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Student perceptions of people and places in their school that are influential for mental health and emotional wellbeing, and implications for wellbeing policies in Wales

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ABSTRACT

There have been reported increases in mental health challenges among young people in the UK, including since the Covid-19 pandemic. There is increasing interest in the role of school environment as both a potential contributing factor to these challenges and as a site for intervention. In Wales, this is embodied in 2021 government legislation which mandates schools to take a whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing. This research interviewed pupils in a range of school sites across Wales to discuss aspects of the social and physical environment in school that are perceived as more and less conducive to mental wellbeing. Twelve case study schools were recruited as part of a wider evaluation of the whole school approach in Wales and, within these, twenty-two group interviews took place with pupils of both primary and secondary age. This involved discussion of people and places in the school environment and a draw-write task. Findings highlighted differences between age groups on which adults in school were considered as key in supporting mental wellbeing, although all age groups reflected similarly on the qualities of supportive adults and on the role of peers. There were also overlaps in terms of spaces in school that were most challenging, with noise, crowding and lack of supervision key. Findings suggest that approaches aimed at tackling multiple aspects of both the social and physical school environment may be supportive of positive mental wellbeing, however not all of these aspects are equally amenable to change or under school control.

Background

There has been a reported rise in anxiety and depression among young people over the last decade (Anthony et al., 2024). There is debate over the extent to which this represents an actual increase in occurrence or increases in reporting, driven by factors such as greater recognition and increased willingness to disclose challenges in mental wellbeing (Fonagy, 2025). While this debate continues, it is clear that the data has prompted significant interest among policy-makers in schools as a key site of intervention in children and young people's mental health (Hu and Qian, 2021; Patalay and Gage, 2019). A growing body of literature explores the impact of a school's environment on students' emotional and mental wellbeing. While there is diversity of language used to define school environment, it refers broadly to the overall climate of the school, including factors such as relationships among the school community and feelings of physical and psychological safety, and how these contribute to pupil mental and emotional wellbeing (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018; Long et al., 2021). Understanding how these areas of school life influence student wellbeing at all ages is therefore important in considering mental health improvements.

The nature and quality of relationships within the school community have far-reaching effects on children and young people's socio-emotional development (Lang et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2018). Research in secondary schools indicates that pupils who enjoy positive relationships with their school staff also experience more positive mental and emotional wellbeing (Kidger et al., 2012; Lang et al., 2013), with evidence to suggest that supportive staff relationships may be especially protective for young people who experience challenging relationships outside of school (Moore et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2013). According to pupils of all ages, staff are perceived as supportive when

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they are authentically caring, consistently fair, and familiar (Clarke and Platt, 2023; Demkowicz et al., 2023; Forsberg et al., 2023; Hajdukova et al., 2014; Mælan et al., 2020) and these relationships are most valued when embedded in a wider culture of wellbeing support (Demkowicz et al., 2023). While many children and young people report relationships with their school teachers as satisfactory (Lang et al., 2013), this is less the case for subgroups including boys, neurodivergent pupils, pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and those with pre-existing emotional and learning difficulties (Bakchich et al., 2023; Goetz et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2023). This may be exacerbated further for those with intersecting minority status i.e. neurodivergence and low socio-economic status (Harwood et al. 2023).

Relationships between pupils are also significant. Closeness of friendships can be a predictor of better wellbeing but can also be a risk factor for more harmful behaviours in the presence of anti-social peer behaviour (Kim, 2015) and an absence of positive family relationships (Moore et al. 2018). The supportive mechanisms of peer relationships may also be impacted by staff-pupil relationships, with evidence that negative dimensions of pupil-staff relationships (i.e. conflict) more strongly predict quality of peer relationships than positive dimensions (i.e. closeness) (Endedijk et al., 2021), suggesting that teachers may play a role in amplifying the social dynamics between peers. Pupil-staff relationships and peer relationships are considered to be foundational aspects of school life and in Graham et al. (2016) pupils suggested that schools consider how to encourage and facilitate this relationship building as an active part of their education.

