of Condition embodies a pro-active and positive approach to diversity and inclusion. Thus, in terms of equality in education, Baker et al. (2004) outline the four key dimensions of equality of condition; equality in educational and related resources, equality of respect and recognition, equality of power and equality of love, care and solidarity.

While it is recognised that education alone cannot eradicate inequalities within society, changes can indeed happen. The authors suggest that equality of respect and recognition can be established by developing a fully inclusive educational environment whereby differences between people and groups are valued, accommodated and celebrated. The Education Act (1998) promotes political equality in education as the third object of the Act endeavours “to promote equality of access to and participation in education and to promote the means whereby students may benefit from education” (p. 10). Baker et al. (2004) maintain that equality of power is concerned with participation in decision making which in educational terms contributes to the voice of the child, and a child’s sense of agency and empowerment. According to Kangas, Venninen & Ojala (2016) concentrating on children’s participation can result in a better understanding of children’s competence, vulnerability and power issues. The Children’s Society’s Good Childhood Report reveals that research with children around the world confirms that children want to be listened to and “are keen to be asked for their views on topics that matter to them” (The Children’s Society, 2017, p. 7). Thus, equality of power encourages all groups in society to involve themselves in the planning and development of education policy.

Lynch (2009) argues that there is a genuine need to recognise that people require love and care, not alone to survive but to grow and develop. Moreover, Lynch (2009) maintains there is a false belief that human beings are just “economic actors, devoid of relationality” (p. 410). According to Baker et al. (2004) the affective domain which represents relationships of love, care and solidarity has been largely neglected in education resulting in profoundly negative effects. Emotional work is considered a fundamental factor in teaching and learning, however, Baker et al. (2004) believe a much bigger focus needs to be put on educating people about their emotions

and affective relations - to know how to name one's feelings and to recognise and appreciate the feelings of others requires education. As reported by Green and Batool, "teachers who influence values, beliefs and attitudes are those who address the affective domain in their teaching strategies" (2017, p. 36) which is in line with the belief that children are happier to learn when there is a relationship of trust between teacher and student (NCCA, 1999a). It could be said that Equality of Condition addresses the need for recognising that wellbeing is indeed for all, and that education plays a pivotal role in its development.

## **2.7 Wellbeing and Early Childhood Education**

Early childhood education is defined as "the arrangements for the education and care of children from birth to statutory school age (age six in Ireland)" (Dunphy, 2008, p. 55). Hayes and Kernan (2008) discuss the affective dimension of learning in early years education whereby a sense of security and belonging is prioritised. The authors contest that this dimension of learning allows one to focus on valuable learning dispositions, such as, motivation, learner identity and confidence. It has been widely recognised that early educational experiences contribute significantly to future outcomes thus it is of paramount importance that all dimensions of children's development in the early years contribute to their well-being in addition to their academic success (Stipek, 2006). Within the Reggio Emilia setting, Magaluzzi talks of the 'rich child' – "the child who is rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent" (as cited in Waller & Davis, 2014, p. 34). In line with Equality of Condition, Dunphy is of the opinion that within a sociocultural framework young children are characterised as "active rather than passive, independent rather than dependant and powerful rather than powerless" (2008, p. 66) and at the heart of this process is dialogue and interaction.

In order for early childhood education to be successful in enhancing a child's wellbeing and love of learning, it is vital that an agreed pedagogy is adhered to by practitioners both in early childhood settings and junior primary schools.

As play is considered an essential part of childhood, a pedagogy of play could be considered the most effective type of pedagogy in early years settings.

Unfortunately, current literature suggests that an agreed pedagogy of play is missing.

Stephens (2010) states that it is necessary to engage in a discussion about pedagogy due to the fact that pedagogical understanding makes a positive difference to practice.

When discussing play as pedagogy, the autonomy of the child is essential as this is considered to be one of the most empowering experiences a child can have. Meaning is created through the medium of play most likely because children have control over their actions and the situations they can co-construct (Canning, 2007). *Aistear* (2009) makes reference to children's choice on a number of occasions in both its *Guidelines for Good Practice* and its *Principles and Themes*. When referring to children *Aistear* states that "they love to make choices about when, what, where, how, and with whom to play" (NCCA, 2009a, p. 53). Choice emerges under a number of areas in the framework not only in relation to children's well-being, but also in relation to the effect of adult-child interactions during play.

In Ireland, the *DEIS Action Plan* (2017) recognises early interventions are needed for emotional wellbeing. Similarly, *Wellbeing in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion: Resources for Promoting Wellbeing in Primary Schools* states "early childhood marks the beginning of a lifelong journey of development and lays the foundations for positive healthy learning and well-being" (DES; HSE, 2015b, p. 3). One of the earliest DEIS initiatives brought about was the founding of the Early Start Programme which at the time urged the wider education sector to review its

position (Hayes & Kernan, 2008). Established in 1994, the Early Start Programme is a one year preschool intervention scheme. The aim of this programme is to meet the needs of children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months in designated disadvantaged areas who are at risk of not reaching their full potential within the school system. The holistic development of the child is taken into account as “the project involves an educational programme to enhance overall development” and “promote positive educational outcomes” (DES, 2014, p. 1). In recognising the parent/guardian as the prime educator of the child parental involvement is one of the core elements of the Early Start Programme. Similarly, parental involvement is one of the key aims of the *Aistear* framework as it strives to “support parents as their children’s primary educators during early childhood, and promotes effective partnerships between parents and practitioners” (NCCA, 2009b, p. 6). Undeniably, the promotion of wellbeing is a collaborative process involving parents, schools, teachers and the community. Thus, the establishment of strong home school links brings about parental interest in education and school life in general which in turn supports the wellbeing of the child.

*Aistear* is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years. According to Dunphy (2008) the framework was brought about in an effort to “reframe the learning experiences of young children around processes rather than subjects” and more importantly to promote a child-centred pedagogy rather than a teacher-centred one through the medium of play (p. 65). The *Aistear* framework describes children’s learning and development using four interweaving themes; *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking*. The framework defines the theme of well-being stating that it is “about children being confident, happy and healthy” (NCCA, 2009b, p.16). The theme of *Well-being* is presented using four aims;

Aim 1: Children will be strong psychologically and socially.

Aim 2: Children will be as healthy and fit as they can be.

Aim 3: Children will be creative and spiritual.

Aim 4: Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life (NCCA, 2009b, p. 17).

Each aim is divided into six learning goals which clearly state that the adult and the child work together to make these goals achievable, “In partnership with the adult, children will...” (NCCA, 2009b, p. 17). Not unlike much of the literature explored already in this paper, *Aistear* encourages and supports the development of successful relationships through positive and engaging interactions. The framework states that well-being consists of two main elements: psychological well-being, which focuses on feelings and emotions and physical well-being. It is interesting to note that both *The DEIS Action Plan (2017)* and *Wellbeing in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion (2015a)* advocate the use of the *Aistear* framework in an effort to promote the wellbeing of children in primary schools in Ireland.

## **2.8 Child Protection**

The safeguarding of all children should be at the forefront of every school. The revised publication of *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* gives statutory responsibility to individuals who are mandated to report child protection concerns as mandated persons are in a prime position to protect children from harm (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017). As daunting a responsibility as that may seem, the protection and safety of children needs to be every

school's principal concern. If this is not the case, a child's wellbeing could be seriously affected. According to *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (2017), child abuse can be categorised into four different types: neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. Child neglect has been reported as the most common type of abuse in Ireland and internationally. Neglect can be defined as "an omission of care, where a child's health, development or welfare is impaired by being deprived of food, clothing, warmth, hygiene, medical care, intellectual stimulation or supervision and safety" (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017, pp. 7-8). Chronic neglect can have harmful effects on a child's mental health and wellbeing.

The idea of having one's basic needs met in order to survive is associated with Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. For many years Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs has been used as a way of understanding human behaviour and the needs of individuals. Maslow's model is based on two groupings: deficiency needs and growth needs. Each lower need must be met within the deficiency needs before moving to the next higher level. Deficiency needs include basic needs essential for survival, including, food, water and shelter. Once these needs have been met, the individual moves to the next level to seek safety, for example, freedom from anxiety and stress (Benson & Dundis, 2003). Only when these lower level needs have been met can people's attention move up to more psychological and subtle needs, for example, intimacy, self-esteem and personal growth (Razzkazova, Ivanova & Sheldon, 2016). Maslow's model demonstrates how difficult it must be for many children to meet their growth needs as there are other barriers to face before they come to these which is why ensuring children's safety and protection in an attempt to support their wellbeing can be such a complex task for educators.

## 2.9 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the literature relevant to the topic of wellbeing and more specifically the link between children's wellbeing and educational achievement. The literature is clear on the fact that there is an international struggle in defining wellbeing highlighting the complexity of its nature. The *Primary School Curriculum* (1999a), the *Aistear* framework (2009a & 2009b), *Wellbeing in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* (DES;HSE, 2015a) and *The DEIS Action Plan* (2017) have been explored in an attempt to discover how much emphasis is placed on wellbeing in primary schools today. The majority of the literature states that it is necessary to teach young children specific coping strategies to deal with setbacks and challenges that can appear at any time in life. Key questions relating to the need for and purpose of formalised testing in primary schools were addressed as the literature surrounding this particular topic in education appears to be quite ambivalent. The principles of Equality of Condition were investigated as it highlights the need to recognise and celebrate diversity and inclusion within society, and in particular the need for emotional education in our schools. The literature review concludes by identifying child protection as a fundamental factor in the protection of children's wellbeing in primary schools. Chapter Three will focus on the methodology design of this study.



## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter considered the literature associated with this study. In particular, wellbeing and educational achievement, equality in education, and quality in early years education were explored. This chapter describes the methodological framework for this research. It will highlight the context of the research, the importance of educational research, the paradigms within this type of research and quantitative and qualitative methods of research. It will also discuss the significance of validity and reliability within research. Finally, ethical considerations and limitations of a small-scale study such as this will be addressed. The overall aim of this research is to examine teachers' own attitudes to wellbeing and to investigate how the wellbeing of children is met through the practice of the teacher and of the school.

