



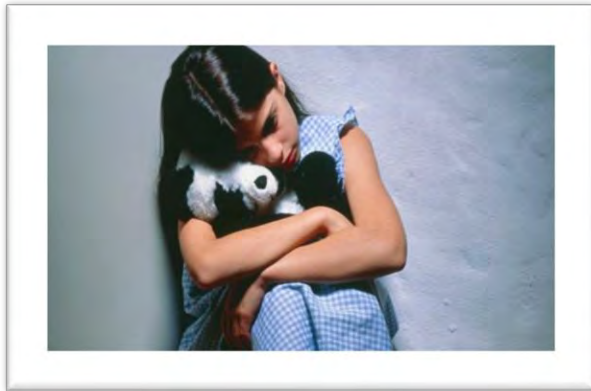
A systemic, whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing

Professor Carmel Cefai PhD



L-Università
ta' Malta

CHALLENGING TIMES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE



MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN YOUNG PEOPLE

WHO (2024): Between $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ of 13-15 year old adolescents feel nervous, low and have sleep difficulties

WHO (2024): Over the last two decades there has been a decline in life satisfaction and increase in loneliness amongst adolescents; more pronounced in female adolescents

UNICEF (2024) 13% of children and young people aged 0- 19 in EU have a MHI



Adolescent girls have poorer mental health and wellbeing compared to boys (11, 13, 15 years old). These gaps increase with age, with 15-year-old girls showing the worst outcomes. (WHO, 2023)



1 in 5 adolescents (11-17) reports feeling unhappy and anxious about the future (Eurochild & UNICEF, 2019)



Young people in the EU rank climate change among their top three worries (Coffey et al., 2021)



Across Europe 25% of pupils report having been bullied in the past month, 50% report having experienced cyberbullying in the past (Lobe et al., 2021)

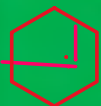


Key sources of teachers' stress: admin work, excessive marking, classroom management, heavy teaching load, and addressing parental concerns (Eurydice, 2021)



In Europe, almost 50 % of lower secondary school teachers experience stress at work, with variations ranging from 20% to 90% (Eurydice, 2021)

9 million adolescents (10-19) in Europe are dealing with mental health challenges (OECD, 2022)



The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already existing mental health challenges in teachers with high levels of anxiety, depression and stress (Silva et al., 2021)



Life satisfaction and self-rated health among adolescents, particularly girls, has been in decline, while there has been a rise in multiple health complaints – such as difficulty sleeping, backaches or headaches, or feeling low (WHO, 2023)



In Western Europe, the estimated annual cost of mental health disorders in youth (0-19) amounted to 57.6 billion US dollars (UNICEF, 2021)



13% of adolescents in 23 EU countries feel lonely while at school (Baarck et al., 2022)

In Europe, suicide is the second most common cause of death among adolescents aged 15-19. (UNICEF, 2021)



SCHOOLS AS CONTEXTS FOR WELLBEING

- Schools are in a unique position to effectively promote the wellbeing and mental health of children and adolescents and prevent the emergence of MHIs at critical periods during their development
 - **they have access to all children and young people for an extended period of time**
 - **50% of individuals with MHIs experience their first onset by age 19 with peak age of onset at age 15-**
- **Increasing evidence on the benefits of school based interventions on the wellbeing and MH of children and young people...**



CIPRIANO ET AL (2023) META-ANALYSIS: 424 STUDIES (2008-2020) FROM 53 COUNTRIES OF USB INTERVENTIONS FROM KG TO SECONDARY SCHOOL, INVOLVING 575,361 STUDENTS

Students who participated in interventions demonstrated significant improvement (**in order of greatest magnitude** ranging from small to moderate effect $g = 0.122$ - 0.293) for:



- › school climate (sense of belonging, connectedness, perceived support and safety)
- › **social and emotional skills**
- › positive peer relationships
- › **prosocial behaviours**
- › externalizing behaviours
- › **emotional distress**
- › school functioning (academic engagement, attendance)
- › **academic engagement**

SUPPORTING WELLBEING AT SCHOOL-GUIDELINES FOR POLICYMAKERS AND SCHOOLS (2024)

For POLICYMAKERS [here](#)



For SCHOOLS [here](#)