While some studies have considered the association between school grounds and buildings on mental and emotional wellbeing (Troy et al. 2022), this is less extensively researched. Literature on the locations of bullying sits at an intersection of people and place in relation to wellbeing, and indicates that pupils experience and display bullying behaviour in crowded and confined spaces such as toilets, locker areas and stairwells due to reduced adult supervision and restricted sightlines (Francis et al., 2022a; Horton et al., 2020; Izadi and Hart, 2024). In a cohort of middle school pupils, self-reported wellbeing was worse in confined spaces as well as areas of discipline (e.g. classrooms or disciplinary office) (Joing et al., 2020). This suggests that negative pupil experiences of space in school are largely connected to related experiences with staff and peers in those locations.

There is also some evidence on positive ways in which space can impact on pupil wellbeing. For example, Amicone et al. (2024) found that children reported more exploratory, calming activities and connection with peers during playtime in the school garden compared to pupils who spent playtime on a concrete yard, who instead reported competitive games and sad feelings. Similarly, when paved playgrounds in primary schools in the Netherlands were updated with plants and grass, schools saw an increase in pro-social behaviour and improved social wellbeing (van Dijk-Wesselius et al., 2018). While van Dijk-Wesselius et al. (2018) found no association between the greening of playgrounds and emotional wellbeing of pupils, research elsewhere has indicated that time spent in natural environments can improve pupil mood and feelings of distance from the stress of school (Bai et al., 2022; Wallner et al., 2018). In the UK, this is developing through the growing Forest Schools programme, which supports schools in using outdoor spaces and access to nature as part of teaching and learning. Although adopted increasingly in UK schools, lack of evaluation means that evidence of effectiveness is currently limited (Garden and Downes, 2021).

Other spaces potentially conducive to positive wellbeing include libraries, valued by pupils for providing quiet places for recharging, particularly where welcoming and supportive staff are available (Merga, 2021). Primary aged pupils identified potential benefits of less crowding and nicer décor in libraries compared to classrooms, including better emotional wellbeing and more ability to regulate emotions (Willis et al. 2019). In a review of evidence on school environments, Hawkins et al. (2023) state that high-quality buildings where pupils feel both physically and emotionally safe are conducive to, not only social and emotional wellbeing, but may actually promote other health behaviours including physical activity and better diet. This illustrates the importance of better understanding the relationship between environment at school and pupil wellbeing (Francis et al., 2022b).

This paper reports data on pupil perceptions of people and spaces in the school environment that are more and less conducive to emotional and mental wellbeing (EMWB). It adds to understanding of the importance of physical school spaces for wellbeing and how space influences relationships and behaviour. Data was collected as part of a wider mixed-method evaluation of the Framework on Embedding a Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2021). This statutory legislation mandates schools to work towards a whole school approach in promotion of positive EMWB, whereby the whole community of those in the school, and those working with it, all play a part. The policy aims include the promotion of EMWB through creating an 'emotional and mental wellbeing friendly' environment within schools, with the aim of prevention and early identification of mental health challenges. This includes building positive relationships between staff and pupils and between peers, as well as reviewing how aspects of the physical environment (classrooms, communal spaces, toilets) can contribute to pupil wellbeing. This paper reports on pupil interviews only and descriptions of other data collection activities can be found at https://osf.io/5zcka. Findings from other stakeholders (school staff, policy-makers, mental health practitioners) are reported elsewhere.

Methods

Sampling and recruitment

Twelve schools were recruited from across Wales, including four primaries (age 7–11), seven secondaries (11–18) and one all-age school (3–18). These were identified to represent a range of urban/rural settings from across multiple local authorities and included two Welsh-medium schools. Schools also varied by socio-economic status (SES), identified by higher and lower rates of entitlement to Free School Meals (FSM), which is a recognised proxy indicator of local population SES.

Primary schools were recruited in lower numbers due to historical analysis suggesting that more primaries were already operating in ways which could be described as a recognisably 'whole school approach' than secondaries (Estyn, 2019). This meant less likelihood of detectable changes in practices in primary schools, leading to larger sampling of secondary settings. Schools were approached by the study lead and advised of the opportunity to take part, with data collected in academic year 2022/23. Twenty-two semi-structured, qualitative group interviews were completed with pupils. 132 students were involved in total and of these, 102 were secondary school age (14–15) and 30 were primary school age (9–10).