### **3.2 Research Context**

Education is the most fundamental part of any person's life. Ultimately, education provides humans with so much more than the ability to read and write. Specific life skills, such as, cognitive skills and social and emotional skills can be developed in schools as schools can provide safe and supportive environments for children. As such, meaningful educational experiences can significantly contribute to a child's social and emotional growth. 21<sup>st</sup> century living can be demanding and challenging, thus it is imperative that the youth of today are given the opportunity to develop personal qualities and skills such as, resilience, perseverance, the ability to work with peers, the ability to handle their own emotions and the ability to communicate with others appropriately in order to live a happy and successful life. In

Ireland, many publications outlining the importance of addressing the social and emotional needs of children have generated huge interest in children's wellbeing. *Wellbeing in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* (2015a), *The DEIS Action Plan* (2017), *Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines* (2017), and *The Aistear Framework* (2009a, 2009b) are examples of the heightened interest in wellbeing in recent years. Moreover, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills undertook a new type of collaborative research with schools in 2015 which focused on schools' provision for the wellbeing of students. This was the first of its kind and emphasised the value of recognising wellbeing as a fundamental part of education.

The *FRIENDS for Life* Programme, *The Incredible Years* Programmes and *Zippy's Friends* are examples of the latest evidence based intervention programmes that promote well-being in primary schools with a specific focus on resilience, childhood anxiety prevention and emotional wellbeing (DES; HSE, 2015b). The roll-out of these programmes in primary schools emphasises the genuine need for children to be taught specific skills to support them in their own lives advocating a universal approach to the promotion of wellbeing across schools. The growing interest in the topic of wellbeing in primary schools is very important to the researcher who has been teaching in a DEIS Band 1 Dublin Junior School since 2010. The researcher understands how crucial it is to ensure that young children are given the emotional tools to successfully deal with events in their own lives. Supporting children in their acquisition of coping skills in the classroom will help them outside of school too. More recently, working in The Early Start Programme has given the researcher the opportunity to support the children's overall development through positive interactions, engaging activities, meaningful playful experiences and by fostering a nurturing pedagogy. Children, even at the young age of three and four, can struggle with their own emotions on a daily basis for a vast

variety of reasons, which highlights the genuine need for early intervention in schools. The psychological and physical wellbeing of children mean more to the researcher than standardised test scores, the simple reason being, the researcher wants the children in her care to be happy and to experience success in other areas of school life.

### **3.3. Educational Research**

According to Bassey (1992), education is “first, the nurture of personal growth towards worthwhile living, and, secondly, the conservation, transmission and renewal of worthwhile culture” (p. 7). Bassey’s definition of education emphasises the significant role educational practitioners and researchers play in the day-to-day experiences of schoolchildren. Educational research, therefore, could be considered an invaluable resource for researchers and practitioners with a view to advancing educational practice. Opie (2004) defines educational research as “the collection and analysis of information on the world of education so as to understand and explain it better” (p. 3). Ultimately, it is in the interest of the educator to carry out this type of research in order to build self-knowledge and engage in professional development which in turn improves practice. Educational researchers strive to improve educational practice and policy through the generation of new knowledge which ultimately relies on systematic and critical enquiry (Bassey, 1992). There is a belief that educational research can only be carried out by specific educational experts (Opie, 2004). The author maintains that this notion needs to be eradicated if practicing teachers are to be encouraged to carry out educational research in an effort to enhance their day-to-day practice. Scott & Usher (1996) argue that while there is a need for educational researchers to obtain suitable research skills, there is also a need for educational practitioners to become “critical readers and writers of research” (p. 1). Practitioner

research is a real source of insight and is necessary if educational research is to be improved. Erikson & Gutierrez (2002) declare that if real progress is to come about, the knowledge of both practitioners and research specialists “must grow together in new ways” (p. 23).

Hiebert, Gallimore & Stigler (2002) would be in agreement with Erikson & Gutierrez (2002) as they claim that knowledge, produced solely by researchers, can be deemed quite abstract, perhaps due to the fact that it’s designed to apply to a wider variety of problems within teaching. Thus, practitioners’ knowledge is considered a necessity to secure a useful knowledge base for teaching. Hiebert et al. (2002) argue that teachers very rarely draw from a shared knowledge base as a means to improve their practice. In other words, there is an ever growing concern that educational research has very little influence on improving classroom teaching and learning. Bassey (1992) expresses the opinion that educational research is time consuming and costly for all involved but believes it is the way forward. Both Hiebert et al. (2002) and Erikson & Gutierrez (2002) comment on the reliance of ‘quick solutions’ in order to temporarily eradicate a problem or to establish a truth within education rather than taking the time to tease out the problem to dissolve it permanently whilst Bassey (1992) makes reference to the increasing amount of repetition in education whereby following the historical model is considered the most straightforward option. Erikson & Gutierrez (2002) use the example of walking through a swamp in the search for truth, “testing the ground with each step” rather than “driving on a superhighway”, the authors believe that in order to bring about positive educational change, it should be accomplished locally and done at a slow and steady pace.

There is a growing need for practitioners to demonstrate confidence in their knowledge and skills in order for the quality of classroom teaching to grow in a lasting

way. As such, this research offered teachers the opportunity to discuss their own wellbeing practices, to express their concern regarding the facilitation of wellbeing in their school and to celebrate the work that is being done to promote wellbeing practices. Practitioner knowledge is a term used to represent the kinds of knowledge practitioners produce through active participation and reflection on their own practice (Hiebert et al., 2002). The authors outline a number of characteristics that practitioners must adopt as a way of developing a professional knowledge base for teaching. First, professional knowledge must be public – the idea that teaching is a private and solitary profession must be done away with if practitioner knowledge is to be used to enhance teaching and learning. The authors maintain that if knowledge is shared, it can continuously be improved through open examination. Professional knowledge must also be shared with other members of the profession. In this regard, the process of collaboration supports practitioners in voicing hypotheses and in drawing conclusions. It is through this type of communication that discussion, verification and modification emerges. Finally, if researchers are to truly value the knowledge of practitioners, professional knowledge must be “accurate, verifiable and continually improving” (Hiebert et al., 2002). Quality in education is paramount and if researchers and teachers are to work side-by-side as partners to bring about change in teaching and learning, continuous professional development is essential for both groups of experts.

### **3.4 Research Philosophy**

When carrying out research, it is imperative that the researcher is aware of their own world view. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2011) believe that approaches to methodology in research have been found within various paradigms. The authors define a paradigm as “a way of looking at or researching phenomena, a world view, a

shared belief system or set of principles, the identity of a research community, and a way of pursuing knowledge” (p. 5). Guba and Lincoln (1994) simply define a paradigm as a set of basic beliefs concerned with first principles. Cohen et al. (2011) maintain there are two main paradigms that underpin most educational research, namely; the positivist approach and the interpretive/constructivist approach. The positivist approach is broadly associated with quantitative methodologies whilst the interpretative approach has a connection with a qualitative approach.

The purpose of social research, for positivists, is to uncover the patterns and regularities of the social world by using the type of scientific methods used to such good effect in the natural sciences (Denscombe, 2010). According to Cohen et al. (2011) positivism strives for objectivity, measurability, predictability, and the construction of laws and rules of behaviour. Within this paradigm, questions and hypotheses are stated in propositional form and subjected to empirical test to verify them (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) while it is also believed that the researcher and the researched person are independent entities (Robson, 2011). Thus, positivists try to ensure that there is no personal involvement with the raw data as validity and reliability could be affected which in turn could affect the overall results. As the purpose of this research was to explore teachers’ perspectives on children’s wellbeing, the positivist approach was deemed unsuitable. The positivist approach deals with facts and aims to separate facts from values, making it ‘value-free’ as phenomena are seen to be lawful and orderly (Robson, 2011). As the researcher endeavoured to gain a deep understanding of teachers’ perceptions of children’s wellbeing, the data, in this research, could not have been scientifically measured. Scott & Usher (1996) maintain that educational research based on a positivist paradigm can be quite problematic as

social events and phenomena tend to be seen as open and uncertain rather than orderly and predictable.

Positivist and interpretive paradigms fundamentally provide two different lenses to support the understanding of social phenomena. Within an interpretive/constructivist approach in social research, knowledge involves meaning, illumination and interpretation (Scott & Usher, 1996). Interpretative researchers endeavour to interpret the world in terms of its actors as they start the research process with individuals and aim to make sense of the interpretations of the world around them (Cohen, et al., 2011). Evidently, research is a social practice with a central aim of understanding. To help to make sense of the social world, “we need to understand the meanings that construct and are constructed by interactive human behaviour” (Scott & Usher, 1996, p. 18). Guba & Lincoln (1994) argue that the constructivist paradigm relies on a relativist ontology meaning that reality has multiple constructions that are socially and experimentally based. As this paradigm depends on social practice, the researcher and the focus of the enquiry are linked (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and this was taken into consideration for the purpose of this research. Cohen et al. (2011) believe that within the constructivist paradigm, theory is emergent and should follow research rather than precede it. From the perspective of this researcher in the field of teachers’ perceptions of wellbeing and wellbeing practices, the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm was considered the more suitable approach. The research process involved gathering the views, perceptions and beliefs of junior school teachers to gain a deeper understanding of teachers’ perceptions on the value of wellbeing practices and the affect these practices can have on young children which in turn ensured the data was emergent through the generation of recurrent themes.

### 3.5 Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods

According to Yilmaz (2013), quantitative and qualitative research designs are considered very different in terms of their epistemological, theoretical and methodological foundations. Quantitative research can be defined as research that explains phenomena according to analysed numerical data (Cohen et al., 2011).