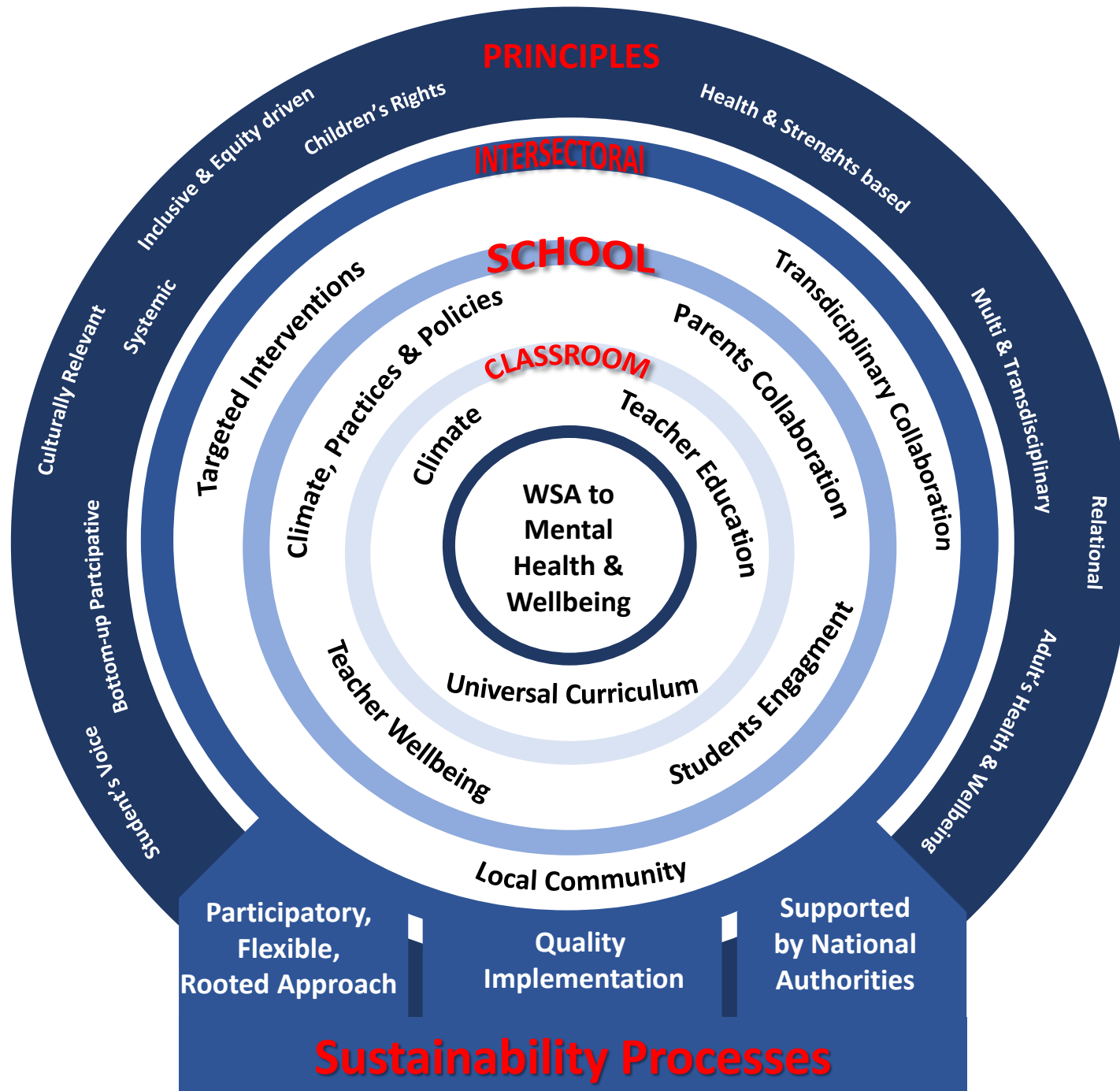
A SYSTEMIC, ECOLOGICAL AND PARTICIPATORY FRAMEWORK

Mental health and wellbeing as a mandatory key learning goal in 21st-century education

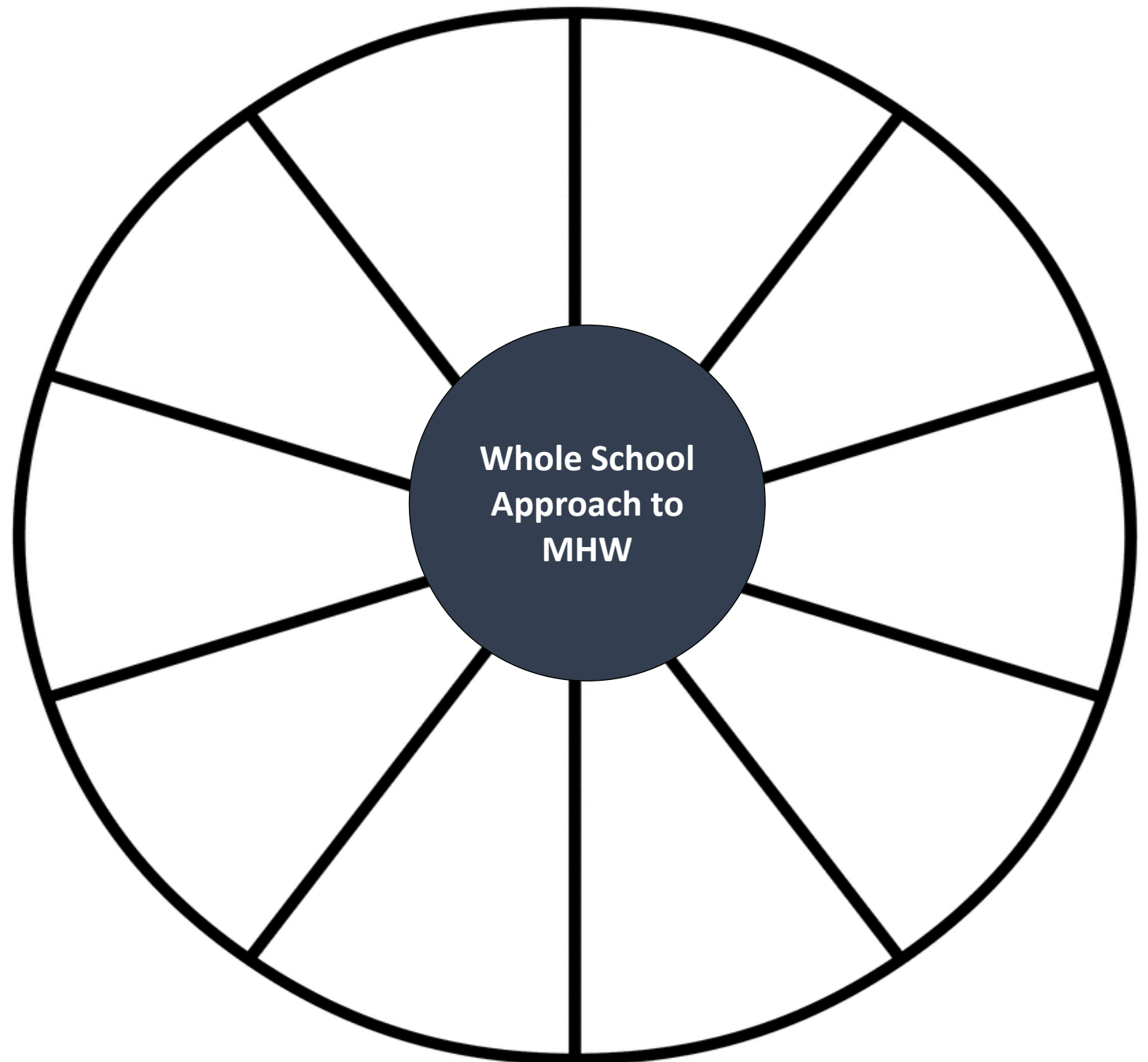
We developed an evidence-informed **framework** to guide the way in which the whole-school community, can be mobilised to promote well-being and mental health