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (SREC 226). Consent was obtained at three levels. We obtained written consent from schools for data collection (via headteachers/heads of school), opt-in parental consent and child assent to take part in interviews. School staff were asked to explain the study to their classes and were provided with study flyers to distribute in classes. They were given autonomy over selecting from those who were interested but were asked to consider a range of pupils who would be comfortable chatting in a small group and would offer a range of different viewpoints. Interested pupils were provided with age appropriate information sheets, which were read to them by a school staff member if needed, to account for any literacy difficulties. The information sheets described the study, including the voluntary nature of participation, the planned discussion content and their right to withdrawal. All materials were provided in both English and Welsh.

Pupil assent forms were included in the information pack provided to them, which contained their information sheets, parental opt-in forms and the assent form. They were asked to take them home for completion of parental opt-in and bring back to their teacher or contact research staff if they or their parents have questions ahead of completion. At the start of the focus group session, the researcher collected signed parental opt-in forms from the designated staff member. They then read through the pupil assent form and provided paper copies to pupils to complete. Pupils were able to ask any questions about the research before completion. It was reiterated at this point that they could change their minds, even if they or their parents had already agreed.

Data collection and analysis

Groups were conducted in English in English-medium schools and Welsh in Welsh-medium schools. Separate, age-appropriate, topic guides were developed for secondary and primary school groups and all groups were audio recorded for full transcription. Topics for discussion were guided by the key aims of the Framework, specifically around creating an emotional and mental wellbeing friendly environment. In the Framework this includes considering safe and supportive relationships between staff and pupils and between peers, as well as the impact of school spaces such as classrooms and shared environments on EMWB. Sections included: what is meant by EMWB; factors in school impacting EMWB; people and places in school supportive of EMWB, awareness and visibility of provision. To facilitate group discussion, an interactive task was designed for pupils to complete, involving drawing/writing about their own school and the people and places in it supportive of EMWB. Using draw/write methods with young people has been found to promote better recall (Horstman et al. 2008), to support participation in those less inclined to speak in groups (Box and Landman, 1994) and to be an enjoyable means of participating in research (Bradding and Horstman, 1999). Pupils were provided with pens, stickers and templates and advised that they could draw or write on the templates as they preferred. While completing this task, the researchers prompted them on the content of their drawings to elicit further discussion, ensuring real-time, child-led interpretation of the content (Angell, Alexander and Hunt, 2014). Appendix 1 shows an example of the completed exercise for primary-age pupils. Appendix 2 shows an example of the completed exercise for secondary-age pupils.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with Welsh-language scripts transcribed in Welsh and then translated to English, before sense-checking by Welsh-speaking research staff. Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This approach supports the qualitative aims of facilitating participant storytelling and ensuring the primacy of participant voices over more positivist concepts of uncovering 'truth' (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This commenced with open and reflexive reading of a sample of transcripts from secondary schools by ZH and development of an initial coding frame, based on this reflexive engagement and also reflecting the aims of the research. Repeated discussions were then held between ZH, JL and RB to collaboratively review and refine this coding frame. The refined version was applied to a sample of five transcripts each by ZH and JL, before another meeting with RB to finalise coding. The final frame was then applied to all secondary school transcripts, and the development and analysis process was then repeated for primary schools Table 1.

Findings

This section presents pupil perceptions of key relationships and spaces in their school that impact their EMWB. Illustrative quotes are used throughout as examples of themes identified.

Table 1
School identification code and school type.

Identifier	Type	Identifier	Type
2	Primary	1	Through School
8	Primary	3	Secondary
9	Primary	4	Secondary
12	Primary	5	Secondary
		6	Secondary
		7	Secondary
		10	Secondary
		11	Secondary

Relationships in school and their perceived impact on pupil EMWB

Teacher-pupil relationships

At all sites, pupils noted the importance of good relationships with staff to their ***EMWB***. Across our sample, every primary school pupil and almost all secondary school pupils were able to identify at least one member of staff at their school who contributed to feelings of safety and support while at school. For primary aged pupils, this tended to be their class teacher, potentially reflecting the fact that pupils in primary tend to spend most of the day with the same person. Teaching assistants and head teachers were also commonly noted as positive influences. This differed in secondaries, where head teachers and other members of the senior leadership team rarely featured in responses and were perceived as removed from the day-to-day life of pupils. Instead, secondary aged pupils felt close to certain subject teachers that they had built a relationship with:

> *I have a teacher that I really like and she's like, oh if you need to talk to me … she's literally like a second mum.* (School 3, Secondary)

> *There's two art teachers and they're really supportive and you can go to them about anything.* (School 6, Secondary)

The personal characteristics and behaviour of staff were more important to pupils than their formal roles in the school. Pupils valued feeling known and understood by staff members, identifying supportive teachers as those considered caring, personable, kind, and easy to approach. Pupils in both primary and secondary schools recounted examples of being greeted individually and intentionally by certain teachers, whether that be as part of the daily routine or more incidentally in the corridors, with this promoting a sense of value and belonging:

> It's, let's say somebody was feeling down and they had nobody to talk to, the teachers will always make sure *they are okay and also, at the doors, in the morning, the teachers always ask how we're feeling.* (School 2, Primary)

> She's [teacher] very kind. She doesn't shout at you and she helps you. She never passes you without saying *hello.* (School 5, Secondary)

This 'feeling known' by staff may explain why designated wellbeing teams were mentioned much less frequently by pupils in secondary schools, as few young people reported being in contact with wellbeing services at their school and had not built relationships with staff in these teams.

Conversely, staff members described as having a negative impact on pupil ***EMWB*** were perceived as displaying indifferent behaviours, for example in not being welcoming to pupils in class:

> … they (pupils) would want to come more if the teachers were more, what's the word, to make the teachers *feel like they want you. There are some teachers that are really nice and they like you to come to the lessons but then there are some teachers you have that you just feel like they want to get rid of you.* (School 10, Secondary)

In those schools where pupils noted that behaviour of their peers in

class could be problematic and disruptive, the ability of staff to deal with this was valued:

> PAR1: We never get problems in [teacher]'s class, ever…
> PAR3: That was the one teacher that could control our class.
> MOD: What's different about her?
> PAR3: She just has this kind of vibe of authority … She can be quite scary but she's also such a very lovely lady. (School 11, Secondary)

As above, the importance of tone was noted here, with teachers who maintain positive communication and relationships, even when managing challenging behaviour, valued by pupils.

Relationships with peers

As with teacher-pupil relationships, narratives around peer relationships differed slightly between primary and secondary pupils in our sample. In primaries, peers were predominantly noted as positive influences for ***EMWB***, with friends labelled on draw/write tasks as "kind", "fun" and enabling feelings of safety and calm. Wider school populations were broadly rated positively and, while bullying was acknowledged by primary aged pupils, most felt this was not a common problem at their school.

As seen in primary aged pupils, participants from secondary schools highlighted friendships as key sources of fun and wellbeing support. In draw/write tasks, friends were commonly situated centrally in their support circles and accompanying discussions added nuance to this positioning. Though lots of young people identified friends as one of their first ports of call for support, it was noted that in a school setting there may be limits to what they can help with:

> They can be someone to talk to but they can't really, they can't do anything about it, they can only comfort. *They can't, they can calm the situation but they can't take it into their own hands unless they go to a teacher.* (School 10, Secondary)

Pupils noted the emotional and psychological comfort provided by friends and, while this was often sufficient for individuals, certain circumstances warranted action that could only be taken by adults, for example in addressing bullying, which was referenced as a barrier to pupil ***EMWB*** in all secondary schools:

> MOD: *What do you think is one of the biggest challenges to pupil's wellbeing in this school?*
> PAR3: *Other students.*
> PAR2: *Other students yeah.*
> PAR4: *People getting bullied.* (School 11, Secondary)

Here there was an intersection between relationships with staff and pupil relationships, with the impact on pupil ***EMWB*** exacerbated when there was a perception that responsible adults were active in addressing the issue:

> I know a girl in my class, who was constantly being picked on, shoved down the stairs, and proper bullied for *months, and the school didn't do anything about it. The students were just walking around the school acting as if they owned it, they [teachers] don't care when it comes to that.* (School 4, Secondary)

Conversely, pupils' feelings of safety and support in schools were enhanced when staff were responsive in preventing bullying behaviour as soon as it emerged:

> There are some people who are just absolute idiots at school, but there aren't really bullying issues. Some *people take the mick for a day and are punished, and then they don't do it again. There isn't a lot of proper bullying happening because it's stopped on the day it happens.* (School 1, Secondary)

Young people in secondary schools were more likely than those in primary to highlight how disruptive behaviour from peers could reduce feelings of safety and increase anxiety while at school. This included disruption in class affecting teaching and learning:

> *I put other peers right on the outside* [of the support circles map], *class peers. I'm in a class with a lot of people that have behaviour issues, so that affects a lot of the class…* (School 11, Secondary)

Spaces in the school environment and pupil EMWB

Children and young people reported varied experiences of their physical school environments, with some spaces universally experienced as stressful, other spaces being more contested, and some spaces frequently cited as providing respite and support. There was a strong interaction throughout between pupil behaviour and how participants felt about different spaces within their school, which is explored below.

