

"The Mind Matters"



Primary School Teachers' Perspectives on Supporting Primary School Children's Mental Health in Mainstream Schools.

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Introduction

Research by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) stated that **1 in 3 children in Ireland will experience some form of mental health issue** by the age of 13 (Cannon et al., 2013).

This **qualitative research** incorporates **seven semi-structured interviews with primary school teachers** and explores the under-researched area of **primary school teachers' perspectives on supporting primary school children's mental health in the Irish context**.

It adopts **reflexive thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and aligns with the **Biopsychosocial Model (BPS)** (Engel, 1977).

Results show that although teachers view their role as crucial and collaborative, they rely on external supports. However, a concerning situation exists whereby **external support is under-resourced** and the referral system is overwhelmed. In contrast to supporting well-being, teachers feel ill-equipped to support aspects of children's mental health as they have received little to no formal training.

Nevertheless, teachers are **showing initiative** through Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and self-study to navigate barriers.

Defining Mental Health

The WHO (2018) proposed that **mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual is aware of their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and has the ability to contribute to their community**. It is more substantive than merely the absence of mental disorders or disabilities.

Literature Review - Key studies

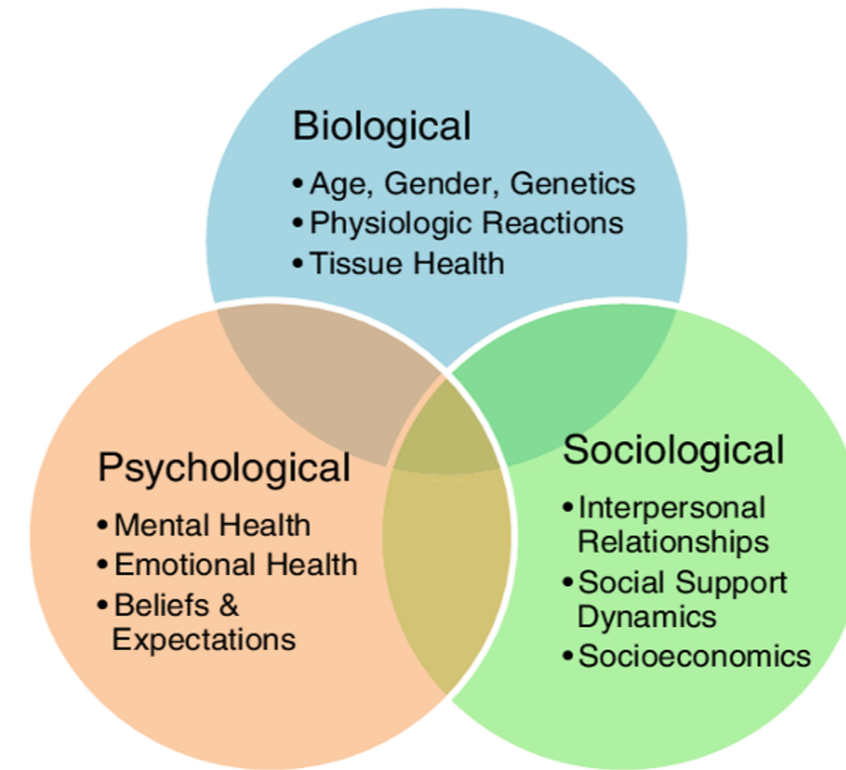
- Teachers and schools are well-positioned to make an impact through offering support, prevention, promotion and intervention (Danby & Hamilton, 2016; Roeser & Midgley, 1997).
- DES (2015) forwarded that the **whole-school implementation of SPHE (NCCA, 1999)** buttresses the effective delivery of mental health and well-being education.
- Recent study in Ireland by Ní Chorcora and Swords (2021) found that 95% of 356 primary school teachers surveyed **do not feel adequately trained** to support students with mental health difficulties. **Teachers desire training** that would help them to identify and support children's mental health needs (Danby & Hamilton, 2016; Graham et al., 2011, Reinke et al., 2011).
- Barriers** - Ireland had the highest proportions of schools indicating that availability of specialists, links with relevant agencies and lack of national policy were barriers to provision (Patalay et al., 2016).

RESEARCH RATIONALE

- Research aimed to offer novel findings and a **more nuanced understanding** of primary school teachers' perspectives supporting children's mental health.
- Dearth of research** carried out using semi-structured interviews in the **Irish context** from teachers' perspectives.

Theoretical Underpinning

The **Biopsychosocial Model (Engel, 1977)** is an interdisciplinary and multifaceted model that highlights the interrelations among the **biological, psychological, and socio-environmental influences** on health and disease. It is the **optimal holistic, comprehensive and strength-based approach**.



Research Questions

Primary School Teachers' Perspectives on Supporting Primary School Children's Mental Health in Mainstream Schools.

Embedded questions:

- What do they feel their **role** is in supporting the mental health needs of primary school children?
- What do they think are the **main barriers and supports** in supporting primary school children's mental health?
- Do they **feel equipped** in supporting primary school children's mental health?

Methods

Design

- Qualitative Approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021)
- 7 Semi-structured interviews
- Social Constructivist Paradigm
- Researcher – Female, Early 20s, Education and Psychology student

Participants

- Primary school teachers from varied school settings

Procedure

- Pilot interview, Interviews, Transcription
- Analysis



Analysis

- Revised 6-stage model of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021)
- Researcher as an Active agent - reflexive and interpretive approach

Key Findings and Recommendations

- Teachers value their role but desire more training and guidance. **All teachers should receive mandated in-service CPD to help flag mental health indicators due to lack of training in Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Moreover, Mental Health Literacy should be blended into ITE.**
- Threshold to access external support is too high and waiting lists are oversubscribed. Grey area exists whereby teachers have to compensate for this shortfall as children are still struggling significantly. **More Educational psychologists are urgently required. Government needs to increase funding.**
- SPHE is a key support. However, a hyperfocus on core subjects can create challenges in mediating the curriculum. **Competency of 'Fostering Well-being' (NCCA, 2020) should be allocated sufficient time and be appropriately implemented, monitored and assessed using a whole-school approach.**
- Teachers should **continue using an amalgam of mutually reinforcing strategies**. 'Friends for Life' program could be adapted to enhance its ease of implementation in the Irish context.

Limitations and Future Research

- Participants were known to the researcher which may have heightened **social desirability bias** (Phillips & Clancy, 1972). **Participants self-selected** themselves to take part.
- Address **why** an increasing number of children need mental health support and how to combat this – solution-focused.
- Interview other stakeholders** such as psychologists, SET teachers, principals and parents to glean more insights on how their role and perspectives compare to and interact with the mainstream teacher.

Conclusion

Overall, this research reaffirmed previous finding and offered novel insights into primary school teachers' perspectives on supporting primary school children's mental health.

Teachers are not mental health professionals, but they are professionals with an inherent role in supporting children's mental health. Ultimately, children rely on adequate support and the future of our **society depends on it**.

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Overview of Results

Themes	Subthemes
1. Teachers Champion their Collaborative and Crucial role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers have an intrinsic role in supporting mental health. Collaboration is key
2. Teachers Using Initiative to Navigate Barriers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum can create challenges
3. Teachers Confident with Well-being but Wary of Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of formal training placing onus on teachers to upskill. Teachers relying on an under-resourced system.