Furthermore,

Quantitative research is informed by objectivist epistemology and this seeks to develop explanatory universal laws in social behaviours by statistically measuring what it assumes to be a static reality (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 312).

The quantitative approach represents an objective reality that regards the researcher and the participants as separate and independent of each other, as Scott & Usher (1996) put it; the researcher remains unbiased, value neutral and must make certain that the research process is unaffected by personal considerations. As quantitative data take the form of numbers, research strategies such as, surveys and experiments and methods such as questionnaires and observation are often the preferred approach for quantitative researchers. According to Denscombe (2010) quantitative analysis allows researchers to have confidence in their findings as “interpretations and findings are based on measured quantities rather than impressions” (p. 269). For the purpose of this study, the quantitative research method approach was deemed unsuitable. The use of this research method suggests that human behaviour is determined and controlled “thereby ignoring intention, individualism and freedom” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 15). This research method approach limits participants’ responses to questions in order to assist comparison of the data. As a result closed-ended questions would fail to provide insight into participant’s individual/personal experiences which is in opposition to what this study represents.



Evidently there are advantages and disadvantages to both quantitative and qualitative methods; however it is important to note that the choice of research method largely depends on what the topic of inquiry is. Given that reality is considered multi-layered and complex, Creswell & Miller (2000) state that qualitative researchers or constructivists believe in “pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended, and contextualised perspectives toward reality” (p. 125). Yilmaz (2013) develops this further by defining qualitative research as;

An emergent approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world (p. 312).

Both descriptions emphasise the importance of the social world and how events within that world affect the people living in it. As such, qualitative research methods are used to reveal trends in the opinions, thoughts and ideas of people; people are no longer passive recipients, instead they are constructing their own world. Cohen et al. (2011) maintain that there are many reasons why qualitative research is used; to describe, to report, to create key concepts, and to generate and test theories. The aims of this research were to describe teachers’ perceptions, to report on their opinions and ideas, to generate specific concepts and themes and to examine whether or not internal and external wellbeing resources are positively impacting children in schools. According to Denscombe (2010) the strategies of research associated with qualitative data include case studies, grounded theory, ethnography and phenomenology. This type of research uses methods such as interviews, documents and observation in an attempt to gather data. Qualitative research tends to be small-scale in terms of the numbers of persons researched, thus a qualitative stance can create rich data due to the researchers contextual approach. A qualitative approach was adopted for this study as it allowed

the researcher to capture expressive information about the beliefs, values, feelings, and motivations of junior school teachers' regarding their perceptions of wellbeing among young children which could not have been carried out using a quantitative approach. One must be fully aware that there are also disadvantages to the qualitative approach; there is a chance that the meaning could become decontextualized or lost during analysis of the data. In addition, it is necessary to bear in mind the complexities of social phenomena - the analysis of the qualitative data needs to recognise this rather than oversimplifying the explanation (Denscombe, 2010).

### **3.6 Reliability and Validity**

It is widely acknowledged that qualitative and quantitative researchers bring different lens to their studies in terms of validity. Validity is regarded an essential feature of quantitative research as positivism has been characterised by a systematic theory of validity (Golafshani, 2003). Robson (2011) states that validity is used to determine whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure. Furthermore, Denscombe (2010) maintains that validity within quantitative research aims to ensure that the data have been recorded accurately and precisely, the data are appropriate for the purposes of the investigation and that the explanations stemming from the analysis are precise and truthful. Creswell and Miller (2000) define validity within qualitative research as "how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them" (pp. 124-125). The authors maintain that within an interpretivist paradigm validity does not imply that the data gives us answers; instead the focus is on the inferences drawn from that data. However, academic researchers argue that it can be difficult for novice researchers to make sense of the notion of validity in qualitative research due to the variety of labels placed on

criteria (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001). Golafshani (2003) is of the opinion that reliability and validity symbolise trustworthiness, rigor and quality in qualitative paradigm. Whittemore et al. (2001) make a distinction between primary criteria and secondary criteria in validity arguing that primary criteria is necessary to all qualitative inquiry but they are inadequate by themselves, thus secondary criteria ensure higher standards of quality as well as providing more flexibility to investigations. According to the authors, primary criteria consist of credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity. On the other hand, explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity are regarded as secondary criteria. In a similar way, Maxwell (1992) proposes five types of understanding and validity in qualitative research, namely; descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability, and evaluative validity. With regard to interpretive validity, the emphasis is placed on the participants' perspective as the author writes "interpretative accounts are grounded in the language of the people studied and rely as much as possible in their own words and concepts" (Maxwell, 1992, p. 289). Ultimately, this type of understanding is fundamental to interpretive research as interpretive validity has no real counterpart in quantitative research.

It is imperative to acknowledge potential threats to validity in flexible designs such as this study. Robson (2011) maintains the use of triangulation can help to counteract all threats to validity. As stated in Denscombe,

Triangulation involves the practice of viewing things from more than one perspective. This can mean the use of different methods, different sources of data or even different researchers within the study (Denscombe, 2010, p. 346). Evidently, triangulation is used to eliminate over reliance on the observation from one particular source as a way of ensuring validity. According to Creswell and Miller

(2000) it is a systematic process of sorting through the data to find common themes which is carried out by removing overlapping areas. Essentially, triangulation provides more support to the researcher as it can reduce the possibility of error. Data triangulation is the method of triangulation employed for the purpose of this research. Denscombe (2010) maintains that by utilising this method of triangulation, the validity of findings can be checked by using different sources of information. In the case of this study this meant comparing the data from different participants from three junior school settings, followed by separate analysis, comparison of data and interpretation of results. Creswell and Miller (2000) advise the use of several validity procedures in research so that the lens of the researcher, the lens of the study participants and the lens of the people external to the study, such as reviewers and readers, are recognised as collaborators within the research which in turn increases the validity of the study. Member checking is considered another validity procedure whereby the responsibility of validity shifts from the researcher to the participants. The participants are given the opportunity to review the interpretations and the final research report so that they can confirm the credibility of the information (Yilmaz, 2013). For the purpose of this study, participants were asked to ensure that the themes made sense and whether the overall account was realistic and truthful. Thick, rich descriptions of the setting, the participants and the themes of the study were applied to ensure validity and credibility. Creswell and Miller (2000) argue that the purpose of using thick descriptions is to “provide as much detail as possible” in an attempt to “help readers understand that the account is credible” (p. 129). The procedures used in this research employed a constructivist perspective as a way of ensuring validity and reliability.

The researcher was aware that the responsibility of ensuring quality in this study lay with her as “the credibility of a qualitative research depends on the ability and effort

of the researcher” (Golafshani, 2003, p. 600). Whitemore et al. (2001) present a table of techniques to demonstrate validity in qualitative research. For the purpose of this study, the researcher employed a number of these techniques, such as, the method of triangulation. In addition, the technique of data gathering was treated very carefully as the researcher ensured that verbatim transcriptions were provided. Member checking was a third technique utilised by the researcher to guarantee that participating teachers were content with the researchers’ interpretations and that the results were truthful and accurate. Finally, the researcher demonstrated validity of the research by providing thick descriptions with the intention of providing as much detail as possible for the readers.

### **3.7 Methodology (Case Study)**

This research is a case study into junior school teachers’ perspectives of wellbeing. Bryman (2001) argues that historically research in the form of case studies focus on a single community, a single school or a single family. This research focused on the single community of junior school teachers working in junior primary schools in North Dublin. Defined by Yin (2009) “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Choosing a case study approach provided the opportunity to gather thorough, rich data in an attempt to examine junior school teachers’ perceptions of wellbeing. As such, this study was a small-scale piece of research inquiring into teachers’ perceptions of wellbeing which is only emerging as a topic of concern within schools in Ireland. Denscombe (2010) believes that the case study approach ties in quite well with the needs of small-scale research as the investigator focuses solely on

one or a few research sites. As claimed by Yin (2009) if “how” or “why” questions are being asked in research, the case study method is more often than not the preferred strategy as these questions are considered explanatory. Clearly there are also disadvantages to the use of the case study approach and it is imperative that these are recognised to ensure validity of the research. As stated in Yin (2009) there is concern over the lack of rigour of case study research whereby an investigator may allow their own biased views shape the overall findings and conclusions. The author argues that bias can come into play when using many other research strategies therefore the problem is not different but may happen more frequently when using a case study approach. To minimize the potential for bias, it is the responsibility of the researcher to give an account of how personal beliefs and experiences may have a bearing on findings as “the researcher’s identity, values and beliefs become part of the equation” (Denscombe, 2010, p. 87), in other words putting the researchers ‘self’ into the research. As such, the participants who volunteered to take part in this research were informed of the researchers’ vested interest in children’s wellbeing, her own qualifications, background and work experience.

### **3.8 Semi-Structured Interviews**

Cohen et al. (2011) believe that a good case study researcher should possess skills to support them in successfully probing beneath the surface of phenomena. As such “the researcher must be an effective questioner, listener, prober, able to make informed inferences and adaptable to changing and emerging situations” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 296). Thus, the use of semi-structured interviews was deemed the most suitable approach to gain valuable insights into teachers’ beliefs, opinions and experiences regarding the wellbeing of junior school aged children. According to

Robson (2011) the use of semi-structured interviews is most appropriate when engaging in small-scale research such as this as the interviewer is closely involved with the research process. To ensure high quality qualitative research, the researcher should endeavour to begin with a set of well thought out questions which should be “unambiguous, focused, relevant and feasible” (Kozleski, 2017, p. 26). For the purpose of this study, a clear set of questions was compiled focusing on key issues arising from the literature review allowing for the research question to be explored in great detail. Although the questions are prepared in advance by the interviewer, it is vital to ensure flexibility through the use of open-ended questions as “open-ended responses let the researcher understand and present the world as it is seen and experienced by the participants” (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 313). Robson (2011) is of the belief that there are many advantages to asking open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews, namely, they encourage cooperation and rapport between researcher and participant, they can generate unexpected answers, and they can allow the researcher make a truer assessment of what the participant really believes.