Perceptions of safety

When asked about areas of their school that impacted negatively on ***EMWB***, pupils from all schools could quickly identify areas that felt unsafe.

For some, classrooms were challenging due to other pupil behaviour compromising perceived safety:

> PAR6: …*I would have said, the general classroom is probably the most least safe place you can think of for wellbeing.*
> PAR3: *Definitely. Chairs being thrown around, pens.* (School 4, Secondary)

In some secondary schools, increased teacher presence or security cameras had been installed to address problems with pupil behaviour and, while some interpreted this as mistrustful, others noted potential benefits of this:

> MOD: *Is it better having a teacher hanging around there, or worse?*
> PAR: *It's horrible, I don't know why, I don't like it.*
> PAR: *It depends, like if you leave B block unsupervised, it's like a danger zone* (School 4)
> PAR: *Every single Head of Year has cameras they can keep an eye on, like all the school, on all their year, that kind of thing.*
> MOD: *Right, so are the cameras in the corridors?*
> PAR: *Yeah, and they pick up voices as well, so they know what's been said.*
> MOD: *How does it feel having the cameras?*
> PAR: *Safer.* (School 3, Secondary)

Some noted areas of the school site they actively avoided due to behaviour from peers away from the monitoring of adults. These tended to be unique to each school, but were usually spaces in hidden corners (e.g. certain stairwells) or away from the school building (e.g. school field):

> PAR5: *There's always like a fight on the back field, every week…*
> PAR4: *Yeah, and they make it so obvious, everyone's just crowding there.*
> PAR1: *There's vapes and fags, you name it, it's there.* (School 11, Secondary)

At some schools located in areas of higher deprivation, pupils identified spaces in the immediate vicinity of the school, often on the route to site, which were problematic. These areas were particularly difficult as they were not perceived to be under the authority of school staff, and therefore less regulated:

> There's a little alleyway over there, that people usually always walk through. … there would be about 50 people in there, so people a bit

older than us, … I will refuse to go down there, even when there's nobody. (School 10, Secondary)

Noise and crowding. In other spaces that were experienced as challenging, this was often associated with noise and overcrowding with the canteen and corridors cited in both primary and secondary schools:

The corridors are like small and enclosed. There's double doors but I think I got barged two times today in the corridors because people just don't really look where they're going because they're so focused on getting to the lessons. (School 6, Secondary)

The corridors, they're too small. … Upstairs near the languages it's really small, everybody's squashed. (School 1, Secondary)

Many of these spaces were unavoidable for pupils during the school day, and constituted a source of daily stress. This includes corridors were rushing is common due to the need to get to class on time (and potentially avoid sanction) and canteens which were frequently experienced as too loud:

P2: *The canteen, sorry, but I'm making it bad, bad.*
MOD: *It seems like most people don't like the canteen, is that right?*
P2: *It's too loud.*
P3: *It's like everyone screams* (School 9, Primary)

In the canteen you can't really hear yourself think sometimes and the lines (queues for food) *cover the entire canteen.* (School 6, Secondary)

Some pupils referred back to safety measures implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic, including split lunch and break times for different year groups to reduce the numbers of people in corridors and halls. This was preferred by those pupils and several expressed a desire for this to be reinstated, however it was also acknowledged that this presented logistical challenges for staff.