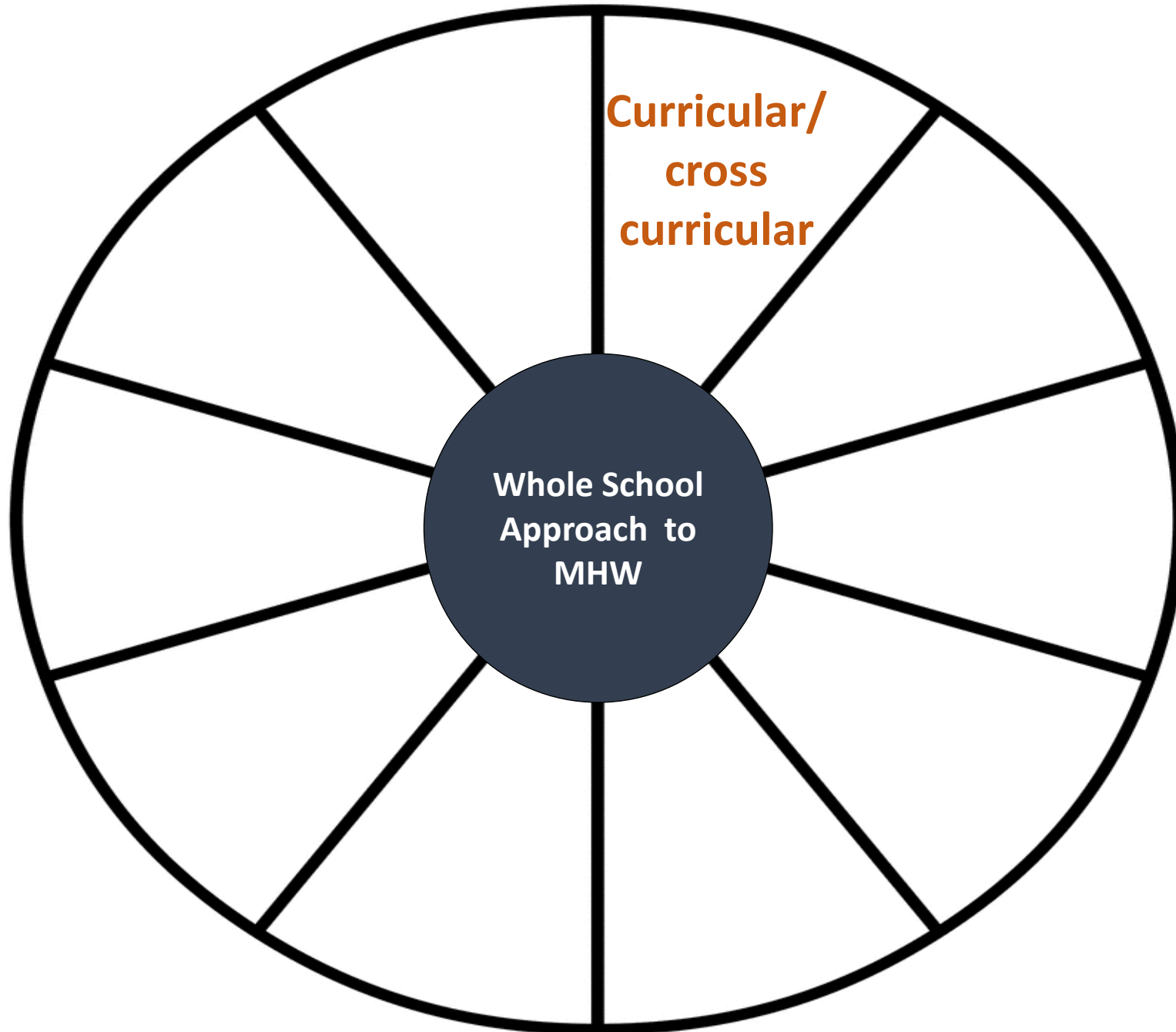
Cefai, C., Simões, C. and Caravita, S. (2021) [*A systemic, whole-school approach to mental health and well-being in schools in the EU.*](#) Publications Office of the European Union



**A WHOLE SCHOOL
APPROACH TO MHW
(CEFAI ET AL, 2021)**

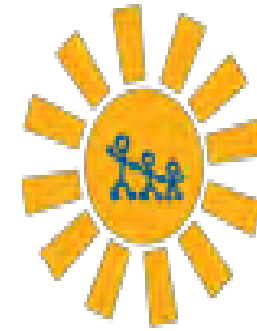


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CURRICULUM

- › **Curricular:**
 - › Social and emotional learning
 - › **Resilience**
 - › Mental health literacy (awareness, MHP, stigma)
- › **Cross curricular:** embedded in the other content areas of the curriculum
- › **Extra curricular:** arts education, physical exercise/sports, mindfulness, nature based activities
 - › **becoming more curricular**



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**Incredible
Years®**



LIONS QUEST



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Clubs International
Foundation



Educating Hearts.
Inspiring Minds.



