

# ***A Collaborative Review Evaluating Student Teachers' Confidence regarding Wellbeing Promotion in Irish Primary Schools***

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## **Introduction**

This project takes as its starting point the wellbeing of student teachers, which may benefit both student teachers and the primary-school pupils they teach in future. Guided by the Department of Education's mission to promote the wellbeing of children and young people ([DES, 2019](#); [NCCA, 2024](#)), this project focused on the mental health and wellbeing of student teachers in an initial teacher education (ITE) setting in Ireland. This project explores how agencies and institutions can provide better mental health support for student teachers. It also addresses student teachers' unique needs as they navigate the challenges of their dual identities and responsibilities as both students and future primary teachers. The aims of this engaged-research project were to better understand and promote student teachers' mental health and wellbeing; to work collaboratively with student teachers to adapt the '[5 Ways to Wellbeing](#)' programme, created by Mental Health Ireland; to meet these student teachers' needs; and to equip participants with the confidence and skills needed to promote wellbeing in primary schools. The overarching goal was to enable student teachers to thrive personally and professionally, ensuring they are equipped to promote the wellbeing of the students they will eventually teach. Research suggests that student teachers are susceptible to host of stressors that can lead to a high attrition rate at the beginning of their careers ([Vesely et al., 2014](#); [Mairitsch et al., 2021](#)). The wellbeing of student teachers is also a critical issue as they assume the dual identities of both students and future educators. Student teachers are in a unique position as they are learners, grappling with academic pressures and personal challenges, while simultaneously preparing for the immense responsibility of guiding young children as they navigate a challenging world. This dual student-teacher identity can increase mental and emotional strain, as they undertake the complexities of both roles. The rationale for this research is threefold: firstly, just like any student, maintaining good mental health allows student teachers to excel academically, form relationships, and build resilience. Also, student-teachers' wellbeing directly impacts their capacity to manage classrooms, connect with students, and foster a positive learning environment. Finally, student teachers are in a unique position to model and promote positive mental health strategies and emotional intelligence in their classrooms and school communities in their school placements during their ITE programmes, and in their future practice.

## **Research design**

The project was guided by the research question, how can student teachers' mental health be better supported in a higher-education initial-teacher education programme? The project received ethical approval from the relevant university institution. Year 2 Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) student teachers were selected as an appropriate student cohort to engage with this topic

as wellbeing is already particularly emphasised in Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in second year of the B.Ed. programme. Wellbeing is a central facet of [the SPHE curriculum](#) and is a significant focus of [current curriculum developments in SPHE](#). 60 B.Ed. Year 2 students aged 19 to 20 years partook in this project with a mean age of 19.67. Standard deviation years= 0.58; female = 55; male = 5.

B.Ed. Year 2 student teachers were invited to opt-in to this research without any negative consequence. All B.Ed. Year 2 students received the content of the workshops, even if they did not opt-in to this research. Workshops were not recorded in any way. 1 online questionnaire and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental [Wellbeing Scales - WEMWBS](#) were administered before the first workshop. An advisory group of 5 self-selecting Year 2 Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) student teachers were invited to nominate themselves to guide the research process and to advocate for the needs of the students, as they believed them to be. This group met three times throughout the academic year: in advance of the first workshop to discuss student needs and expectations regarding wellbeing promotion provision mid-way through the workshop as part of interim evaluation of the project; and after the final workshop took place to review student experiences and perceptions of the workshops and the project process. Only note-taking by the researchers took place during the three meetings of the advisory group.

2 Development Officers from Mental Health Ireland facilitated 5 in-person workshops during scheduled SPHE contact hours over the course of the 2023/24 academic year. The theme of each workshop was guided by the partner's evidence-based [5 Ways to Wellbeing](#) programme. 1 of the 5 workshops included two guest speakers: a mental health nurse; and a child and adolescent art psychotherapist.

## **Findings**

### **Phase 1**

#### **Providing a context**

The findings in phase 1 were drawn from participant responses to an online questionnaire and the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). Both were administered in advance of the 5 scheduled workshops by Mental Health Ireland developmental officers. Please see the appendices for more detail relating to student teacher responses.