It is important for the researcher to remember that the interview is a “social, interpersonal encounter, not merely a data collection exercise” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 421). According to Agee (2009) recognising qualitative inquiry as a reflective process highlights the strengths of a qualitative approach. With this in mind, a pilot of the interview format was undertaken before conducting interviews with the selected sample to ensure that the chosen questions were appropriate. Carrying out a pilot of the interview format confirmed whether the questions were dynamic and multi-directional enough to guarantee rich data. Agee (2009) states that it is imperative to ensure that the researchers’ questions are answerable, that the phrasings of the questions do not ‘lead’ the participants’ answers, and that the questions are focused and clear.

### **3.9 Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were completed, the six step approach suggested by Creswell (2003) was adopted to analyse and interpret the data. Step one and step two involved organising and preparing the data for analysis through the use of transcribing the interviews, writing up field notes and reading through all the data to get a sense of the new information and to establish some general themes. Step three and step four allowed the researcher begin detailed analysis whereby a coding process was adopted which is considered a major feature of qualitative data analysis (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2003; Robson, 2011, Denscombe, 2010). According to Cohen et al. (2011) a code is “a name or label that the researcher gives to a piece of text that contains an idea or a piece of information” (p. 559). The researcher was then enabled to group these initial codes into a smaller number of specific recurrent themes which captured the key ideas of the participants’ responses. Step five of Creswell’s data analysis approach involved representing the descriptions and themes found in the data using a narrative style. Denscombe (2010) maintains that the quality of the representation relies heavily on the literacy skills of the researcher in terms of how convincing and authentic this account of the research is. The final step of analysis involved making an interpretation of the data whereby information gleaned from the literature was compared with the findings of this research.

### **3.10 Sample**

The sample in this research was a non-probability purposeful sample. As this was a small-scale piece of research it was important to choose a sample that was satisfactory to the specific needs of the research (Cohen et al., 2011). According to Denscombe (2010) purposive sampling allows the researcher obtain the best



information by choosing participants most likely to have the experience or expertise to provide quality information and valuable insights on the research topic. Twelve junior school teachers, all with a minimum of five years junior school teaching experience, were asked to participate in the research. The three schools in question represented a diverse sample as one school was a DEIS Band 1 junior school, another was a non-DEIS infant school and the third school was a DEIS Band 2 junior school. It was vital that the rigour of this study was maintained through the selection of a wide range of junior school teachers who possess both positive and negative views relating to wellbeing and wellbeing practices. Before the volunteers consented to take part, the details pertaining to the study were explained, in particular, they were assured that the data gathered would be used only for the purpose of this study and the participants were given the opportunity to ask questions relating to the research. Participants were informed that every effort would be made to ensure their anonymity and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

### **3.11 Ethical Considerations**

Undoubtedly, any type of inquiry into a person's life is considered an ethical exercise. Guba and Lincoln (1994) are of the opinion that ethics is intrinsic to the constructivist paradigm due to the participants' own opinions and values being very much part of the inquiry process. Bassey (1992) identifies a common concern for many educational researchers; "the carrying out of systematic and critical enquiry on educational topics, within a twin ethic of respect for truth and respect for persons" (p. 4). This would be in line with the costs/benefits ratio highlighted by Cohen et al. (2011) which is described as "the primary ethical dilemma in social research" (p. 75). The authors argue that it is the responsibility of the researcher to strike a balance

between the search for truth in order to gain knowledge and the protection of the participants' rights and values throughout the research process. For the purpose of this study, it was essential that participants were treated fairly, honestly, and with consideration, respect and appreciation at all times.

According to Bryman (2001) there are four main ethical principles that need to be considered when carrying out social research; whether there is harm to participants, whether there is a lack of informed consent, whether there is an invasion of privacy, and whether deception is involved. To ensure there was no physical harm or psychological harm to the participants resulting from the research, it was imperative to establish safe and comfortable locations for the interviews to take place whilst also guaranteeing that the questions being asked were in no way intrusive or offensive to the participants. Before participants were approached, it was necessary to seek permission from each school's Board of Management, see Appendix D. Howe and Moses (1999) maintain that the basic idea of informed consent is that it is the choice of the participants to weigh up the risks and benefits that could potentially be associated with taking part in the research. Ultimately, this can only happen when they are informed about the research and understand what it means to be part of the research process in question. Participants were provided with a consent form whereby it was made clear that participation was entirely voluntary, the purpose of the research was highlighted, and confidentiality was guaranteed around the use of audio recordings. The consent form also explained that participants were fully entitled to withdraw from the research at any time and that interviews would be carried out at a location and at a time that best suited the participant. Howe and Moses (1999) refer to Noddings' ethics of care whereby she believes educational research should be for teaching rather than on teaching. To maintain participants' autonomy and privacy throughout the research process, Noddings

states that the relationship between researchers and participants should be based on mutual respect and trust. The subject matter of this study could be considered a sensitive area for some. In this way, ensuring participants felt at ease and respected throughout the research process was of paramount importance and this was maintained by guaranteeing their right to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality at all times. All collected data was stored securely and was only used for the purpose of this research. In line with validity procedures, participants were provided with the opportunity to read and to comment on the fairness and accuracy of the description of their opinions, thoughts and ideas before the research was finalised.

### **3.12 Limitations**

As with any type of research, limitations of a research design must be recognised and managed by the researcher as a way of maintaining validity. According to Cohen et al. (2011) case studies can be prone to problems of observer bias thus it is essential that the researcher adopts a reflexive approach to the study. Denscombe (2010) states “reflexivity suggests that there is no prospect of the social researcher achieving an entirely objective position from which to study the social world” (p. 325) due to the fact that the researcher has experience of the social world already, in this way, the personal-self becomes inseparable from the researcher-self (Creswell, 2003). However, Creswell (2003) argues that if a researcher clarifies the bias brought to the study, readers, more often than not, appreciate the researcher’s openness and honesty. Furthermore, a limitation involved when carrying out semi-structured interviews is the concept of ‘the interviewer effect’ whereby there is a possibility that interviewee statements could be affected by the identity of the researcher. As such, the quality of the data can suffer if interviewees “supply answers which they feel fit in with what the

researcher expects from them” (Denscombe, 2010, p. 179). As many of the participants were known to the researcher and were aware of the researchers’ own views and beliefs relating to the topic of wellbeing ‘the interviewer effect’ may have had an impact on participants’ responses. Denscombe (2010) also warns that qualitative researchers adopting the case study approach should be aware that they could be faced with scepticism about the generalization of the findings. As this was a small-scale piece of research, the findings reflect the perceptions of a small amount of junior school teachers in three particular areas in Dublin. Although this type of research allowed for teachers’ voices to be heard which in turn generated rich data for the purpose of this study, it does not necessarily represent the experiences of all junior school teachers in the many types of school settings. In addition, Maxwell (1992) is of the opinion that internal generalizability is an issue when interpreting interviews. The reason being the interviewer and interviewee only work together for a brief period so although the participants account may be descriptively valid at that particular time, other aspects of the person’s perspectives on his/her actions in the outside world could be missed as they were not expressed in the interview.

### **3.13 Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the context of this particular research and highlighted the fundamental roles educational and practitioner research play in the development of educational practices. Chapter Three also explored research paradigms and the research approaches associated with these paradigms, namely, quantitative and qualitative methods. The motivation for choosing a qualitative research methodology approach was explored along with validity considerations connected with this type of approach. A detailed account of how the research was conducted, including the data collection

process and the data analysis was provided. Ethical considerations involved in the research were identified and discussed as were limitations of the research design. Chapter Four will outline the principal themes developed from the data during the processes of coding and analysing.

## Chapter 4 – Analysis and Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

Chapter Three described the methodological framework for this research including the motivation for choosing a qualitative approach. This particular research is a case study into junior school teachers' perspectives on wellbeing. Chapter Four presents the findings generated from the semi-structured interviews and aims to focus on the main themes derived from the data. The interviewees present a broad range of teaching experience with the majority working in DEIS and non-DEIS schools in West and North Dublin.

Following the data analysis, the subsequent themes emerged; the first theme that materialised was teachers own understanding of wellbeing and the struggle in defining wellbeing (4.2). The findings suggest that participating teachers generally believe that guaranteeing children's happiness enhances and safeguards their wellbeing. However, other opinions are in contrast to this belief as some interviewees believe that there is much more to do to enhance the wellbeing of children other than making sure they are happy.

The second theme revolved around teachers' perceptions of what their role should be and what a parents' role should be in the development of children's wellbeing (4.3). This theme takes a thorough look into the idea of a shared responsibility between teachers and parents. Both parties contribute to the overall development of the child as the child relies heavily on the support and guidance of both to live a happy, healthy and fulfilled life. In this way, the home and the school should both be considered special

places in the lives of children as Noddings (2005) believes both should be centres of stability and community.

The third theme that emerged from the data centred on teacher's perceptions of the role of the parent, in particular, in the development of children's wellbeing (4.4). A healthy and respectful collaboration between teachers and parents is discussed as well as the subtheme of the importance of nutrition and rest in order for children to have a successful day in school (4.4.1).

The fourth and final theme outlined in this chapter focuses on the role of the teacher in the development of children's wellbeing (4.5) beginning with the disappointing finding that participating teachers do not feel confident enough to teach emotional education in a beneficial way. Four major subthemes are highlighted in this section which emphasises the huge responsibility teachers face on a daily basis. The first subtheme draws attention to the amount of care children require at junior school age (4.5.1) whilst the second subtheme outlines the emotional educational strategies participating teachers carry out daily either in a natural way or through the use of the curriculum (4.5.2). Following this, the importance of early years education in the primary school and the impact of establishing positive learning experiences for young children in an attempt to foster a love of learning is discussed (4.5.3). Finally, the impact formalised testing can have on children's wellbeing is considered (4.5.4). Contrasting beliefs are presented throughout this particular discussion. Some participating teachers believe that standardised tests fail to take into account adversities many children face outside of school, whilst others believe it is a useful method to identify children experiencing difficulties.