- PEW S (PreK-6)
- Incredible Years (PreK-2)
- 4Ps (PreK-8)
- Caring school community (K-6)
- I can problem solve (PreK-5)
- Second Step (PreK-8)
- Friends

CASEL'S PROGRAM GUIDE

<https://casel.org/guide/>

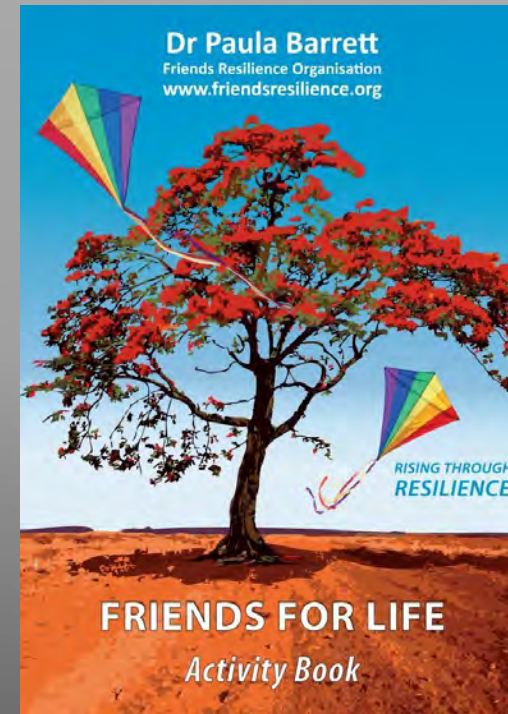
Preschool and Elementary

Middle and High School

FRIENDS (BARRETT, LOWRY-WEBSTER & TURNER, 1999)

Program consists of activities for early years, primary school, middle school and high school students to develop social skills, self-esteem, problem-solving, resilience, emotional regulation and healthy relationships.

Fisak et al (2023) review of 41 RCT trials- those who took part in FRIENDS exhibited lower scores on measures of anxiety and depression at post intervention, with effect sizes maintained at 6- to 12-month follow-up. Particularly effective in early adolescence. Although not statistically significant, there was a trend towards larger effect sizes for targeted interventions relative to universal ones





Co-funded by the European Union

PROSPER Resilience
(Early Years, Primary
School)

POSITIVE Positive
Psychology and
Education (Primary
School)

TRIVY Resilience/Trauma
based Education
(Secondary)

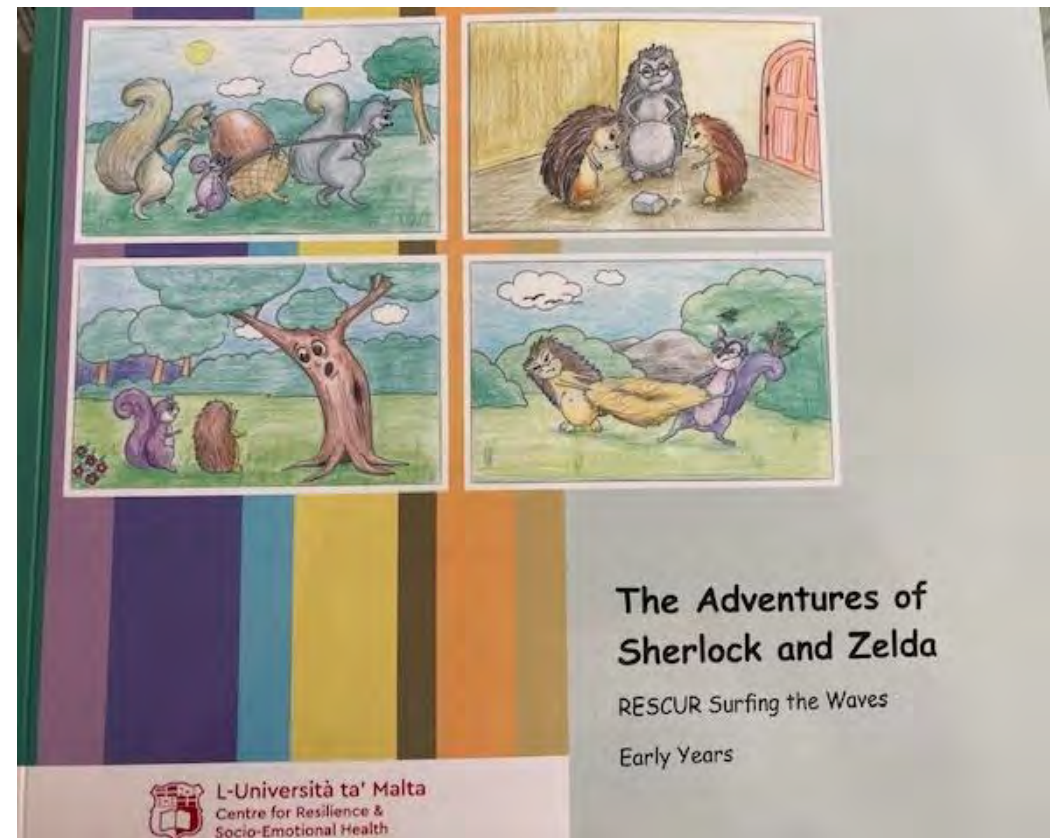
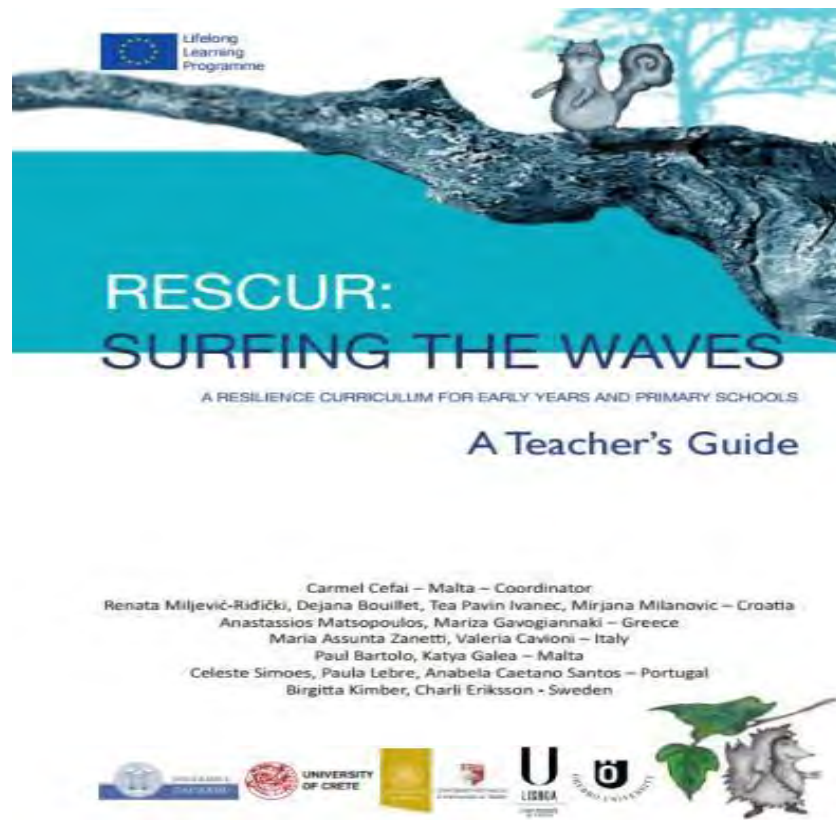
STRENGTH
(Secondary)