#### **Finding 1: Integrating Mental Health Across Subject Areas**

Students recognise that wellbeing is primarily addressed in the Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) module, but they express a desire for mental health to be incorporated across subject areas and modules. This approach would help create a more comprehensive understanding of mental wellbeing and its transversal relevance to teaching across disciplines. Student teachers recognised the value of cross-curricular integration (e.g. suggestions for embedding wellbeing in higher education across the curriculum can be found in Byrne and Surdey 2021). Mental health and wellbeing can be linked to subjects such as English (using literature to discuss emotions), Science Education (mental health and health issues), and Drama Education, Music Education, and Visual Art Education (expressing feelings through creativity). Student teachers also highlighted the value of interdisciplinary assignments. This could encourage projects or lesson planning where student teachers develop ways to integrate mental-health and wellbeing themes into various subjects, fostering creativity in delivering wellbeing

messages through different teaching areas. Student teachers highlighted a crucial point in relation to teachers' wellbeing and the fact that it is directly related to their ability to support their future students. When teachers feel emotionally balanced and supported, they are better equipped to address their students' mental-health needs.

The suggestions from student teachers outlined in this section make it clear that to enhance the B.Ed. programme, mental health needs to be a more integrated and prioritised component across subject areas and modules. Addressing personal and professional wellbeing should be equally emphasised. Supporting and equipping student teachers with strategies for sustaining their own wellbeing as well as supporting pupil wellbeing during their school placements during the B.Ed, should be equally highlighted so that they are well-prepared to foster mental-health awareness and support in their future classrooms. By equipping future teachers with better mental-health knowledge and practices, both in terms of personal wellbeing and classroom application, the overall mental health landscape in Irish primary schools would be positively impacted.

### **Finding 2: Lack of Curricular Support**

The feedback from student teachers about the lack of support from the 1999 *Primary Curriculum* in addressing mental wellbeing in schools reflects a broader concern about the adequacy of mental-health education in Ireland. The feedback highlights a number of key points such as a curriculum gap, increasing mental-health challenges, and sourcing support beyond the curriculum. Student teachers feel they need to go beyond the curriculum to find suitable resources in the field of mental health, which suggests that the existing framework is outdated and insufficient for contemporary needs. The 1999 curriculum may not adequately address the growing mental health challenges faced by students today. Student teachers acknowledge that mental health is a significant issue in Ireland, which underscores the urgency for a more comprehensive approach to wellbeing in schools. Mental health issues are becoming more prevalent, and the lack of formal guidance in the curriculum can leave student teachers underprepared to handle them.

Student teacher feedback suggests a clear gap between what is needed and what is currently available. When student teachers explore beyond the curriculum to address wellbeing, they believe that it creates inconsistency within and across schools. This belief can potentially increase student teachers' sense of anxiety and lack of confidence, readiness, and support. Not all student teachers may have access to the same resources, leading to varied experiences for student teachers, and their pupils. Addressing this gap through curriculum reform, teacher education, and better resources can ensure that Irish primary schools play a central role in supporting the mental wellbeing of pupils.

## **Phase 2**

### **Finding 1: A Need for Practical Steps and Resources**

The feedback from the student teacher advisory group highlights a significant need for practical support and confidence-building when it comes to incorporating and supporting children's wellbeing in the classroom. Their reflections point to two main areas of concern: the need for better preparation for wellbeing support on school placement, the part of the B.Ed programme that takes place in school settings; and the potential challenges associated with paired placements, where two student teachers are allocated to one classroom, which take place in the first semester during Year 2 of the B.Ed. programme in the project's teacher-education setting.

### **A) Workshops Focused on Children's Wellbeing**

The student teacher advisory group emphasized their desire for workshops that offer practical steps and resources on how to support children's wellbeing. This finding indicates that while theory may be covered in their lectures, student teachers feel a gap when it comes to real-life application. Student teachers specifically desire this in the context of their school placement experiences. They suggested practical, hands-on workshops would be useful whereby a move beyond theory would be made. Instead, practical strategies would be incorporated that could be directly implemented in the classroom. For instance, student teachers suggested engaging in activities such as designing wellbeing lesson plans, exploring emotional literacy tools, and practicing mindfulness techniques with children. These workshops could also include case studies where students analyse how to best support specific mental health challenges. A desire for resources to equip all student teachers with a toolkit of resources was noted, including activities, lesson ideas, and digital tools focused on mental health and wellbeing. These might include items such as emotion cards, relaxation techniques, or social-emotional learning apps, which they can use during their placements. Student teachers also highlighted the need for confidence building workshops. It was suggested that in these workshops a focus could be placed on building confidence in delivering wellbeing support. This could involve role-playing exercises, where students practice different scenarios that they may encounter with children who are struggling emotionally.

