



Title of Research Project: A Socio-Ecological Study, Adopting a Participatory Approach to Exploring Student Wellbeing in the First Year of Junior Cycle in Ireland: A Snapshot of Student Wellbeing

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Summary:

The importance of wellbeing to student life is widely recognised. With a greater focus on young persons' wellbeing in Ireland and given the significant reform in lower post-primary, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) introduced a universal social and emotional learning intervention in 2017 (NCCA, 2017) aimed at supporting the promotion of student wellbeing. While there is a wide range of studies addressing student wellbeing, the experiences, perspectives, and understandings of student wellbeing in the newly introduced Junior Cycle (JC) and the Irish context in general have not been researched extensively to date.

This study explored students' perceptions and experiences of wellbeing in the first year of JC and how young people perceive their school supports their wellbeing during transition. The perceptions that are held by teachers regarding the JC Wellbeing Programme, and their experiences supporting student wellbeing in first year were explored. It is in this context that this study advanced work on student wellbeing at the beginning of significant reform around student wellbeing in Irish schools, adding to

the literature on students' experiences of wellbeing in school, and the perceptions and experiences of teachers supporting student wellbeing in Ireland.



Figure 1: Student photograph representing the confusion experienced by students during transition from primary to post-primary school.

This qualitative research used a case study methodology to explore students' and teachers' perceptions of wellbeing in one large post-primary school using two main methods of data collection namely Photovoice and Interview. First year students' perspectives and experience of wellbeing were explored using photos and narratives, and members of staff who have a role in supporting student wellbeing in first year were interviewed. In total 43 first year students volunteered to participate in Photovoice, six as members of the Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG). Nine members of staff, including teachers, leaders, programme coordinators, and support staff also participated. The participative study design aimed to strengthen student voice and agency during the process of participation in the research. Photovoice participants were involved in the data collection and the CRAG was involved in each step of the research process including data analysis. Data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The CRAG presented the findings of the Photovoice to a whole school staff meeting to inform the school improvement plan and wellbeing programme. The teachers valued the input from the students while the students felt Photovoice was a useful approach to discuss issues that others might not like to hear.

This research demonstrates the significant and rich insight young people can provide when given voice. The research findings highlight the impact relationships and connectedness have on student wellbeing and suggest areas for development that reflect the complexity of the multifaceted concept which is student wellbeing. The study concludes with recommendations and proposes a useful approach that could assist schools in amplifying student voice, engendering greater agency, and contributing to decision making for an improved school environment through implementing the Photovoice method of data gathering.

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