PROVIDES Mental
Health (Inc
Resilience) (Early
Years Secondary)

INCLUSIVE Inclusive
Trauma Informed
Contexts (post
secondary/higher
education)

SUPPORT

RESCUR SURFING THE WAVES



NORWAY

- › Lion's Quest
- › **AGGRESSION REPLACEMENT THEORY**
- › Terje Ogden Centre for Behaviour Studies

LIONS QUEST



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Increasing evidence for extra curricular activities: mindfulness, physical activity, arts, nature-based activities



Article

Adolescents' Life Satisfaction, Physical Activity, and the Moderating Role of Gender: A Cross-Country, Multilevel Analysis in 64 Countries

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Highlights

What are the main findings?

- This study finds a positive and significant association between physical activity and life satisfaction across 64 countries
- For most countries, we did not find a significant gender moderator effect.

What are the implications of the main findings?

- We provide strong evidence for the potential of physical activity as a beneficial intervention to improve adolescents' well-being.
- Physical activity may be considered as a Positive Childhood Experience (PCE) for the healthy development of adolescents

Cefai et al (2025)

- Investigated the relationship between physical activity (PA) and wellbeing amongst 399,794 15-year-old adolescents in 64 countries making use of data from the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the world's largest comparative education survey of adolescents (high- and middle-income countries and economies)
- PA is positively and significantly associated with wellbeing/LS. This finding holds for the pooled sample and across the 64 countries analysed
- Strong evidence for the potential of PA as a universally beneficial intervention to improve adolescents' well-being

MINDFULNESS (PHAN ET AL, 2022 REVIEW)

- › 77 studies with a total sample of 12,358 students across 5 continents
- › The highest quality evidence across outcomes indicated that mindfulness increased prosocial behavior, resilience, executive function and attention ,and decreased anxiety, attention problems/ADHD behaviors and conduct behaviors.
- › The highest quality evidence for well-being was split, with some studies showing increased well-being and some showing no improvements
- › No impact on depression symptoms