### **B) Preparation for Placemen**

The feedback suggests that many student teachers do not feel confident or adequately prepared for their placements when it comes to supporting children's wellbeing. The student teacher advisory group revealed that this sentiment was widespread among the Year 2 B.Ed. cohort, especially regarding the paired placement which takes place during their first semester. The paired placement, where two student teachers are assigned to one classroom, takes place in the first semester of Year 2 and is designed to support student teachers as they develop their pedagogical skills, knowledge, and confidence. Paired placement is a common feature of initial teacher education programmes and has an overarching goal of supporting students to independently prepare for and undertake their first full placement in the second semester. Student teachers are paired according to geographical location of their placement schools, and they collaboratively work together to: prepare for the placement; co-design curriculum content, activities, and teaching methodologies; and co-teach for a required number of lessons. A way of addressing this research finding might be in the realm of placement preparation. Prior to placements, there could be dedicated sessions that focus on how to incorporate wellbeing practices into everyday classroom activities. These sessions could cover how to recognise signs of emotional distress, how to approach conversations about feelings with children, and how to create a safe and supportive classroom environment. Additionally, pre-placement reflections were noted as a worthy activity by student teachers. Introducing reflection sessions where student teachers assess their own wellbeing and readiness before placement might help them become more self-aware and proactive about their mental health needs during the placement period.

### **Finding 2: Better Recognising Students' Mental-Health Issues and Needs**

The feedback from the student advisory group underscores the need for better communication between the initial teacher education setting and student teachers, a structured yearly induction, and more opportunities for informal peer interaction. By implementing practical solutions such

as official welcome talks, continuous check-ins, the sharing of an assessment calendar overview, and informal peer connection opportunities, the student advisory group suggested how the initial teacher education institution can significantly enhance student teachers' sense of support, confidence, and engagement throughout the academic year. These improvements would not only help students manage the transition from Year 1 to Year 2 but also foster a stronger sense of community, reducing feelings of stress and isolation and promote a more positive academic experience.

### **A) Induction and Support for All Year Groups**

Unlike Year 1 B.Ed. student teachers who often receive comprehensive, explicit, and structured inductions, Year 2 students felt they were not given sufficient orientation or guidance on how Year 2 would differ from Year 1. This led to challenges in managing the increased workload and understanding the demands of the new academic year. The student advisory group suggested that the Head of Department could give a formal "welcome" talk in early September specifically for Year 2 students. This would set the tone for the year, outline expectations, and provide an opportunity to address the differences between Year 1 and Year 2 in terms of workload, teaching placements, and academic expectations. A dedicated session at the start of Year 2 to explain strategies for workload and time management would help student teachers anticipate busy periods and cope with stress. This could include advice on how to balance assignments, placements, and personal wellbeing.

### **B) Opportunities for Informal Peer Connections**

The student advisory group highlighted the need for non-competitive, non-assessed spaces to get to know each other in a relaxed, judgment-free environment. These spaces can foster stronger peer relationships, which can serve as an important support network throughout the programme. Student teachers also suggested that the initial teacher education institution could organise informal social events and/or activities, such as coffee mornings, discussion groups, or workshops, where students can connect with each other outside of an academic context. These activities should be designed to be inclusive and non-competitive, encouraging students to share interests and experiences in a safe environment. Another suggestion from the advisory group was a peer support network. This could encourage the development of peer support groups where students can share their challenges, offer advice, and collaborate on workload management. These could be student-led but facilitated by the initial teacher education institution, ensuring that they remain positive, supportive spaces.

The student advisory group's reflections provide valuable insight into the need for practical, hands-on workshops that address children's wellbeing and student teachers' better preparation for school placements. Addressing the challenges of paired placements and ensuring adequate support for student teachers' mental health will be essential for improving their overall confidence and wellbeing during their teaching journey.

## **Phase 3**

### **Finding: wellbeing is fluid**

The student advisory group reported that one of the main take-aways they got from the 5 workshops delivered by Mental Health Ireland is that wellbeing is fluid. Wellbeing does not need to be a stand-alone subject. Simple, short activities such as, deep breathing, mindfulness exercises, and/or quick emotional check-ins, can be woven into different parts of the school day.