Cleanliness. An additional issue associated with experience of space was the cleanliness, hygiene and state of repair around the school site, with toilets commonly noted in both primary and secondaries. In some cases, this was related to pupil behaviour:

PAR2: *Then sometimes they text their friends to meet up in the toilets and trash them, put wet paper stuff all over the floor.*
PAR4: *Yeah, like in the girls' toilets mainly the Year 7 s, they get the tampons and they put it underneath the water and stick it on the ceiling and then the Year 12 s, well the Year 11 s, 10 s and sometimes the Year 7 s or 8 s just write on the toilet walls and then, some people go in there to vape as well…* (School 3, Secondary)

In other cases, it was felt that this was due to the age and disrepair of facilities:

PAR2: *They're also just kind of disgusting. I've never actually gone to the toilet here once, because they are just horrible.*
PAR1: *It's a cleanliness issue.*
PAR3: *They're not very sanitary.* (School 7, Secondary)

Perceptions of spaces conducive to EMWB

Pupils were also asked to identify spaces impacting positively on their ***EMWB***, and many noted various places around school sites which they sought out when feeling low, overwhelmed or unsafe. These varied widely, as one pupil noted:

Everybody has their own kind of safe space. They can't just like make one space for everyone. (School 12, Primary)

However, a commonality of these spaces was that they enabled individuals to take time away from pressures and stresses of the day. This was found most commonly in areas such as the library or outdoor areas, which were valued for quietness when compared with indoors. The tranquillity of outdoor space was especially valued by pupils in one of the more rural schools as providing a contrast with the rest of the school site:

MOD1: *The school grounds, what's nice about the school grounds?*
PAR3: *They're beautiful. … You can get away from school for a bit. I know you're in school but you get away from school…*
PAR1: *You're away from the learning…* (School 3, Secondary)

In some schools where access to designated quiet spaces was not available, the value of them was still noted and desired:

My idea would be like I don't like, in the school probably I'd like another area so a quiet room in case, if their teacher's not available there they can go there and have five minutes to myself. (School 2, Primary)

This child felt that a quiet space would enable them to self-regulate when a teacher was not available for support and this need for space to self-regulate was seen across both primary and secondaries. Several pupils shared examples of trying to find a place to retreat to when feeling upset or overwhelmed. This was often to the toilets, possibly as the only place in many schools perceived as providing privacy and solitude, however, as noted earlier, these spaces could also often be experienced as noisy and stressful, meaning their function as a safe place could be limited.

For some, a safe space in school was one where they could avoid peers, sometimes specifically due to bullying. Where the school grounds were large enough, this might simply be an outdoor area far from anyone else. Otherwise, this tended to be an area with increased adult supervision, such as the classroom of a preferred teacher:

That's [teacher's classroom] our safe space for us because it's somewhere where we know we've had issue with other pupils, we won't get that. We're guaranteed that if you need somewhere to cry because you're *upset, that's where you can go.* (School 4, Secondary)

For some, spaces conducive to ***EMWB*** were those where they could enjoy time away from classroom learning, spending time with peers or on extra-curricular activities:

PAR1: *Like how you get to be free on the yard.*
MOD: *Would other people say the same thing about the playground?*
PAR2: *Yeah, because you just get to like have fun, have a laugh with your friends.* (School 8, Primary)

… there's really small music rooms and they're sound proof as well … they do feel really nice, because if you want to get your mind off things and play some music, like you know you have the space to do so, even if you want to do it with a small group of friends or you want to do it on your own. (School 6, Secondary)

Discussion

This research considered the role of people and places in the school environment in supporting pupil ***EMWB***. It builds on limited existing literature on how physical spaces can be significant, as both areas where wellbeing is promoted and also those with a more negative impact. This includes key spaces within schools that are challenging due to being seen as unsafe, overcrowded or lacking monitoring of behaviour. It reinforces previous findings on interpersonal skills and qualities that are viewed as helpful in school staff and on the value of positive peer relationships. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the Welsh Government Framework On Embedding A Whole-School Approach To Emotional And Mental Well-Being (Welsh Government, 2021), which calls for schools to maximise the wellbeing impacts of school environments and

relationships. The implications of findings for implementation of this legislation (hereafter referred to as the Framework) are now considered.

The Framework notes that positive relationships between staff and pupils are proactive and include greeting pupils by name, being smiling and welcoming and providing a reassuring presence. These features were noted by pupils here, with friendliness and being welcoming valued in staff. In line with previous research (Mælan et al., 2020), familiarity was also important, with pupils in primary schools identifying class teachers and school head as adults they would seek support from. Previous findings suggest that positive year group climate is associated with pupil mental wellbeing (Donaldson et al. 2025). In primary schools, where staff are more likely to stay with their year group class all day, the impact of an individual teacher on this climate is likely to be significant (although not necessarily positive).