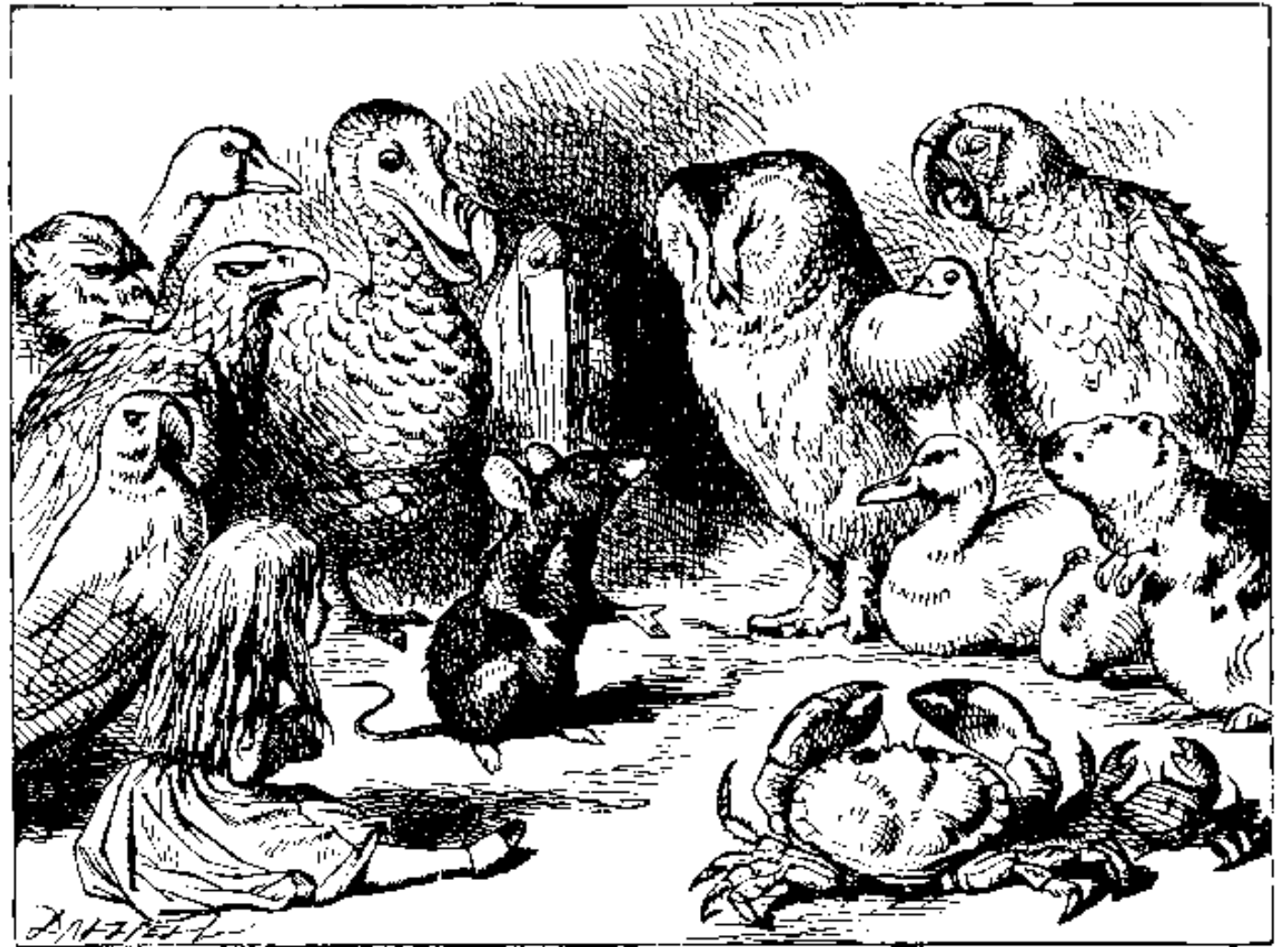
INCREASING THE CURRENCY OF SEL

Including **WMH competences** as a common indicator of a school's effectiveness and success will ensure wellbeing will feature prominently in the school's agenda

But evaluation needs to be **formative and inclusive**, and avoid labelling and ranking



**IN THE CAUCUS
RACE YOU RUN AT
YOUR OWN PACE
AND YOU'LL BE
GUARANTEED TO
WIN A PRICE**



Student assessment needs to be formative, collaborative & systemic avoiding ranking and labelling

SURVEY: SELF CONTROL (SFC), SOCIAL COMPETENCE (SC)

Teacher Survey

- Sat still when was supposed to (Sfc)
- Cooperated with peers without prompting (SC)

Student Survey

- I can wait in line patiently (Sfc)
- I can solve a problem with my peers on my own (SC)

Social Scenarios

You lent your friend a DVD, but he hasn't given it back yet.

What will you do?

You are trying to watch a movie and your friend is being too loud.

What will you do?

You want to go to your friend's birthday party, but you are nervous about the large crowd.

What will you do?

You feel like one of your friends is upset with you, but you don't know why.

What will you do?

You want a turn on the computer, but your friend isn't sharing.

What will you do?

You are at the mall and a friend dares you to steal something.

What will you do?

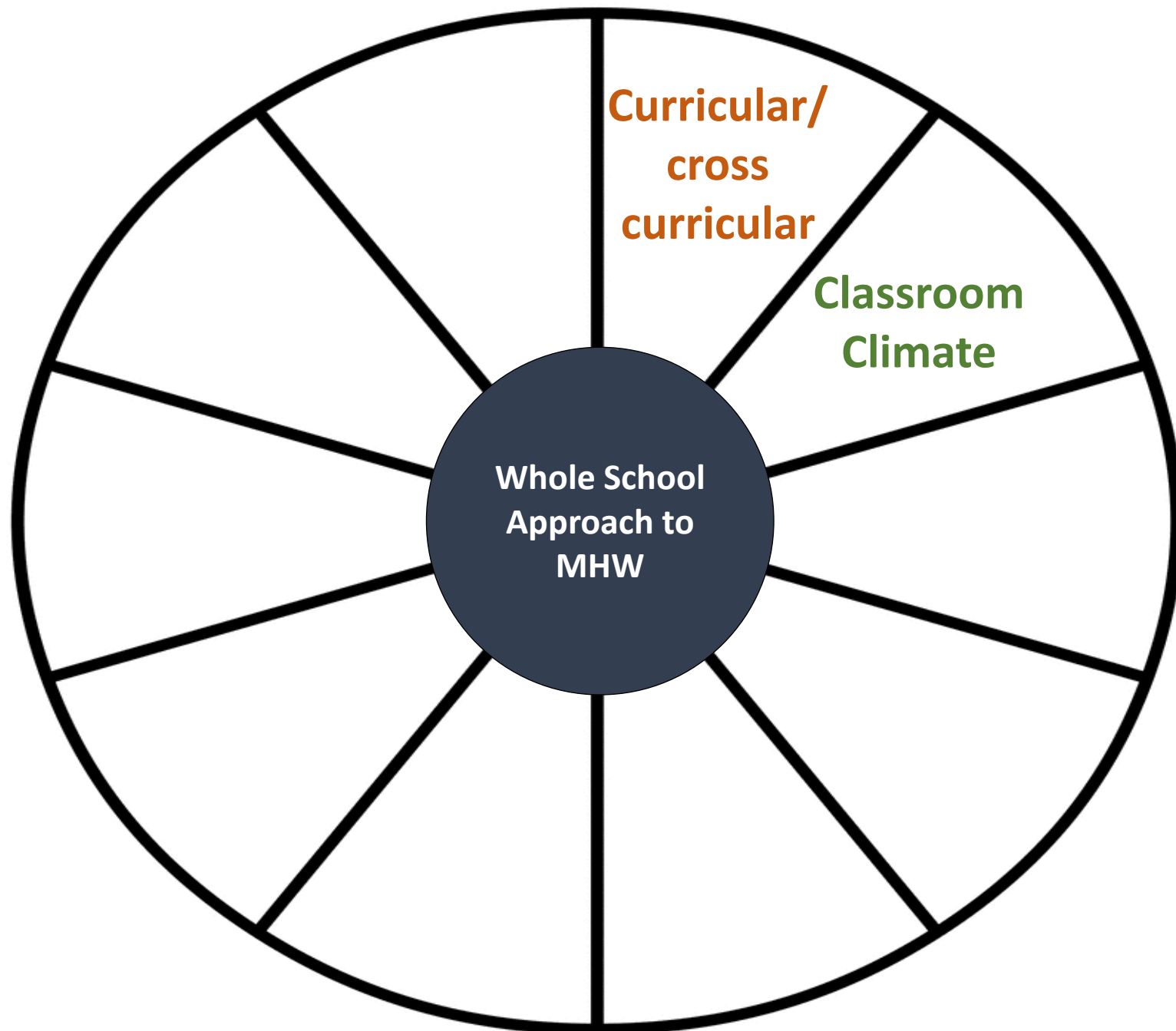
Markley, P. W. (2004). Interview
Assessing self-concept in
young children