## 4.2 Understanding of Wellbeing

Exploring teachers' attitudes to wellbeing was the central focus of this research, thus it seemed only right that their understanding of wellbeing be investigated early on in the interview. Remarkably, many respondents found this question difficult to answer with the majority of them taking a few moments to really think about what wellbeing meant to them, thus highlighting the complex task of defining wellbeing. The difficult task of defining wellbeing has already been alluded to when discussing the work of Dodge, Daly, Huyton & Sanders (2012), McLellan & Steward (2014), and Soutter (2011). According to the *Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion*, wellbeing can be defined as;

The presence of a culture, ethos and environment which promotes dynamic, optimal development and flourishing for all in the school community. It encompasses the domains of relationship, meaning, emotion, motivation, purpose, and achievement. It includes quality teaching and learning for the development of all elements related to healthy living whether cultural, academic, social, emotional, physical or technological with particular focus on resilience and coping (DES; HSE, 2015a, p. 9).

In their own way, the responses of the interviewees touched on the majority of points illustrated in this definition. The holistic development of the child appears to be at the forefront of these teachers' priorities. The topics of resilience, self-esteem, and self-confidence were mentioned by some participants in an attempt to define wellbeing whereby one teacher stated;



I suppose it's an ability to cope, that you have the mental health, mental fortitude more than anything to be resilient in terms of challenges or emotions or setbacks [NDT2].

This particular viewpoint is in keeping with the work of Martin & Marsh (2009) and Roffey (2016).

*Aistear* states that "the theme of Well-being is about children being confident, happy and healthy" (NCCA, 2009b, p.16) which is in agreement with how Noddings (2003) views education with the emphasis put on teaching the child how to be happy. A large number of teachers believed that the child's happiness is what wellbeing is based on as one reported;

I think wellbeing is, well for me, I think it's that every child is happy in school. I place a lot of importance on that [DT1].

Another participant was in agreement as she stated;

I think a lot of it has to do with your self-esteem and being happy, not just happy in yourself but happy just in life in general [NDT4].

However, one participant, in particular, strongly disagreed with this belief as she expressed;

At the start I thought wellbeing was just making sure everybody in this class was happy and the more I kind of looked into it and thought about it, it became clear that that's not what wellbeing is. Wellbeing is, like, seeing all of

the emotions and feelings a child can have and making sure that they are all treated as being valid and dealt with appropriately [DT4].

This teachers' opinion is in line with the work of Green and Batool (2017) and the *Primary School Curriculum's* (NCCA, 1999a) belief that a relationship of trust between teacher and child enables the child's happiness and thus brings about a sense of agency and a love of learning by teaching them that all feelings are valid and that there are coping strategies to help us in dealing with these feelings.

Taking care of our minds and our bodies was the most common theme to derive from teachers explorations of wellbeing with responses including;

that they're healthy in their mind and they're healthy in their body [DT7],

wellbeing, for me, is the overall health and mental health of a child, that their care needs are met, their physical needs are met and their emotional needs [DT2],

physically looking after yourself and mentally looking after yourself [NDT1].

These echo two of the aims used to represent well-being in the *Aistear* framework; "children will be strong psychologically and socially" and "children will be as healthy and fit as they can be" (NCCA, 2009b, p. 17). Interestingly, the role of *Aistear* in the development of children's wellbeing was not brought up by any of the participants. Although there was no question directly asked about the use of the early childhood

framework, it was surprising that it didn't come into conversation when the focus of the research concerned wellbeing and junior school teachers' perspectives of wellbeing.

### **4.3 A Shared Responsibility**

Undoubtedly, the wellbeing of children is not something that stops and starts at different times of the day. A child's wellbeing is affected by their home environment, by their school environment, by interactions in the home, and by interactions in school as one participant reported that;

I think no matter where a child is, whether it's in the home, or whether its play or whether its school or the content they see on TV, all of that impacts on their wellbeing and also has a role in promoting that wellbeing....everybody in the child's life has a role to promote that [NDT2].

Therefore, it is not surprising that the main themes deriving from the data shine a light on parents and teachers and the influential roles both parties have on children and their holistic development. Interestingly, many participants spoke at length about a shared responsibility between parents and teachers regarding the promotion of wellbeing among young children. When asked if the primary school had a role to play in the promotion of wellbeing, all participants said the primary school did have a role to play whilst some followed this up with the belief that the responsibility should be shared between parents and teachers –

I think the responsibility is limited and I think that we need to facilitate parents in taking responsibility as well [DT2].

Whilst another participant felt that primary schools have a responsibility

in a supportive way, like we're not full control. It has to come from home and I'm saying this from me being a mother [DT3].

These opinions are in line with one of the four key areas that underpin a health promoting school as strong partnerships between schools, parents and the wider community are encouraged in an effort to support the development of children's wellbeing in primary schools (DES; HSE, 2015a). The guidelines emphasise the critical role parents play in the life of a child referring to the family as the primary influence on a child's life. Moreover these guidelines recognise that parents/guardians need to know that they are valued and particularly "in situations where there are concerns about the mental health and well-being of a child, parents/guardians need to be actively involved from the outset" (DES; HSE, 2015a, p. 17).

#### **4.4 The Role of the Parent**

In Ireland, parents have the constitutional and legislative recognition as the first educators of their children and are believed to play a crucial role in their children's educational journey (DES, 2017). As parents have this huge responsibility, specific skills and knowledge might be considered necessary for them to take on this role confidently as one interviewee stated;

they're happy to take it on and try it out at home but it just goes back to a lack of skills, they're trying their best but they would have needed this intervention as well [DT4].

Although many participants referred to the importance of educating parents in an effort to support them in taking an active role in their own children's emotional development, when asked about specific steps taken in order to help children with an emotional need in their class, ironically the majority of interviewees reported that they would immediately talk to the child's parents. It would appear from the data that many of the teachers interviewed rely on parents' opinions when it comes to dealing with a child's emotional needs be it unusual behaviour, anxiety or daily stresses in general. Many of the respondents' opinions were in line with the health promoting school guidelines whereby if there is a concern about a child's mental health or well-being, it is imperative that parents are actively involved from the outset (DES; HSE, 2015a). As one participant stated;

parents and teachers – we're all on the same page. If communication was clearer between the parents and teachers, we would get the best for the child [NDT1].

This idea of a clearer communication between parents and teachers is important to note. As many of the participants involved in this research were teachers from a DEIS Band 1 school, it was surprising to find that very few made reference to the *Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme*. It is significant to mention that a question about this particular scheme was not directly asked by the researcher. Establishing a

genuine partnership between parents and teachers is the core vision of the *HSCL Scheme*. The *HSCL Scheme* is a vital support for schools under *DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools)* which focuses on addressing and prioritizing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities. Promoting co-operation between home, school, and community and empowering parents are two of the scheme's main goals (DES, 2005 – 2006). Both of these goals are connected with the idea that the promotion of children's wellbeing is a shared responsibility between parents and teachers as one interviewee stated;

we can only deal with it in school and there is the home-school link with the home - school liaison but I think we can support parents and educate parents to also improve their children's wellbeing [DT2].

Another teacher reported that;

we are really good at identifying children who need that extra bit of support and linking with our home-school as well and providing the support at home as well [DT6].

Whilst these participants seem to value the *HSCL Scheme* as a vital resource in the promotion of a shared responsibility between teachers and parents, it leads to the question of whether this resource is being utilised enough by schools in an attempt to empower parents in marginalised communities to foster the holistic development of their children?

The idea of this shared responsibility between parents and teachers is also central to what the early childhood curriculum framework *Aistear* represents. One of the main purposes of the framework is to support parents as their children's primary educators during early childhood. The framework recognises parents as the most important people in children's lives as it believes "the care and education that children receive from their parents and family greatly influence their overall development" (NCCA, 2009b, p. 9). Indeed, the level of care and education children require from their parents was discussed by many of the interviewees from both DEIS schools and non-DEIS schools with one participant, in particular, emphasising the point that the level of care and nurture children require can vary regardless of the family's socioeconomic background;

our school is a mix of families from disadvantaged backgrounds and very privileged backgrounds. We would find that children from both types of backgrounds could be anxious or could need a lot more input on feelings and wellbeing and nurturing [DT7].

According to Noddings (2005) a person's desire to be cared for is almost certainly a universal characteristic whereby caring is a way of being in relation rather than following a set of rigid steps in an attempt to care for another person. Overall, interviewees were of the opinion that it is quite obvious if a child comes to school experiencing a lack of care in the home as one participant quite sombrely reported "in a DEIS school, so many children come into school with such a void" [DT2] whilst another commented on the damaging affect parents can have on their children's self-esteem and self-perception in "the way that they are addressed, the information they are

given” [NDT2]. Recently the Irish Primary Principals’ Network reported that anxiety is now one of the most serious problems facing children (O’ Brien, 2018). This concerning statement was echoed by one interviewee who supposes that perhaps this anxiety could come from the home –

if parents are anxious or nervous or worried, this transfers to the kids and it can influence how they settle in at school. I can see an increase in the number of kids coming to school anxious [NDT4].

This concern was referred to again by another participant when she described a girl in her Senior Infant class as “a bundle of stress” and it was not until the teacher met the child’s mother that she could see similar characteristics –

she’s just like a carbon copy of the mum. If the parent isn’t coping then the child can pick up on that too [NDT1].

Perhaps society’s perception of care can be quite narrow minded in terms of what it means to care for a child. Participants’ responses may lead one to believe that there are many ways in which a child can experience a lack of care in the home through lack of love, lack of nurture, lack of attention and even through the lack of coping strategies if parents themselves don’t possess them either. Interestingly, almost all of participants reported that the biggest challenge of junior school teaching revolves around the amount of care, nurture and emotional support that children of this age require in school on a daily basis.



