

Student work published in its original form without the journal's standard peer-review process

Policy brief: Student mental health and wellbeing in Poland: Are the current policies and measures enough?

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Abstract

This policy brief addresses the critical state of student mental health and wellbeing in Poland. According to studies conducted by non-governmental and international organisations, the mental health and wellbeing of students in Poland have drastically worsened, necessitating immediate, nationwide and holistic action by all relevant authorities and stakeholders. The Polish Government has already taken some measures, such as joining the World Health Organisation (WHO) Mental Health Gap Action Programme in 2023, increasing the budget on child and adolescent mental health, and providing schools with psychologists to support students. However, significant challenges remain, including shortages of psychologists in schools, limited funding opportunities to schools, and a lack of comprehensive national policy or programs. This policy brief recommends the development of a national education policy and programs on student mental health and wellbeing that provides guidelines and framework for schools, educators, and other relevant education stakeholders.

Keywords: education policy, mental health, Poland, student, wellbeing

Context

Over the past two decades, Poland has transitioned through several education reforms which have positively and negatively impacted the education system (Jakubowski, 2021; Korzeniecka-Bondar et al., 2023). However, within these reforms, not much has been done in regard to student mental health and wellbeing on a nationwide scale. The current state of wellbeing of children and youth in Poland is at a critical stage (Kaczmarek & Trambacz-Oleszak, 2021; Toffolutti et al., 2022).

According to a study conducted by Unaweza Foundation, a non-governmental organisation, 39% of 184,447 students have reported suicidal thoughts and 8.8% had attempted suicide (Unaweza Foundation, 2023). Furthermore, 80% of all respondents felt overwhelming stress and almost 70% had not utilised the support of psychologists inside or outside of school due to various factors such as societal stigma and others (Unaweza Foundation, 2023). Furthermore, the police recorded a 148% increase of suicide attempts of youth from 2020 to 2022 (WHO, 2023).

Additional studies have revealed that mental health and wellbeing among youth have drastically worsened, especially after the global pandemic (Bojanowska et al., 2021; Toffolutti et al., 2022; Van Thomme et al., 2023). Children and youth are exhibiting higher levels of school-induced stress, loneliness, anxiety, depression, learning difficulties, low self-esteem among other factors (Bojanowska et al., 2021; Kaczmarek & Trambacz-Oleszak, 2021; Toffolutti et al., 2022; Van Thomme et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the latest PISA 2022 has also indicated that student life satisfaction and sense of belonging in schools were among the lowest in PISA participating countries (OECD, 2023).

These findings shed some light on the grim reality of the mental health and wellbeing challenges that Polish children and youth are grappling with. Although there are some policies and measures in place, be it governmental or non-governmental, the question remains whether it is enough and if not, in what ways it needs to be further addressed.

Purpose

The purpose of this policy brief is to advise the Ministry of National Education to take prompt, nationwide, holistic action to tackle the student mental health and wellbeing crisis in schools in Poland. The current situation of worsening student mental health and wellbeing is a stark reminder to uphold the duties of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* and provide every child and youth with the necessary support they need to lead a flourishing life.

What we know about student mental health and wellbeing

Historically, defining wellbeing has been a contested and complex challenge (Dodge et al., 2012; Jarden & Roache, 2023). However, for the purposes of this brief, wellbeing in its simplest terms can be understood as living life well (Curren et al., 2024). Mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing and a critical component of our health and wellbeing (WHO, 2022). Wellbeing has become an increasingly important issue all over the world and has been included in global policy documents such as the *UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030*, *EU Joint Action on Mental Health and Wellbeing*, *WHO European Program of Work 2020–2025* and more (Patalay et al., 2016; Pulimeno et al., 2020).

Schools are integral to the wellbeing of students (Govorova et al., 2020; Marquez & Main, 2021; Pulimeno et al., 2020). They are also the ideal setting to support the mental health and wellbeing of students and minimise barriers associated with providing such support (Patalay et al., 2016; Pulimeno et al., 2020). School work related anxiety, bullying, and lack of emotional support from parents in relation to schools have been found to be the most common predictor of declining student life satisfaction. In Poland, there is evidence of school effects impacting life satisfaction (Marquez & Main, 2021).

Additionally, the positive effects of supporting student wellbeing are also closely linked with improved relationships with teachers and peers, and academic achievement (Pulimeno et al., 2020). However, prioritisation of student wellbeing varies across schools due to varying school policies and funding availability (Patalay et al., 2016). WHO's *Health Promoting Schools* (HPS) framework aims to incorporate health literacy and health promotion in a holistic manner, and provides certificates to schools who follow the specific guidelines (Patalay et al., 2016). HPS is seen as a successful intervention when provided with sufficient institutional support and funding (Patalay et al., 2016).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is critical in the wellbeing field and pertains to the development of social and emotional competencies relating to oneself and others (Durlak et al., 2022; Osher et al., 2016). Numerous meta-analytical studies have positively correlated SEL with improved academic outcomes, stronger social and emotional and problem solving skills, and better relationships with peers and teachers (Durlak et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2017). Whether it be SEL or any other wellbeing intervention program, a whole-school approach has been cited by various scholars as being most effective (Oberle et al., 2016; Pulimeno et al., 2020). Working within the whole-school community from leadership to teachers and students, incorporating the learning in pedagogical design, integrating partnership with community and parents are also key for effective implementation (Durlak et al., 2022; Pulimeno et al., 2020).

