

Implementing School-based Social and Emotional Learning Programmes: Recommendations from Research

Key Points for Practice

- Schools play an important role in the promotion of students' positive mental health.
- Implementation quality is critical to the overall success of school-based programmes.
- A number of factors operating at the classroom-, school-, community- and policy-level can impact on implementation quality.
- Schools require ongoing implementation support to ensure optimal delivery and sustainability of programmes.
- Curriculum-based social and emotional learning programmes should be embedded within a whole-school approach to ensure the best and most sustained outcomes for students.

PRACTICE BRIEF

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AUTHORS

Dr. Katherine Dowling

Professor Margaret Barry

Implementation of Social and Emotional Learning in Schools

The promotion of children and adolescents' mental health and wellbeing is essential to ensure healthy development and positive social and health outcomes in adulthood.¹ School-based social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions are proven to be one of the most effective universal mental health promotion strategies for young people demonstrating positive outcomes including; improving social emotional skills, mental health and well-being and academic outcomes as well as reducing negative health and social behaviours.¹⁻⁵

While the evidence in support of school-based SEL programmes is compelling, inconsistent and variable levels of implementation can impact negatively on programme outcomes.^{6, 7} Implementation quality refers to the degree to which programmes are implemented as intended by the programme developers.^{6, 8} Strong evidence indicates that implementation quality is a critical

predictor of programme outcomes and the overall effectiveness of an intervention.^{7, 9, 10} In other words, when implementation quality of a programme is high, intervention effects are much stronger and when implementation quality is poor, programmes may fail to achieve intended outcomes. To increase the likelihood of producing successful outcomes, programmes not only need to be underpinned by strong evidence-based approaches, but need to be implemented with high-quality as well.^{6, 7}

In Ireland, few SEL programmes have been developed and evaluated, particularly for the older adolescent population and there is a lack of research assessing how implementation quality impacts on programme outcomes. This absence of information on implementation could be detrimental to the future success and sustainability of SEL programmes.

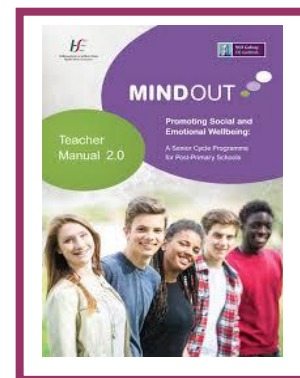
The MindOut programme is a school-based SEL programme for post-primary school students (15-18 years) designed to be delivered by teachers through the SPHE curriculum in Ireland and is based on CASEL's five core competencies for SEL (Fig. 1).¹¹

Fig.1: The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) describes five broad social and emotional competencies:

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Management
- Responsible Decision Making

What did this research explore?

This research examined the implementation of the MindOut programme with disadvantaged post-primary school students (15-18 years) across Ireland. More specifically, this research assessed the impact of the programme on participants' outcomes, the differences in levels of implementation quality between schools, the contextual factors which contributed to implementation variability and the relationship between schools' level of implementation quality and participants' outcomes.



What are the main findings?

- The MindOut programme showed significant improvements to students' social and emotional skills (reduced *emotional suppression* and *avoidance coping* and increased *social support coping*) as well to their mental health with reduced levels of *stress* and *depressive symptoms* as well as lower levels of *anxiety* for female students.
- Implementation quality scores for schools delivering the MindOut programme was quite variable (range: 55%-92%) with eight schools demonstrating high-levels of implementation and eight-schools categorised as low-implementers.
- A number of implementation factors were identified by teachers and students including: (i) Programme; (ii) Participant; (iii) Teacher; (iv) School Context; and (v) Organisational factors.
- The effects of the programme were assessed in relation to schools' implementation level and showed that all of the positive effects of the programme were only found to be significant with the high-, but not the low-implementation group.
- At the 12-month follow-up, only one of the positive outcomes was sustained.

What are the implications?

- Schools play an important role in the promotion of students' positive mental health and SEL programmes can be successfully implemented with vulnerable groups, who often have greater needs and present a number of additional implementation challenges.
- Evidence-based programmes are not enough on their own to produce positive outcomes. Implementation quality is a crucial ingredient to the success of school-based programmes and should therefore be prioritised.
- A number of multi-level factors operating at the classroom, school, community and wider policy-level can contribute to implementation quality and consideration of these during the planning, implementation and sustainability stages of a programme is important.
- Curriculum-based programmes alone may not be enough for optimised and sustained programme outcomes.



Implementation quality is a crucial ingredient to the success of school-based programmes.

Recommendations for Practice

Teacher-level

1. Teachers are encouraged to implement the programme with a high quality of delivery which includes being prepared for classes, enthusiastic about the content of the programme and provide positive feedback and support to increase student engagement and development.
2. Teachers require good quality programme training, comprehensive programme materials and ongoing implementation support during delivery for effective implementation.

School-Level

3. Schools intending on adopting SEL programmes should strongly consider selecting staff to deliver the programmes who exhibit strong implementer readiness (e.g., knowledge and skills; acceptance of intervention; experience, positive attitudes; perceived value; self-efficacy).
4. School leaders and management play an important role in supporting quality implementation through the provision of adequate curriculum timetabling, access to resources, providing increased opportunities to teachers for professional development and staff training, raising school-wide awareness of SEL and influencing staffing arrangements.
5. Schools need to adequately plan for the adoption of new programmes by considering contextual factors in their local setting that may impact quality of implementation. Programmes should also be planned for consecutive delivery as interruptions lead to disjointed programmes that are likely to have lower engagement and reduced effectiveness.
6. Schools are encouraged to embed curriculum-based SEL programmes within a whole-school approach in order to produce optimal and sustained outcomes. Schools will require further education and support around whole-school SEL strategies in order for this to be done effectively.

Community-Level

7. Community stakeholders need to consider what ongoing support, coaching and technical assistance will be readily available to schools to strengthen the implementation of the programme and whole-school SEL.
8. Community stakeholders also need to work with schools within the local contexts to monitor implementation and quality assurance.

Policy-Level

9. Government and national policies need to support the effective implementation of school-based mental health promotion strategies and provide adequate funds to support the development of implementation structures including training and quality assurance systems.
10. National governmental bodies need to provide support to increase the awareness, attitudes and skills of whole-school staff towards SEL implementation at a wider school level.

Published Papers

Dowling, K., Simpkin, A. J., & Barry, M. M. (2019). A cluster randomized-controlled trial of the mindout social and emotional learning program for disadvantaged post-primary school students. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 48 (7), 1245-1263. [Click Here.](#)

Dowling, K. & Barry, M. M. (2020). Evaluating the implementation quality of a social and emotional learning program: A mixed methods approach. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(9), 3249. [Click Here.](#)

Dowling, K. & Barry, M. M. (2020) The effects of implementation quality of a school-based social and emotional well-being program on students' outcomes. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 10 (2) 595-614. [Click Here.](#)

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