These mini-interventions can help create a consistent culture of wellbeing without overwhelming the school day and class timetable. This finding is insightful and aligns with modern approaches to promoting mental health and emotional wellbeing in schools. This approach allows student teachers to be responsive in the moment. The idea that wellbeing can be integrated into everyday classroom practices in short, regular bursts, such as 5 or 10 minutes throughout the day, makes wellbeing more accessible and sustainable for both teachers and pupils. Wellbeing is naturally embedded across subjects and not treated as a separate lesson. For instance, in English, students can reflect on characters' emotions or practice expressing their feelings through writing. In mathematics, teachers can include calming, problem-solving moments or encourage growth mindset approaches to mistakes. In the Arts, students can explore their emotions through creative expression. Such integration helps normalise discussions around mental health and emotional wellbeing, making it part of the everyday school experience.

### **Recommendations going forward**

While SPHE already includes many wellbeing exercises, the student teachers who participated in this project are calling for a more diverse and expanded focus that applies to other areas of the curriculum. Incorporating mental health education into additional modules would help normalise the discussion around wellbeing. The findings reveal the following recommendations.

#### **1. More workshop activity and interaction**

Student teacher feedback reveals a desire for more active, workshop-style instruction, which suggests a need for a more dynamic and engaging approach to the teaching and learning process of wellbeing. Student teachers indicated a preference for more interactive, hands-on learning styles, rather than passive discussions. Active participation would better prepare student teachers for applying what they learn to the classroom and help them engage more deeply with the material. Student teachers could actively engage in activities, role-playing, and simulations that mirror real-life classroom scenarios. This could involve problem-solving in groups, practicing wellbeing exercises, or designing lesson plans in class. They also suggested that each session could involve a short theoretical discussion followed by practical application. For example, after learning about a wellbeing strategy, student teachers could break into groups and practice how they would introduce that concept to children in the classroom, creating a real-world connection.

#### **2. Tailoring workshop content**

Findings reveal that student teachers appreciated when Mental Health Ireland developmental officers brought in a teacher's perspective, but overall, they felt that the sessions were more appropriate for adults. They emphasised that content tailored specifically to children would have been more relevant and useful for their future teaching roles. Student teachers suggested starting with an activity or strategy for the student teachers' personal wellbeing, for instance mindfulness and/or stress management. This could be followed up with how the same or a similar concept can be adapted for children in the classroom such as, simplifying mindfulness for young students or stress management techniques for students. They also suggested that each wellbeing strategy could come with concrete examples of how it can be tailored to the classroom. For instance, if discussing a self-care routine for teachers, demonstrate how that could be simplified or adapted into a child-friendly exercise, such as a breathing or relaxation technique for primary school students. Overall, student teachers believed that this programme is a good basis to start with more groupwork, such as creating a poster to demonstrate learning, and reflection activities built into the sessions.

## Conclusion

This project highlights a strong desire from student teachers for more engaging, practical, and clearly tailored sessions that address both student teachers' personal wellbeing and how these concepts can be transferred to the classroom for the benefit of children. This could be within the B.Ed. programme, where a call for mental health to be a more integrated and prioritised component across subjects and modules was made. Also, in terms of workshop delivery, students requested (1) increased opportunities for active participation, and (2) clear distinctions between content for teachers and classroom applications to be made so that sessions can be even more relevant, useful, and engaging for student teachers as they prepare for their teaching careers.

We would like to thank all the students involved who made this project possible and allowed us to make mental health more accessible and applicable at various educational levels.

## References

Ashley, Ashley K. Vesely, Donald H. Saklofske, David W. Nordstokke (2014) 'EI training and pre-service teacher wellbeing'. *Personality and Individual Differences* Volume 65: 81-85,

Byrne, Deirdre and Surdey, Jessica (2021) '*Embedding wellbeing across the curriculum in higher education. An Fholláine a Leabú ar Fud an Churaclaim Ardoideachais*'. <https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Supporting-Wellbeing-in-Practice-October-2021.pdf>.

Mental Health Ireland. 'Five Ways To Wellbeing'. <https://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/five-ways-to-wellbeing/>.

NCCA (2024) 'Draft Wellbeing Specification For all primary and special schools: For consultation'. [https://ncca.ie/media/csmh55u0/draft\\_primary\\_wellbeing\\_specification\\_2024.pdf](https://ncca.ie/media/csmh55u0/draft_primary_wellbeing_specification_2024.pdf).

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Pre-workshop online questionnaire

The following represents a selected overview of findings from the pre-workshop questionnaire administered to BED student teachers. This provided an important context for the developmental officers ahead of the 5 workshops.

The majority of students selected 'neither agree nor disagree' or 'disagree' when answering the following question related to necessary skills to handle daily stressors.