While many pupils in secondaries cited a class teacher as a significant adult, senior leaders were much less likely to be mentioned. The larger size of secondary schools makes it less likely that senior leaders are able to connect as easily with pupils, some of whom they may have limited interaction with. While this is likely not amenable to direct change, senior leaders may instead need to focus on promoting those behaviours valued by pupils through enshrining positive greeting and calm tone of communication in staff practice. It was also notable that pupils were less likely to centre staff in formal wellbeing services i.e. counselling within their responses. This may be due to low levels of engagement with these services by young people who took part, but previous evidence suggests varied levels of awareness of such services among pupils in Wales (Hewitt et al. 2022). This limited awareness means it is difficult to assess the role of counsellors as significant adults for the school population and this may be more effectively understood by focussing on those pupils accessing this service.

For school spaces, in line with previous research, those identified as most challenging to ***EMWB*** were relatively consistent across schools here as those that were too noisy, too crowded or lacking regulation of pupil behaviour, with clear interaction between a space and the way people act within it. In classrooms, despite constant staff presence, pupils frequently noted the behaviour of other pupils as a key stressor which could profoundly impact their experience the space. Teachers who were able to deal with disruption effectively were valued within our sample, again illustrating the intersection of space and behaviour within it in developing a supportive school environment. Their approaches should be reviewed in more depth, including instances where bullying, cited as one of the main challenges to mental wellbeing, is dealt with effectively.

Spaces seen as most problematic included crowded corridors, dining halls, and toilets. These communal spaces are all noted in the Framework as having the potential to contribute to ***EMWB*** of those in the school however findings here suggest that this potential is not currently being met. Both corridors and dining areas are generally full at specific points in the school day due to timetabling and staffing and it is questionable to what extent this is amenable to change. Some pupils noted that dining was spread due to social distancing practices during the Covid 19 pandemic and this was rated positively. Schools should consider whether it is possible to replicate these practices to reduce the stress of canteens however this may be challenging in the wider context of a general trend in reduction of lunch and break times (Baines and Blatchford, 2023), as well as continuing challenges in maintaining staffing levels (McLean et al. 2024). Similarly, staggered lesson times, which were also often employed during the Covid-19 pandemic, may reduce crowding in corridors and play areas. However, this faces the same logistical challenges as with dining areas, suggesting that schools would require additional resourcing for supervisory staff to implement this.

Toilets present a particularly challenging space for ***EMWB*** and were often highlighted here. Avoidance of school toilets due to them being perceived as unsafe or unsanitary, is associated with bladder and bowel dysfunction (Jørgensen et al. 2021) and lower urinary tract infections (Shoham et al. 2021). Toilets are also a common site for bullying due to lack of supervision (Zemer et al. 2023) and this was noted here, along with other areas where staff supervision is low. Data suggests that a co-ordinated approach to bullying is required, involving identifying social and spatial aspects of the school environment and capacity to supervise these. There is some evidence to suggest that whole school interventions, which by definition address multiple aspects of the school environment, can be effective in reducing bullying (Bonell et al. 2018; Shinde et al. 2020) and it reasonable to theorise that this would, in turn, improve perceived ***EMWB***. Impacts on bullying and perceived pupil safety should be monitored as part of longer-term evaluation of the Framework.

Within the Framework, outdoor spaces are recognised as potentially conducive to a healthy lifestyle and positive mental wellbeing and this was echoed by pupils here who had access to pleasant, accessible space, particularly green areas. Others found communal play areas to be a stressor, where these were too full and noisy. Provision of quality outdoor space is highly variable in schools, with low quality space associated with national financial constraints, air quality and urban setting, particularly for schools in more socio-economically deprived areas (Boys et al. 2022). This suggests that the capacity of schools to use outdoor spaces for wellbeing may often be constrained by factors beyond their control however, it may be beneficial to share examples of good practice for schools to be able to maximise the resource that they do have.