#### 4.4.1 Nutrition and rest.

The majority of respondents were eager to talk about the importance of children's diet and sleep routines as a way of guaranteeing children's wellbeing which resonates with the work of Hale & Guan (2015). This work explored the harmful effects excess screen time can have on children and adolescents resulting in reduced or interrupted sleep patterns which in turn can have a negative impact on one's overall wellbeing. A recent school-based study of mental health by the National Suicide Research Foundation would be in agreement with Hale & Guan (2015) as it claims that longer sleep duration is associated with better wellbeing (Young Lives in Ireland, 2017). The benefits of a healthy diet and adequate rest can be taught in school but are not taken seriously enough unless they are being discussed and promoted at home. The idea of having a balanced diet and a good night's sleep was discussed quite early on in the interviews when participants were asked what their idea of wellbeing was and if wellbeing and academic achievement were linked. One teacher illustrated the negative impact a lack of healthy food and sleep can have on a child in school;

I mean if a child comes in here in the morning and has no breakfast and doesn't have enough sleep, that child is just sitting, falling asleep at the table, cranky, they're retaining nothing [DT3].

Another participant put it quite simply that

if you're not being fed properly and undernourished, well, you can't learn!  
[DT7].

These opinions echo Maslow's Hierarchy of needs whereby a person's basic needs must be met in order to survive. Interestingly, Maslow's Hierarchy of needs model has been adapted by the Department of Education and Skills to create the model of a basic needs checklist which features in *Special Educational Needs: A Continuum of Support* stating "according to Maslow it is only when humans have all these basic needs met that that we can reach self-actualisation" which refers to the need to "become everything that one is capable of becoming" (DES, 2007, p. 2). Throughout the interviews, teachers talked about the need for children to feel successful in school and in life, however, many are witnessing the reality of many young children's lives today where some are coming to school without having their basic needs met by their parents or guardians which in turn affects their overall development as a student and more importantly as a human. One participant summed this up when discussing what wellbeing meant to her;

there's your emotional wellbeing, your physical wellbeing, so they would impact on each other, like, are you getting enough sleep at night? Are you having a healthy diet? They all kind of feed into each other. If one is lacking, it can impact on the rest of your wellbeing [DT5].

The overall feeling of the majority of participants was that the responsibility of ensuring children's basic needs are met lies with the child's parents or guardians. It was reassuring to note that almost all of the teachers interviewed said they would go to the school principal, the Designated Liaison Person (DLP), if they had concerns over a child's welfare which is in line with the child protection guidelines (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2017).

#### 4.5 The Role of the Teacher

In the primary school context, children spend a considerable amount of time with their teacher. A typical junior school day lasts four and a half hours which is a long period of time for a young child. Therefore, it is not surprising that the participants of this research were of the opinion that they do have a responsibility in ensuring that the wellbeing of the children in their care is integral to their practice. However, the most obvious finding was the lack of self-belief and self-confidence teachers possess when it comes to dealing with children's emotional needs and wellbeing. In particular, when asked if they felt capable and confident in dealing with specific emotional needs, the majority of interviewees said they did not as some expressed;

she was obviously a nervous and anxious child but that's probably not something I'm trained in effectively to have dealt with that [DT1],

I don't think we are trained to deal with any social and emotional difficulties [NDT5],

first year out, you realise how important it is to be in tune with the kids' emotions and how they are feeling because it has such an impact on the classroom life and we don't get enough training in it at all [DT5].

School principals share a very similar view to these teachers as it was reported that principals are urging the Department of Education to be "more proactive in providing targeted training and funding for wellbeing programmes in schools" (O' Brien, 2018).

It is quite obvious from this particular research that teachers are struggling to support children's wellbeing with a lot of teachers claiming a reliance on "using your common sense" [NDT4], "learning for yourself" [DT3] and that any steps taken would be "down to my instincts" [DT2, DT3]. The majority of teachers revealed that the topic of wellbeing is very rarely brought up at staff meetings as one teacher stated;

There isn't a wellbeing programme to follow so it's not something that would be discussed much [DT1].

Undeniably, this is a very worrying concern for teachers and for the health of our children. These honest opinions echo the work of Baker, Lynch, Cantillon & Walsh (2004) who believe a much bigger focus needs to be put on educating people about their emotions and affective relations. However, this appears to be an impossible task when teachers themselves feel under resourced to tackle this fundamental part of education. This can be quite distressing especially when a large amount of teachers are eager to learn as one teacher reported;

We don't have the money, we don't have the resources, we don't have the manpower to just teach the teachers and make it even proper part of the curriculum. I would see that as important as some of the subjects I'm teaching, you know, really, because what they get now at this age, they will carry for the rest of their lives [DT3].

The idea of wellbeing taught as a specific subject was also shared by other interviewees with some even suggesting that an emotional curriculum be put in place to support teachers, parents and children.

#### **4.5.1 Care and education.**

The findings suggest that one of the biggest challenges junior school teachers face on a daily basis is dealing with the level of nurture and care children require. Care and education are inherently linked and perhaps more so than ever as anxiety among school aged children is increasing at an alarming rate (NBSS, 2013; Danby & Hamilton, 2016). It appears that the majority of participants interviewed for the purpose of this research are of the opinion that junior school children require an enormous amount of nurture and if this is ignored, the wellbeing of those children could be negatively affected in the future, as one teacher reported;

It's such a pivotal time for them so working in a junior school, I think, can be very emotionally and physically draining as opposed to maybe a vertical school or a senior school [DT4].

An interesting point that was referred to by some teachers was that entering junior infants is often the first time children are separated from their parents longer than the three hour preschool day. As a result of this, one teacher claimed to take on "a maternal role" [NDT3] whilst another stated that junior school teachers are considered "parental-in-locum" [DT2] which highlights the enormous task teachers face on a daily basis before any of the curriculum is taken into account. The integration of education and care is what Hayes refers to as a nurturing pedagogy as she believes "that a dynamic

process approach to practice, integrating care and education, offers more for children's positive development and learning than either an academic (education) or a play-based (care) approach alone" (Hayes, 2007, p. 4). In this way Hayes advocates the use of the *Aistear* framework to support teachers in fostering a nurturing pedagogy. However, as mentioned previously, the use of this framework was hardly mentioned throughout the interviews highlighting the possibly insignificant role *Aistear* plays in some junior schools today. This could be the result of a lack of awareness, a lack of training in the framework or perhaps a lack of knowledge from management.

#### **4.5.2 Emotional educational strategies.**

In the same vein, some teachers found it difficult to name and discuss particular strategies to enhance emotional education that they carry out in their class.

Remarkably, many of the teachers claimed to adopt these strategies in a natural way as one teacher reported;

Yeah, like nothing legitimate that came from a book but I feel like when you've worked for a number of years, especially in a DEIS Band 1 school and a junior school, those kind of things become just naturally part of your day-to-day routine [DT4].

This opinion was shared by other teachers working in DEIS and non-DEIS schools –

I'm not really teaching it, I'm kind of doing it as I go along [DT3],

It doesn't have to be specific discrete lessons teaching wellbeing but just indirectly throughout the day [NDT1],

We do have thirty minutes allocated through the curriculum for SPHE to work on feelings and caring for themselves but definitely in our school you would spend a lot more than that. It's a culture in our school, it's a culture in your classroom as well [DT6].

Undoubtedly, this culture is in line with what a health promoting school represents as a child's wellbeing is the not just the responsibility of the child's teacher but the responsibility of the entire school community (DES; HSE., 2015a). Interestingly, this natural approach undertaken by many of the participants seemed to be in direct contrast with some of the teachers working in a non-DEIS junior school. The general attitude was that the teaching of the SPHE curriculum (NCCA, 1999b) is sufficient in terms of the level of emotional education children require as one teacher commented;

A lot of it would be through the programme, the SPHE programmes – Stay Safe (2016) where you would talk about different feelings that you might have. That would be my only experience of you know, discussing feelings [NDT4].

This teacher continued to discuss the challenge of teaching SPHE due to large class sizes and as a result finds it difficult to listen to every child's feelings during Circle Time, for example. Under the DEIS scheme, class sizes are kept quite small, therefore, it was not surprising to discover that some non-DEIS teachers struggle with emotional education when they have such large classes.

Overall, it would appear that the majority of the interviewees make it their priority to implement strategies into their classroom to support children's wellbeing on a daily basis. Examples of this include; training in the *Fun FRIENDS* programme (2017), a rug placed in the classroom to allow for 'me time', modelling, mindfulness, feelings displayed on the classroom wall at all times to promote emotional literacy, meditation through the programme Go Noodle, breathing techniques, Super Troopers (2018), constantly reinforcing the importance of a healthy diet and sleep, promoting the positive as much as possible, having a positivity board in the classroom, impromptu lessons, water available to the children whenever they need it, the SPHE curriculum (NCCA, 1999b), cooperative games to promote social skills, group work and team teaching. This list is not exhaustive and could be a valuable resource for many teachers. Sharing ideas and resources with colleagues is common place in many schools but it was disappointing to discover that some teachers may not be as open about emotional practice as one teacher stated;

We are so quick to share ideas for Maths and English but like, mental health, we don't [NDT1].

Supporting one another, as colleagues, is vital for the wellbeing of the entire school community, thus it is paramount that staff endeavour to maintain best practice by sharing ideas and resources to enhance the holistic development of the children in their care (DES; HSE., 2015a; NCCA, 1999a). In this way, the hard work teachers undertake on a daily basis is recognised and celebrated.