**I feel like I have the tools and coping skills needed to deal with the daily stresses that come my way.**

Agree

Disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Strongly agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Agree

Many student teachers do not feel supported by the primary curriculum (1999) in addressing mental wellbeing in schools.

**In your view, does the Primary Curriculum equip teachers to address mental wellbeing in schools? Give reasons for your response.**

Not enough. I believe there is a big problem with mental health in Ireland and I don't think there is enough being taught about it in schools

No - the curriculum focuses on academic aspects of school. Teachers have to look beyond the curriculum to find information on wellbeing.

No I don't think so. Wellbeing is mainly focused on in the SPHE curriculum and this is deemed one of the 'less' important subjects so up to date, relevant information on children's wellbeing is not included in the n the curriculum.

Somewhat, SPHE curriculum would include an aspect of wellbeing but it isn't as prevalent in other subject areas. Most teachers would also probably use their own outside resources separate from the curriculum when including well-being into their school day.



Not fully. mental well-being amongst children is changing so frequently and it is difficult for the teachers to keep up to date with it using only the Primary Curriculum

There is only really emphasis placed on mental well-being in the SPHE curriculum. In my opinion the curriculums for the other subjects lack an emphasis on mental well-being, despite its importance in schools.

Some schools are more aware of mental health issues than others and I believe subjects like SPHE help with the matter. However I think more needs do be done in this area

No there is not enough awareness about it regarding children

In regards to the 1999 curriculum, it does in ways, however, it is not up to date at all and there are problems and challenges that young people face today that wouldn't have been a problem 20 years ago. I am sure the new curriculum will address this more.

In some cases yes but most of the time no

In subjects like SPHE, certain strands do focus on mental well-being. However, in other subjects like English and Art, mental well-being is 2 focused on.

I think the current curriculum struggles to deal with issues such an anxiety disorders with children and how to help children with this. The curriculum was developed in 1999 and I think these issues weren't seen as much of a problem back then. I think the new reformed curriculum having a subject area of well-being is a good change.

Elements touch the surface area, but teachers may not feel adequately equipped. The curriculum is a guide for teachers but methodologies and approaches to these areas must be explained and demonstrated to teachers.

The following suggestions were offered to enhance the incorporation of wellbeing into the BED programme.

**Do you have any suggestions for how approaches to mental wellbeing could be improved in the wider B.Ed. programme? If yes, elaborate.**

Focus more on student teachers' wellbeing so they are able to help their own students with their mental wellbeing

Incorporated into different subject areas and modules, we cover a lot of well-being exercises for both use in the classroom and for our own use in SPHE but not many other modules include well-being.

Try to incorporate it into other subjects - drama, pe, music etc, rather than just placing importance on it in sphe

When going out on placement, we are told to not discuss areas such as sex Ed and bereavement with the children. I agree with this but I also think that if a child comes to us with these problems we should have the skills developed to know what to say in that moment. I also find that a lot of the time we are simply told to just do meditation to promote wellbeing and although this may be effective, there could be other ways introduced to us

## Appendix 2: Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)

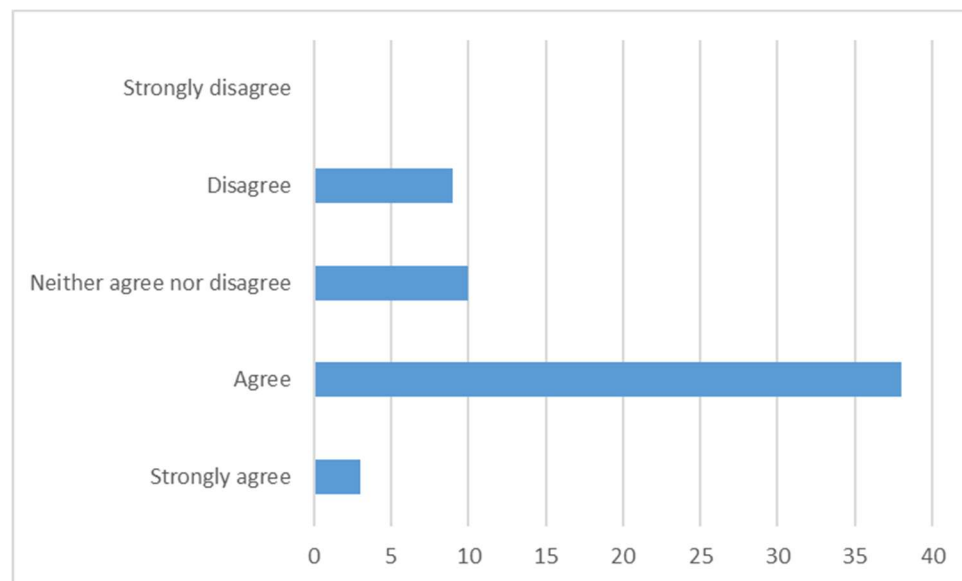
In the United Kingdom, Tennant et al.'s (2007) general population sample had a mean WEMWBS total score of 51 (standard deviation = 7), with 15% of the sample categorized as having low wellbeing (WEMWBS score range 14-42) and 15% of the sample categorized as having high wellbeing (WEMWBS score range 60-70).