Children are interviewed by 2 puppets about
several statements relating to academic
motivation, social competence and peer
acceptance. For each item, the 2 puppets
make a pair of opposing statements about
themselves, and the child says which of the
puppets he or she is more like.



- ▶ Iggy: I have lots of friends.
- ▶ Ziggy: I don't have lots of friends
- ▶ Iggy: How about you?

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APPROACH TO
MHW**



MHW THRIVES IN CARING, SAFE AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Classroom and whole school norms, values and behaviours that foster

- safety, collaboration and connectedness,
- active student participation and
- culturally responsive and inclusive practices

are the building blocks of MHW





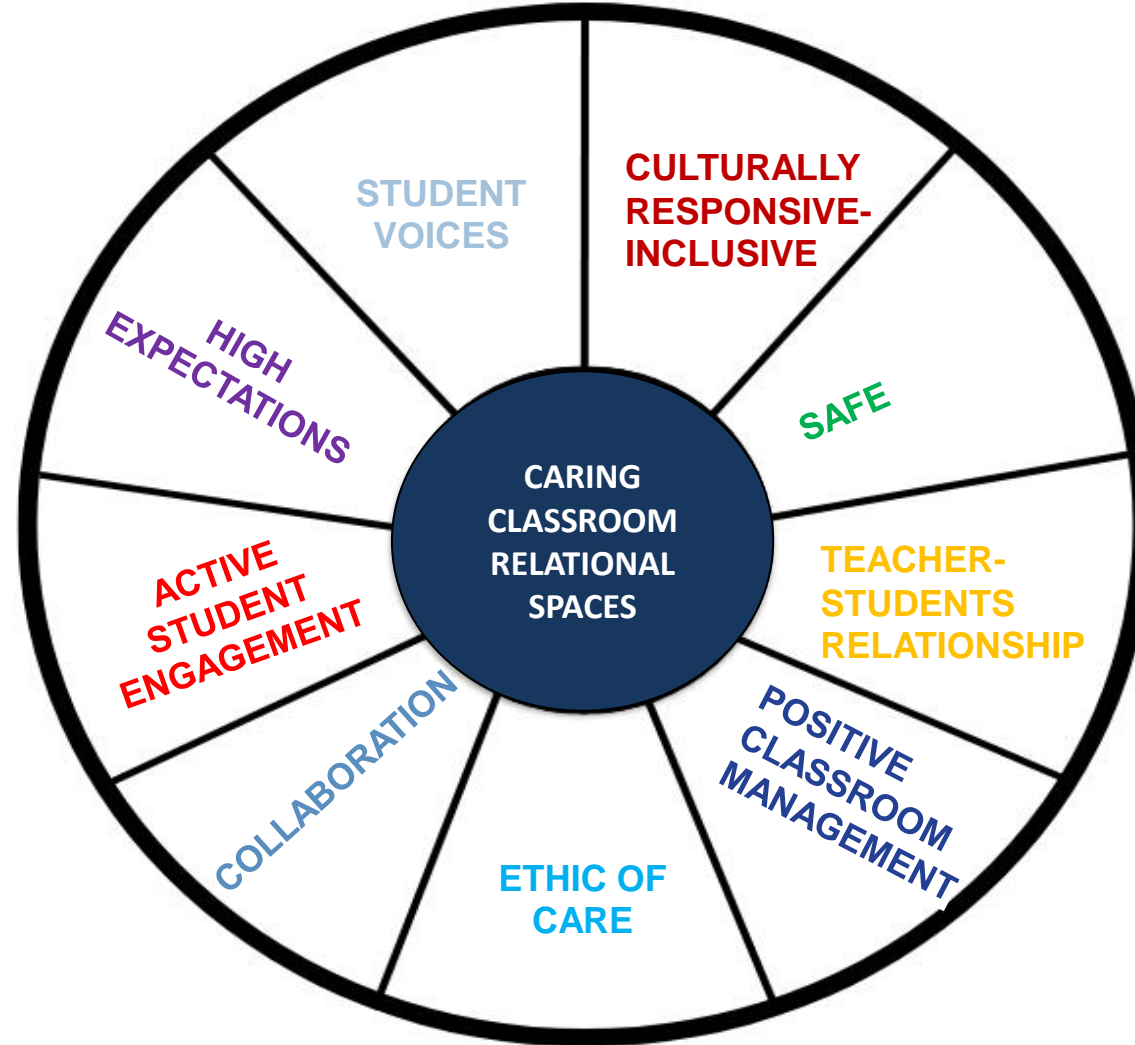
MAINSTREAMING WELL- BEING INTO THE FORMAL CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY: MHW IS EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS!