#### **4.5.3 Creating positive learning experiences.**

Almost every participant, with the exception of two, stated that junior school teachers, in particular, have a big responsibility in promoting positive learning experiences to enhance and to protect children's wellbeing. This was a very interesting finding as it resonates with early childhood educational literature, particularly, the work of Hayes and Kernan (2008), Dunphy (2008) and Stephens (2010). Ensuring that children experience positive learning experiences from a young age appeared to be significantly important to many participants as one reported;

I mean, it can happen at any level but you know, if children have that positive experience from the start, they can build on it from there [DT6].

Another participant was in agreement with this as she stated;

It needs to be a positive one because they've got another seven years of primary school and hopefully another six years of secondary school so yeah, we have a big responsibility to make it positive, to try and engage them in learning, to make learning fun, exciting, that's something that they're going to do for the rest of their lives [DT5].

Other respondents were also keen to discuss the importance of teaching children coping strategies at a young age in an attempt to ensure positive learning experiences from the very start of their education. Many were of the opinion that children can deal much better with everyday setbacks once these coping strategies are modelled and taught

early on which echoes the work of Ruttledge et al. (2016) and Martin & Marsh's concept of academic buoyancy (2008, 2009).

#### **4.5.4 The impact of formalised testing.**

Teachers' responses offered profound insights into formalised testing in junior schools. Many participants believed that standardised testing does have a place but that it should be dealt with in a very careful way as two teachers referred to the test as "a snapshot" of the child at a particular time on a particular day [DT5, DT7]. Some teachers claimed that there are fairer ways to assess children's learning and that they too should be considered at the end of the year as one teacher reported;

I know it's a lot more work for the teacher but continuous assessment or if each child had a folder and like photos were taken, not just of them doing academics, you really should be at the end of the year telling their parents, in their report, how they are as a whole person [NDT1].

This teacher's opinion is in line with the *Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* (DES;HSE, 2015a) as she believes the emphasis should be placed on the holistic development of the child rather than academics alone. The idea of using teachers' own day-to-day observations of children, class tests and other types of continuous assessment was shared by other interviewees which is in keeping with the work of Pellegrino (2014) and *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for schools* (NCCA, 2007).

Remarkably, opinions relating to formalised testing differed greatly among DEIS and non-DEIS teachers. From the data, it appears that teachers working in DEIS

schools were keen to discuss the negative impact standardised testing can have on children who may be facing other adversities in their lives whilst some of the teachers working in non-DEIS schools personalised the pressure and stress that can come with these tests. Some responses included;

I wouldn't place importance on it as in you're going to teach to the test obviously but you would definitely feel a bit of stress when they're coming up because if they don't do well, it's a reflection on you [NDT3],

I'm not mad on these tests but I don't want them to do bad because I don't want the principal coming down like "What's happening here?" So, I'm like...do this, this and this but you do need to take a step back and be like...they're babies really [NDT5].

These honest responses reflect the significant value some schools place on standardised testing. Although the teachers themselves admit they don't place too much value on them, there seems to be an ethos in the school that formalised testing is very important.

As previously mentioned, testing was named a main worry for children in 2013 (NBSS, 2013) and this concern was voiced by many participants during the interviews as one teacher claimed;

If it was to go to the point of impacting on a child's wellbeing or to cause them anxiety or stress, I wouldn't feel like we would get that much information out of it [DT6].

Teachers' awareness of children's wellbeing appeared to be of paramount importance to a number of participants as some teachers commented on the positive approach that should be taken in relation to testing both by schools and by parents in an effort to reduce levels of anxiety among children as one participant made the point;

You do tests your whole life. It's a part of life. You don't want kids to not be able to do them because of bad experiences of standardised tests at the age of six [DT5].

However, one teacher in particular believed that the use of standardised testing is a very useful tool especially if you are working in learning support and was of the opinion that;

There are always going to be kids who don't test very well, there are always going to be the kids who are very nervous around testing but in this school, in particular, they're of such an age that they don't even know, you know they don't have the vocabulary or the associated anxiousness around all of that [NDT2].

This was a very interesting viewpoint and one that was quite different from the other participants. It is in contrast to the belief that young children's early experiences should be as positive as possible in order to feel successful and included (Stipek, 2006; Baker at al., 2004). However, in general, it appeared that most participants were more concerned with children's own individual circumstances, day-to-day happiness and overall wellbeing rather than the score attained on a particular day.

## 4.6 Conclusion

Chapter four presented the findings of the research carried out on the topic of wellbeing in junior schools. The data provided an in-depth exploration of the participants' perceptions and practices of wellbeing carried out in both DEIS and non-DEIS junior schools in Dublin. Undoubtedly, the interviewees presented strong views on the subject of children's wellbeing as the majority of teachers stated that it was imperative to the child's success both at home and in school. The major themes that emerged from the data were the significant role of parents and the valuable role of teachers in the development of children's wellbeing. From a teachers' perspective, it appeared that children rely on the support of parents, teachers, and the wider school community to safeguard and enhance wellbeing. The idea of a shared responsibility emerged time and time again throughout the interviews, for example, the establishment of positive environments both at home and in the school, the impact formalised testing can have on children's holistic development due to pressure from parents and school, the lack of confidence and self-belief teachers and parents can exhibit in terms of promoting wellbeing and the amount of care and nurture young children require in order to feel loved, valued and nurtured.

The conclusions of the research will be addressed in the following chapter. Chapter Five will highlight the limitations connected with this particular study, and in this way recommendations for further research in this area will be discussed.

## **Chapter 5 – Conclusion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This study aimed to explore wellbeing perceptions and practices of a community of junior school teachers in Dublin. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews over a one month period. These perspectives provide the means to better understand the reality of the struggles teachers face on a daily basis to ensure that children's wellbeing is safeguarded and enhanced. Moreover, the study examined teachers' confidence and self-belief when it comes to supporting children's mental health and wellbeing and the belief that teachers and parents must work collaboratively in an effort to foster children's wellbeing from a young age. This chapter will present the conclusions drawn from the study which derived from the interpretation of the findings as well as the limitations pertaining to the study. These conclusions and limitations form the basis for the recommendations provided and areas that the researcher feels require further research are identified.

### **5.2 Conclusions**

It was evident from the findings that all participants place huge value on wellbeing in education. Although some found it difficult to articulate what wellbeing in education meant for them and for the children in their care, it was clear from the way they spoke about specific strategies used on a daily basis to enhance wellbeing that wellbeing was inherent in their practice. Participating teachers shared profound insights into what wellbeing in education represents for them including the ability to become resilient in an emotional capacity. Barry (2018) maintains that emotional resilience is

within reach of us all but that there is a need to identify the skills required to cope with the setbacks life can throw at us. This is outlined as one of the general aims of primary education (NCCA, 1999a). In this way, many participants agreed with the work of Barry (2018) and the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999a) as they believed that providing children with the necessary emotional tools is of paramount importance. Emphasis was placed on the child's happiness with many interviewees reporting that at the heart of wellbeing, is happiness which is in line with the work of Noddings (2003) and the aims of the *Aistear* framework (2009a, 2009b). Taking care of our minds and our bodies were also brought up a number of times by participants when highlighting the connection between wellbeing and academic success which echoes the work of Maslow's hierarchy of humans needs (Benson & Dundis, 2003; Razzkazova, Ivanova & Sheldon, 2016; DES, 2007). Many participating teachers discussed the crucial need of a healthy diet and sleep to learn and to be active members of school life and society in general.

Collaboration among parents/guardians and teachers to foster wellbeing was one of the main findings of this research. According to the participants, teachers have a role in supporting the wellbeing of the children in their care but so do their parents. Children's wellbeing can be affected by a number of factors including home life and school life highlighting the significant responsibility both parties possess which is considered a central component of the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999a), the *Aistear* framework (2009b), *Wellbeing in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* (DES;HSE, 2015a) and *The DEIS Action Plan* (2017). However, in general, it appeared that teachers feel extremely under-resourced to tackle emotional education in a beneficial way. Most participants discussed their disappointment and frustration over their lack of knowledge and expertise in this area of education claiming that they

would always need to rely on the support of the school principal for guidance. In the same vein, if teachers feel they are lacking in confidence and unable to take on this responsibility, how can they be expected to support parents in this area?

The themes of collaboration, co-operation and relationships go hand in hand; in particular, when discussing the vital role positive interactions and environments play in a child's life. Relationships of trust between teachers and children came to the fore on many occasions throughout this research, and particularly around the topic of care and education in junior schools. The enormous amount of care and nurture junior school children require was identified as one of the biggest challenges facing participating teachers. Curriculum aside, teachers discussed the vast amount of time that is spent on social skill development and emotional development with many admitting that the junior school day is highly demanding, both emotionally and physically. Positive relationships between teachers and the children in their care is a recurrent theme in the literature, for example, Noddings (2007), Hayes (2007), and the *Primary School Curriculum* (NCCA, 1999a) which advocate the establishment of trust between teachers and children in an attempt to safeguard the child's happiness and motivation to learn. Respondents were keen to express their dedication to the cause but suggested introducing an emotional curriculum for teachers as a way of providing more support for practitioners, thus, establishing a whole-school approach to emotional education.

The majority of respondents were also eager to discuss the negative impact certain influences can have on young children. For example, the labelling of children in the school due to instances of bad behaviour, or children being exposed to certain situations in the home environment which could be deemed inappropriate. Unfortunately many children are not protected from this. Participating teachers gave specific examples, such as, if certain policies are not in place or not adhered to by



schools to ensure the protection and safety of children, or perhaps if children are never given the opportunity to feel success either at home or in school. In general, participants believed that formalised testing has a place in the junior primary school but that schools and parents need to treat them in a very careful and positive way to ensure that children's wellbeing is protected. This viewpoint is shared by Pellegrino (2014) and Noddings (2005). However, some participants disagreed with this viewpoint as they stated that standardised testing is a necessary part of schooling in order to identify children's progress from year to year and also to recognise whether children require learning support or not which is line with the *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for schools* (NCCA, 2007).