The BEd2 sample had a mean WEMWBS total score of 45.8 (standard deviation = 8.53; range = 20-66), with 32% of the sample categorized as having low wellbeing (WEMWBS score range 14-42) and 5% of the sample categorized as having high wellbeing (WEMWBS score range 60-70).

WEMWBS Category	Number of students
Low Wellbeing	19
Average Wellbeing	38
High Wellbeing	3

Furthermore, 25% of BEd2 students (15/60) had WEMWBS total scores  $\leq 40$ , indicating probable clinical depression as defined by the Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Bianco, 2012).

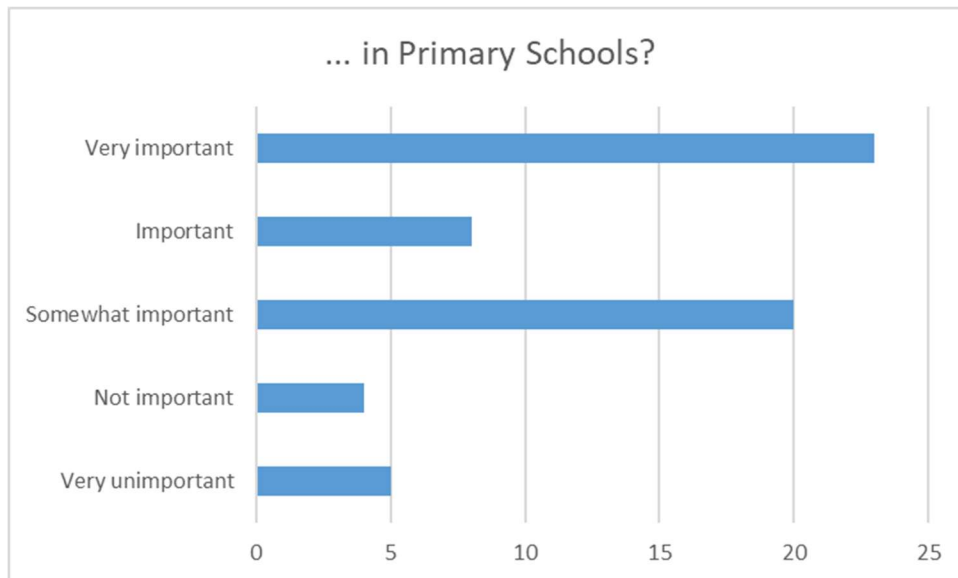
**I feel like I have the tools and coping skills needed to deal with the daily stresses that come my way.**



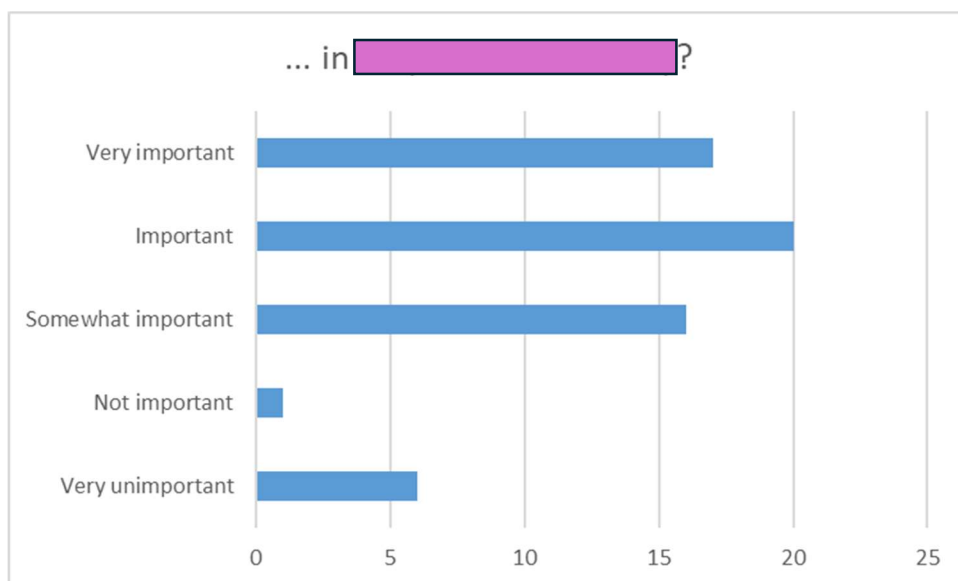
Strongly agree	3
Agree	38
Neither agree nor disagree	10
Disagree	9