Critical analysis on current policies and measures in Poland

In recent years, with the rise of student mental health and wellbeing issues in Poland, the focus has been shifting, and more initiatives are being implemented (WHO, 2023). Poland, in collaboration with the WHO, has joined the *WHO Mental Health Gap Action Programme* in 2023 and has increased their budget to PLN 1 billion on child and adolescent mental health since 2018 (WHO, 2023). Although it is praiseworthy that spending on this issue has increased, the actual spending on school-related wellbeing expenses for children and youth is not clear. Given the dire situation, more funds to schools should be budgeted every year to deal with the growing problem associated with mental health and wellbeing among students within the school setting (Pulimeno et al., 2020).

From the beginning of 2024, the Ministry of National Education is developing a health education subject to be included in the national curriculum and is currently in the process of public consultations to include topics such as mental and physical health, and other preventive measures (TVP World, 2024). Integrating mental health and wellbeing concepts in the pedagogical design is said to be effective (Pulimeno et al., 2020), however it is not enough as a sole measure. In addition to the curriculum, a whole-school approach needs to be adopted in order to successfully implement the subject in schools, which could include training teachers, involving parents to discuss high parental expectations, and other such initiatives (Durlak et al., 2022; Pulimeno et al., 2020). Additionally, national policy is critical in providing schools with guidance and direction that will mitigate barriers to wellbeing program implementation (Patalay et al., 2016)

In recent years, the Polish Government has made efforts to provide schools with psychologists, however, there is still a shortage of about 23.9% psychologists needed for the 2024–2025 academic year (Medexpress, 2024). The current problem is that schools that do not have any psychologists are in danger of not being able to provide the necessary mental health and wellbeing support needed for students (Medexpress, 2024). School psychologists are integral because they may be the only source of support some of these students may get due to continued stigma and lack of support from parents (Medexpress, 2024). Close to 24% shortage is still a significant number and a clear indicator that continued systematic action and support is needed to quickly fill these positions while maintaining quality. These actions taken by the government are fragmented and not enough, therefore, a systematic approach is required.

International organisations, such as UNICEF, have also been working to tackle the issue of mental health and wellbeing decline, through their *Learning Passport* initiative, which Poland joined in June 2023 (Learning Passport, 2024). This initiative is aimed to equip and empower teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills needed to support their students' mental health and wellbeing (Learning Passport, 2024). As of early 2024, the program has supported 9500 teachers and 200,000 students (Learning Passport, 2024). Although this is a good initiative, in line with what research says about empowering teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills (Pulimeno et al., 2020), it is a small scale effort that may not currently reach the number of students that need help and support in their mental health and wellbeing.

At the school level, there are some 3000 schools that currently hold an HPS certificate (Borzucka-Sitkiewicz & Kowalczywska-Grabowska, 2018). The challenges to being an HPS in Poland include the lack of parental involvement and linkages to local community, and a systematic approach (Borzucka-Sitkiewicz & Kowalczywska-Grabowska, 2018). Although Polish schools were mostly successful, a dedicated whole-school approach was difficult to implement. The study suggested that there needs to be a national educational policy in place that would support and guide schools in implementing whole-school approaches (Borzucka-Sitkiewicz & Kowalczywska-Grabowska, 2018). Furthermore, the study also highlighted the positive effects of HPS in schools, however further scaling requires more support (Borzucka-Sitkiewicz & Kowalczywska-Grabowska, 2018).

In regard to SEL in Poland, 'cooperation' is the only competency that is included in the national curriculum (Bowles et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is only practiced on a small scale through some non-governmental organisations and private entities, such as Zippy's Friends from the United Kingdom (Bowles et al., 2017). Currently, there is no comprehensive research on SEL or its effectiveness in Poland, nor is it fully understood and accepted by the governmental authorities (Bowles et al., 2017). Researchers have suggested that SEL be included in the national curriculum as well as teacher training programs in order for SEL to be comprehensively integrated into the education system to support all students and their mental health and wellbeing (Bowles et al., 2017).

Recommendations for improved student mental health and wellbeing

Based on the critical analysis of current policies and measures regarding student mental health and wellbeing in Poland, the following recommendations should be considered by the Ministry of National Education.

First, develop a national education policy on student mental health and wellbeing that provides guidelines and a framework for schools, educators, and other relevant education stakeholders. This policy would demonstrate the government's commitment to this issue, highlighting its importance throughout the education sector, and creating opportunities for further initiatives, funding, and training of educators. The current lack of such a policy document has caused barriers such as lack of staff capacity, specialists, funding, and links with other agencies (Patalay et al., 2016). Thus, establishing it will be integral to presenting a united front on these issues (Patalay et al., 2016; Bowles et al., 2017).

Second, develop and implement a holistic approach to student mental health and wellbeing. Currently, the policies and measures are a mixture of small-scale initiatives and actions taken by a variety of different stakeholders. The government, in collaboration with various educational stakeholders, should implement a comprehensive wellbeing program that can be scaled nationwide. As the critical analysis indicates, current measures are insufficient, and more needs to be done. In order to establish a nationwide program that ensures that every child and youth is supported and empowered, comprehensive empirical research on mental health, wellbeing and SEL is critical.

For instance, the wellbeing program can be a national SEL program that incorporates a whole-school approach and evidence-informed best practices of SEL within the unique national and cultural context of Poland. In order to ensure fidelity, quality and effectiveness, systematic research into SEL needs to be conducted on a regular basis, as there is currently no research available on this front (Bowles et al., 2017). Additionally, in-service and pre-service teachers should be provided with training on the fundamentals of SEL and other mental health and wellbeing related issues in order to best understand and support students (Curren et al., 2024).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current policies and measures are not enough given the current status quo of worsening mental health and wellbeing among children and youth in Poland. Poland needs to urgently and effectively scale its operations to tackle this issue to ensure that all children and youth are supported through robust and comprehensive national education policy and nationwide wellbeing programs.

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