### 5.3 Recommendations

Based on this research carried out, the following recommendations are offered;

- First and foremost, if collaboration between parents/guardians and teachers is to grow and strengthen, a more formal approach is needed by schools. Under the *DEIS Action Plan* (2017), parents and teachers are supported by the *Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme* (DES, 2005-2006). However, the findings suggest that some teachers are not utilising this resource enough for the benefit of the child. Unfortunately, non-DEIS schools do not have access to this scheme which in turn leaves teachers very much neglected in terms of support to collaborate with parents. Perhaps if there was a more formal approach to collaboration between teachers and parents, for example, a second parent teacher meeting in the year to focus solely on the child's holistic development, this could be an opportunity for teachers and parents to share opinions and

insights. In this way, parents will recognise that they are valued by the school and by the teachers.

- *Aistear* (2009a, 2009b), the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years was not discussed by participants throughout the course of the interviews apart from one teacher mentioning the lack of time allocated to play in her school due to the overloaded curriculum in Senior Infants. Although there was no specific question relating to the framework, it was still a very interesting find, considering the interviewees teach in junior primary schools. Perhaps the reason for this is that schools are not accessing the necessary training to feel confident enough to put the framework in place. If this is indeed the case, perhaps principals and teachers are unaware of the positive impact this framework can have on children in terms of social, emotional and cognitive development. It could also be possible that there is such an emphasis on academic development in junior schools that teachers choose not to value play at all. Indeed perhaps teachers feel huge amounts of pressure to cover the curriculum due to time constraints, and pressure from parents to focus solely on test results. Adequate training in the *Aistear* framework and making it part of the curriculum in infant classes would greatly benefit children's wellbeing.
- Despite the publication of *Wellbeing in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion* (DES;HSE, 2015a), participating teachers largely feel under resourced to tackle emotional education. In general, teachers spoke at length about the lack of knowledge, expertise and skills they possess in this area although many feel that it is as important as other subjects they teach, for example, Literacy, Maths and Irish. It was suggested that there be a specific

subject dedicated to wellbeing or an emotional curriculum - a framework that all teachers are trained in and feel confident taking on to equip children and to support them in becoming resilient members of society. Perhaps if this was established, wellbeing would be at the fore of more discussion in all aspects of school life. These opinions echo the work of Roffey (2016) and Baker et al. (2004) who believe that a whole school approach to wellbeing is necessary in order for children to have enabling and enriching experiences in school.

- Overall, formalised testing in junior primary schools was not favoured by the majority of participants. Standardised achievement tests provide information on whether pupils performed better or worse than a hypothetical average student (DES, 2016), however many participating teachers believe that the use of other methods of assessment, which would be considered more child friendly, could be a better option to decrease levels of anxiety and stress among young children. Focussing solely on academic achievement will undoubtedly have a negative impact on children's wellbeing.
- Interestingly, there appeared to be contrasting beliefs between the teachers from DEIS schools and the teachers from non-DEIS schools. Significant contrasting viewpoints were noted when discussing the schools' approach to testing, the role of parents, the use of particular emotional educational strategies and the different challenges children face on a day-to-day basis. In terms of testing, the majority of teachers from DEIS schools referred to the many other adversities children face, namely, homelessness and poverty and that the idea of measuring these children's scores on a national level is quite unfair whilst other non-DEIS teachers had more experience in dealing with anxious children who felt pressure from parents in terms of academic achievement. In addition to this, it was

interesting to note the differences in opinion when emotional educational strategies were discussed. The majority of teachers from DEIS schools reported that emotional strategies are adopted in a natural way throughout the school day whilst some teachers from non-DEIS schools focused solely on the use of the SPHE curriculum (NCCA, 1999b). Although these differences were quite remarkable it was outside the scope of this particular study to explore it further.

#### **5.4 Research Limitations**

Although the use of semi-structured interviews gave a deep and rich understanding of teacher's wellbeing perceptions and practices in three different settings, it does not necessarily represent the experiences of all junior school teachers. In addition to this, due to time and word count restrictions, not all of the data gathered could be included in the same level of detail in the findings.

A further area of potential study would be a focus on the difference in wellbeing perceptions and practices across a range of junior school settings. This study recognised differences in opinions among teachers working in DEIS and non-DEIS schools which could be a very interesting area of study in the future.

Unfortunately, due to the necessary narrow focus of this research, it was not possible to gain an understanding of parents and children's perceptions of wellbeing in schools. Their thoughts and ideas could have taken this study in a different direction in an attempt to gain an overall idea from all aspects of the school community. Again, this could be an area of future study for researchers.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

Interview 1	DT1	DEIS Band One Teacher 1
Interview 2	DT2	DEIS Band One Teacher 2
Interview 3	DT3	DEIS Band One Teacher 3
Interview 4	DT4	DEIS Band One Teacher 4
Interview 5	DT5	DEIS Band One Teacher 5
Interview 6	DT6	DEIS Band One Teacher 6
Interview 7	DT7	DEIS Band Two Teacher 7
Interview 8	NDT1	Non-DEIS Teacher 1
Interview 9	NDT2	Non-DEIS Teacher 2
Interview 10	NDT3	Non-DEIS Teacher 3
Interview 11	NDT4	Non-DEIS Teacher 4
Interview 12	NDT5	Non-DEIS Teacher 5

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Schedule**

#### **Part One**

1. Can you tell me about yourself and your teaching background/experience?
2. What are the challenges of junior school teaching aside from the curricular challenges?
3. What is your understanding of wellbeing?
4. Why is there a belief that there is a link between children's wellbeing and their academic success?
5. Do you think primary schools have a role to play in the development of wellbeing?
6. Is the topic of wellbeing ever brought up at staff meetings?
7. Do you feel there is a responsibility on junior school teachers, in particular, to lay the foundations for positive learning and wellbeing?
8. Are there particular strategies or a particular pedagogy you adopt to enhance the wellbeing of the children in your own classroom? / Can you describe the type of emotional work carried out in your class? Are you comfortable with this emotional aspect of your role as classroom teacher?

#### **Part Two**

9. From your experience, do you think that a child's background has an impact on their wellbeing?
10. Are there any ways in which the school environment and the school community could have a negative impact on a child's wellbeing?

11. What value do you place on standardised testing?
12. Do you think childhood anxiety is as serious a problem as neglect?
13. Have you ever been concerned about a child in your class in terms of their anxiety or mental health in general?
14. What steps did you take in order to meet the emotional needs of that child?
15. Did you feel capable and confident to deal with this at the time?
16. What support(s) were available to you at that time? (for example, school policy/framework?)
17. Is there anything else you would like to say or contribute?

## **Appendix C**

### **Consent Form**

Research Title: A Case Study into Junior School Teachers' perspectives on Wellbeing.

#### **Research Context**

In January 2018, the Irish Primary Principals' Network reported that increasing anxiety among schoolchildren in primary schools is now one of the biggest problems facing school principals. The Primary School Curriculum (1999) states that the role of educators is to empower the child to become active agents in their own learning and decision making which supports their psychological wellbeing. From a young age children need to be given the emotional tools to express and discuss their feelings. This research aims to examine teachers' own perceptions and attitudes to wellbeing in the infant years and to investigate how the wellbeing of children is met through the practice of the teacher and of the school. The data gathered from this research aims to recognise the valuable work teachers are doing currently to ensure the emotional needs of their students are being met whilst also highlighting further changes that can happen to successfully eradicate the increasing levels of anxiety among the children of Ireland.

#### **Research Design**

The participants of this research will be asked to partake in an audio recorded interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. Prior to the interview, the details pertaining to the study will be explained and the participants will be given the opportunity to ask

questions relating to the research. Following on from that, the teacher's permission and co-operation will be sought through an informed consent form. Participants will be informed that every effort will be made to ensure their anonymity and that they can withdraw from the proposed study at any time. Participants will be assured that the data gathered will be used only for the purpose of this study.

I consent to take part in this research project and for the data gathered to be used in the project.

Participants Signature:

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Name in Block Capitals:

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Researcher:

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Date:

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## Appendix D

XXXXXX,

XXXXX,

XXXX

6<sup>th</sup> February 2018

Attention: Board of Management.

Dear Chairperson and Board Members,

I am currently undertaking a Masters in Early Childhood Education in Marino Institute of Education. As I am now in second year, I am required to complete a dissertation which bears the title: *A Case Study into Junior School Teachers' perspectives on Wellbeing*. I am writing to the Board of Management to seek permission to conduct interviews with members of your staff who may have an interest in discussing the topic of children's wellbeing, in particular children's wellbeing in junior schools.

### **Research Context**

In January 2018, the Irish Primary Principals' Network reported that increasing anxiety among schoolchildren in primary schools is now one of the biggest problems facing school principals. The Primary School Curriculum (1999) states that the role of educators is to empower the child to become active agents in their own learning and decision making which supports their psychological wellbeing. From a young age children need to be given the emotional tools to express and discuss their feelings. This

research aims to examine teachers' own perceptions and attitudes to wellbeing in the infant years and to investigate how the wellbeing of children is met through the practice of the teacher and of the school. The data gathered from this research aims to recognise the valuable work teachers are doing currently to ensure the emotional needs of their students are being met whilst also highlighting further changes that can happen to successfully eradicate the increasing levels of anxiety among the children of Ireland.

### **Research Design**

The participants of this research will be asked to partake in an audio recorded interview lasting 30 minutes. Prior to the interview, the details pertaining to the study will be explained and the participants will be given the opportunity to ask questions relating to the research. Following on from that, the teacher's permission and co-operation will be sought through an informed consent form. Participants will be informed that every effort will be made to ensure their anonymity and that they can withdraw from the proposed study at any time. Participants will be assured that the data gathered will be used only for the purpose of this study.

I give permission to Aisling O' Brien to carry out the research outlined and for the data gathered to be used in the project.

Chairperson's Signature:

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Date:

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Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions relating to this research.

Yours sincerely,

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Aisling O' Brien