Strongly disagree 0

### How important is wellbeing promotion...



Very unimportant 5  
 Not important 4  
 Somewhat important 20  
 Important 8  
 Very important 23

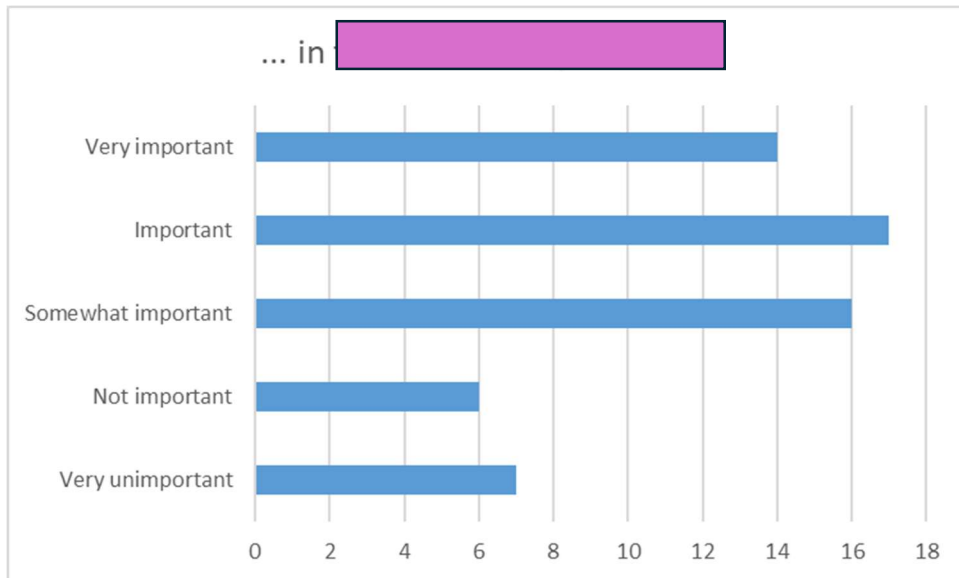


Very unimportant 6  
 Not important 1

Somewhat important 16

Important 20

Very important 17



Very unimportant 7

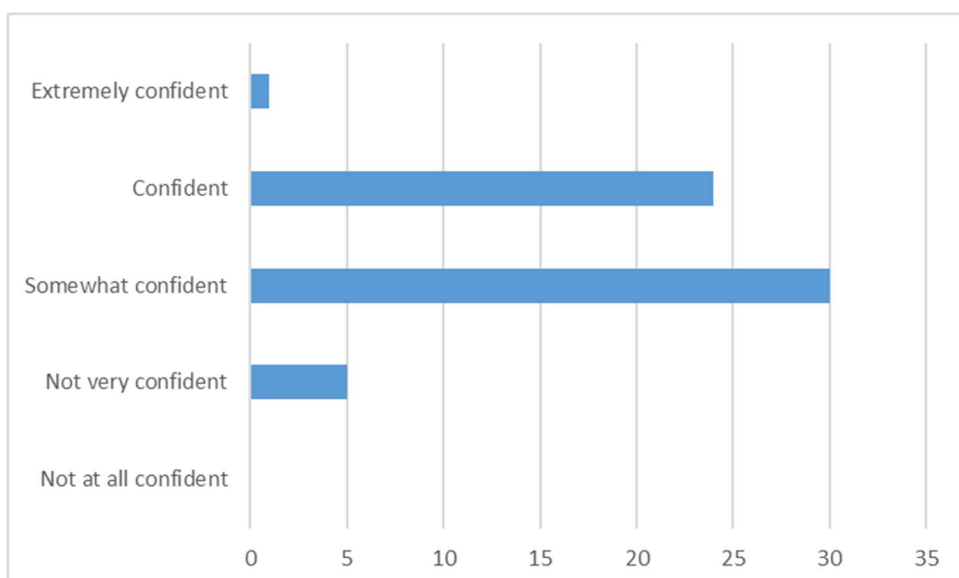
Not important 6

Somewhat important 16

Important 17

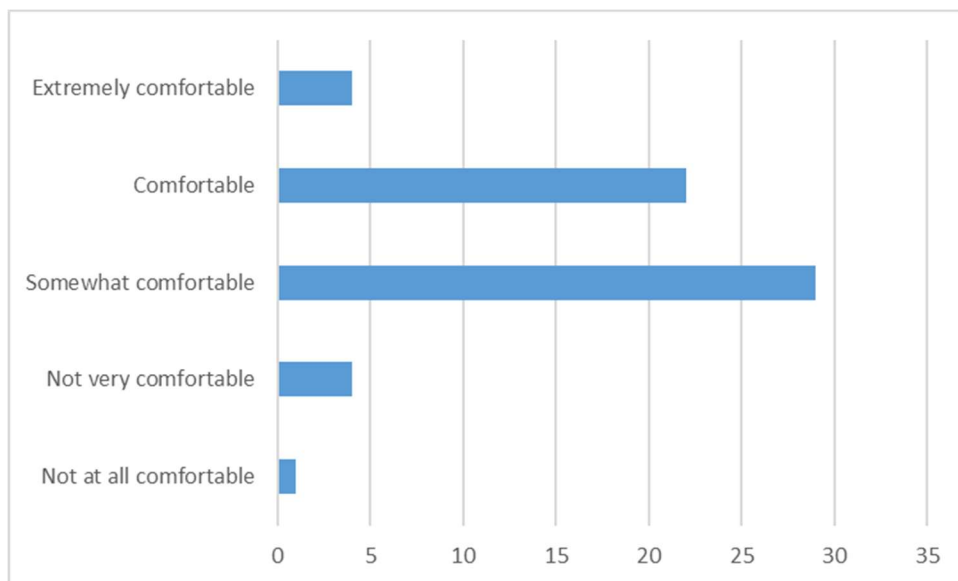
Very important 14

**How confident do you feel in promoting wellbeing with the students in your class?**



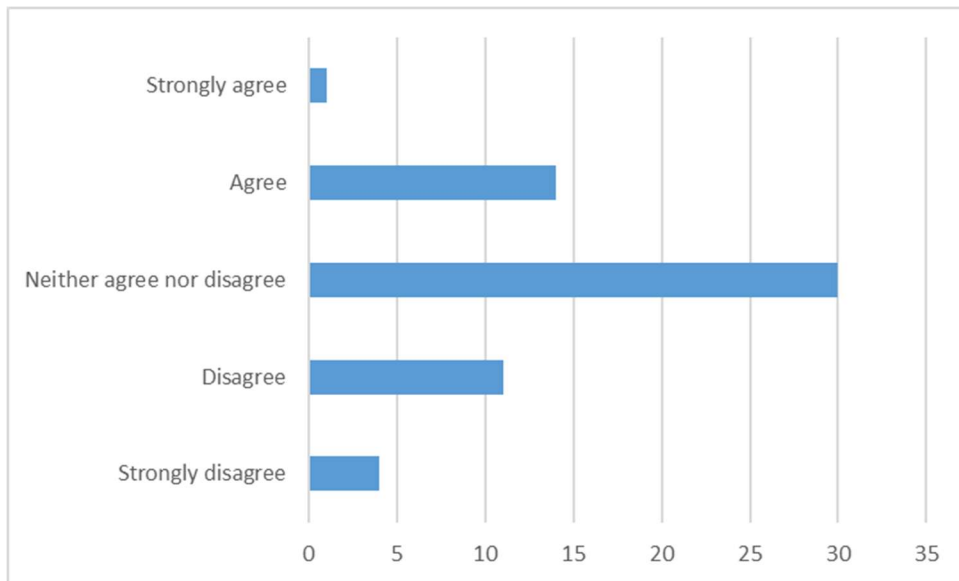
Not at all confident	0
Not very confident	5
Somewhat confident	30
Confident	24
Extremely confident	1

**How comfortable would you feel having conversations about mental wellbeing with the children in your classrooms?**



Not at all comfortable	1
Not very comfortable	4
Somewhat comfortable	29
Comfortable	22
Extremely comfortable	4

**My experiences in (third level institution) to date have adequately prepared me to have conversations about mental wellbeing with children in the classroom.**



Strongly disagree	4
Disagree	11
Neither agree nor disagree	30
Agree	14
Strongly agree	1