The Framework notes that schools should ensure that behaviour management practices are aligned to broader ***EMWB*** aims but this may be more challenging in some spaces due to both staffing levels and building design. There has been significant financial investment in school buildings in Wales in recent years (see - Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme | GOV.WALES) which includes a focus on design conducive to wellbeing, however many older sites remain in operation and will continue to do so for some time, suggesting that this transformation of the school estate will remain a long term goal. These factors are likely to impact the implementation of the Framework and should be considered in future evaluations of effectiveness.

Limitations

Participants were selected with the help of school staff who were guided to include a range of pupils; however it is possible that those who participated were selected due to staff expectations that they would represent the school positively. However, the range of pupil responses and critiques of school practice, culture and environment suggest credibility of the data.

The participating case study schools were also selected to represent a range of area, school types and different approaches to policy implementation but it is possible that other schools would yield different data on these topics. However, pupil responses are consistent with previous research findings in relation to areas of school that are most challenging and in what constitutes a positive relationship. This suggests that findings are likely to add to understanding of how school environment -both social and physical - impacts on emotional and mental wellbeing.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used no AI or AI assisted technologies.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was granted by Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (SREC 226).

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Rachel Brown: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Jessica Lennon:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Caitlyn Donaldson:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Rebecca Anthony:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Abbey Rowe:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Graham Moore:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

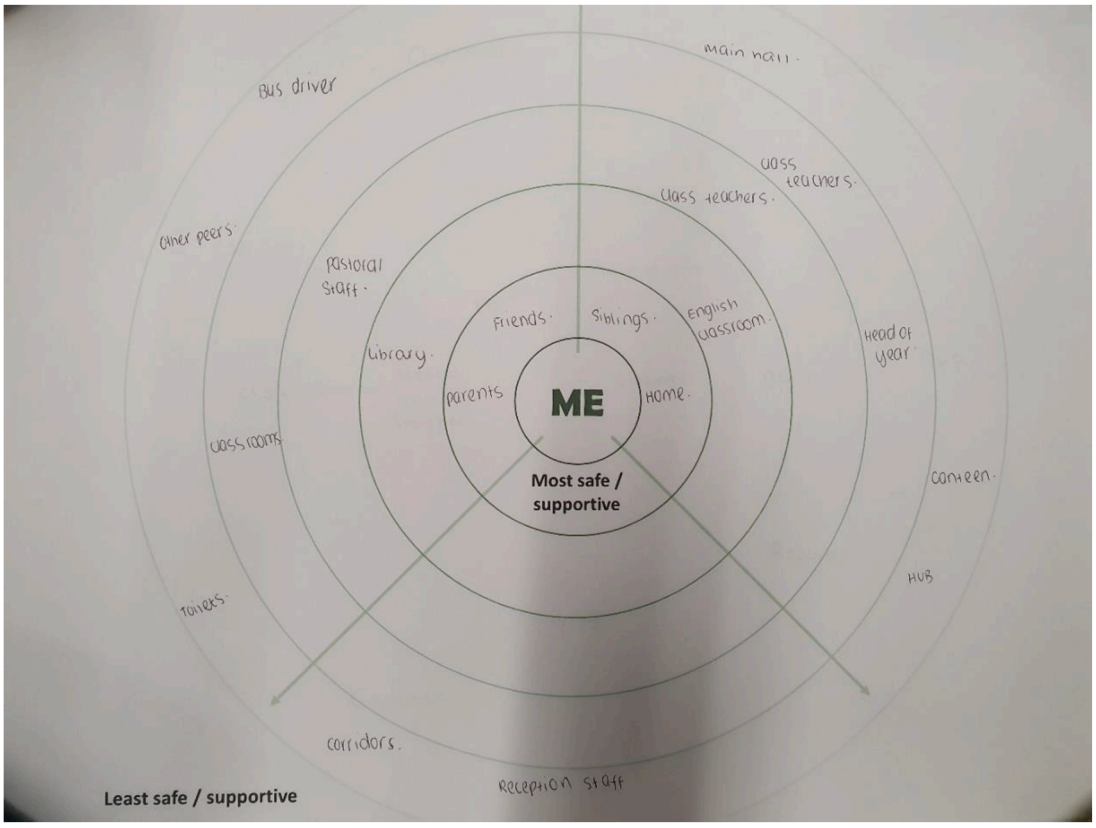
Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix

Appendix 1, Appendix 2

Appendix 1. Example of completed drawing exercise (primary).



Appendix 2. Example of completed drawing exercise (Secondary).

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