TEACHERS ARE NOT JUST INSTRUCTORS BUT CARING EDUCATORS, MENTORS AND ROLE MODELS

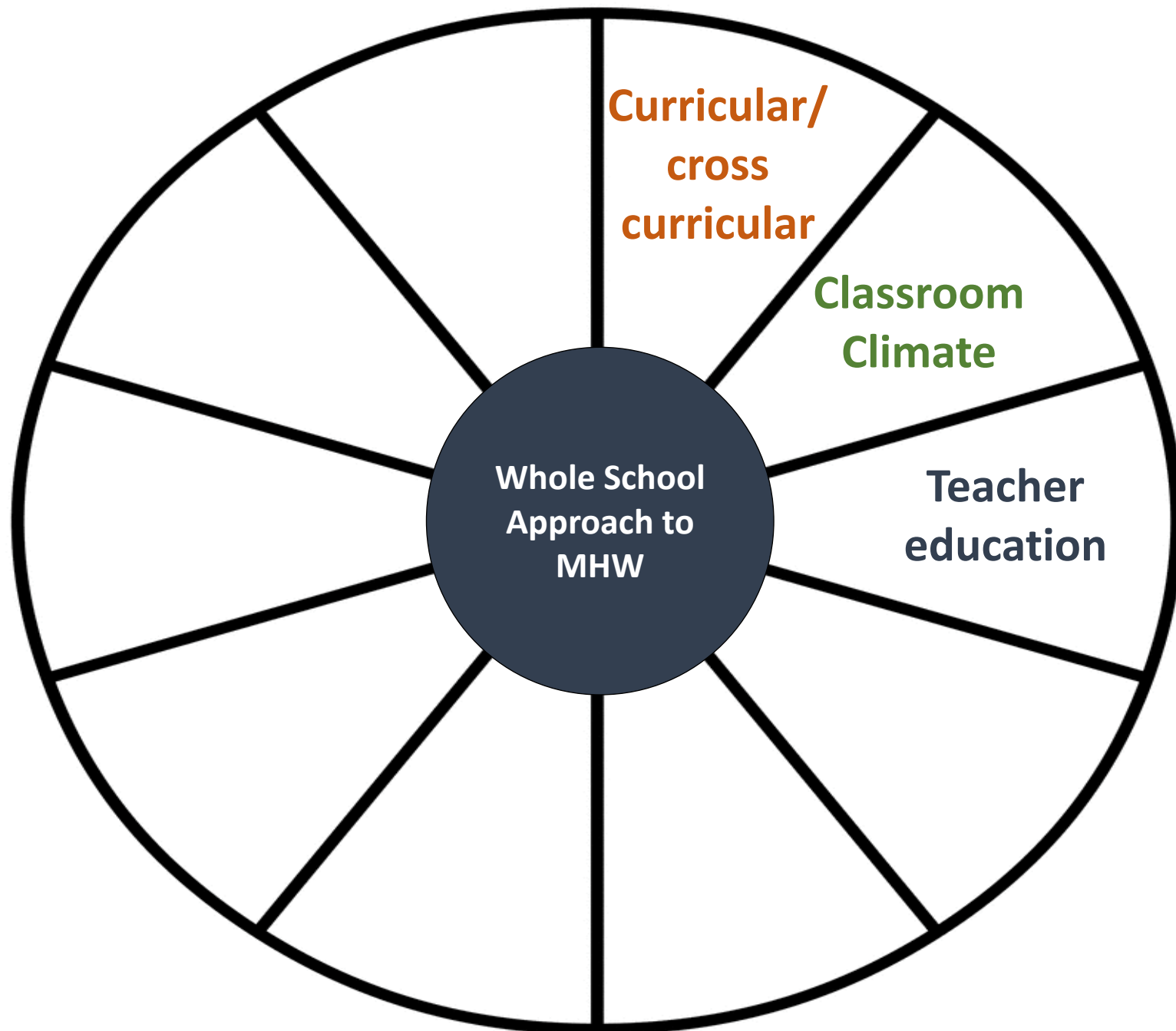
CLASSROOM CARING AND PARTICIPATIVE SPACES (CEFAI ET AL, 2021)

Classroom Climate Indicators: A Formative Checklist

A	Cultural Responsiveness and Inclusion	(1)	(2)	(3)
A1	Is the curriculum adapted and made accessible to all students in the classroom?			
A2	Do the pedagogy, resources and activities match the diversity of students' strengths and needs?			
A3	Is assessment for learning adapted according to the individual needs of students?			
A4	Is there a commitment to actively removing any linguistic, cultural, social or any other barrier to learning?			
A5	Are students with individual educational needs and disabilities actively engaged in the classroom's learning and social activities?			
B	Safety			
B1	Is there a teacher commitment to avoid communicating with students based on fear and anger?			
B2	Is there a focus in the classroom of mutual respect and understanding?			
B3	Are there clear procedures to deal with incidents of violence and bullying in the classroom?			
B4	Do students know what to do when they are bullied by their peers?			
B5	Do students know what to do when they witness bullying in their classroom?			
C	Positive Classroom Management			
C1	Do students have a direct input into the rules of the classroom?			
C1	Are students encouraged to take more responsibility for their behaviour?			
C3	Is the classroom management consistent and fair to all the students?			
C4	Is the student's story of their side of a conflict always listened to?			
C5	Are students provided with good role models for expected behaviours?			
D	Teacher-Student Relationship			



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TEACHER CAPACITY

- MHW requires a pedagogy based on collaborative learning, experiential learning and caring relationships
 - **A transformative personal and social development process**
 - **lack of teacher education, poor self-efficacy in implementation and trained staff turnover**, are major challenges in the implementation and sustainability of MHW



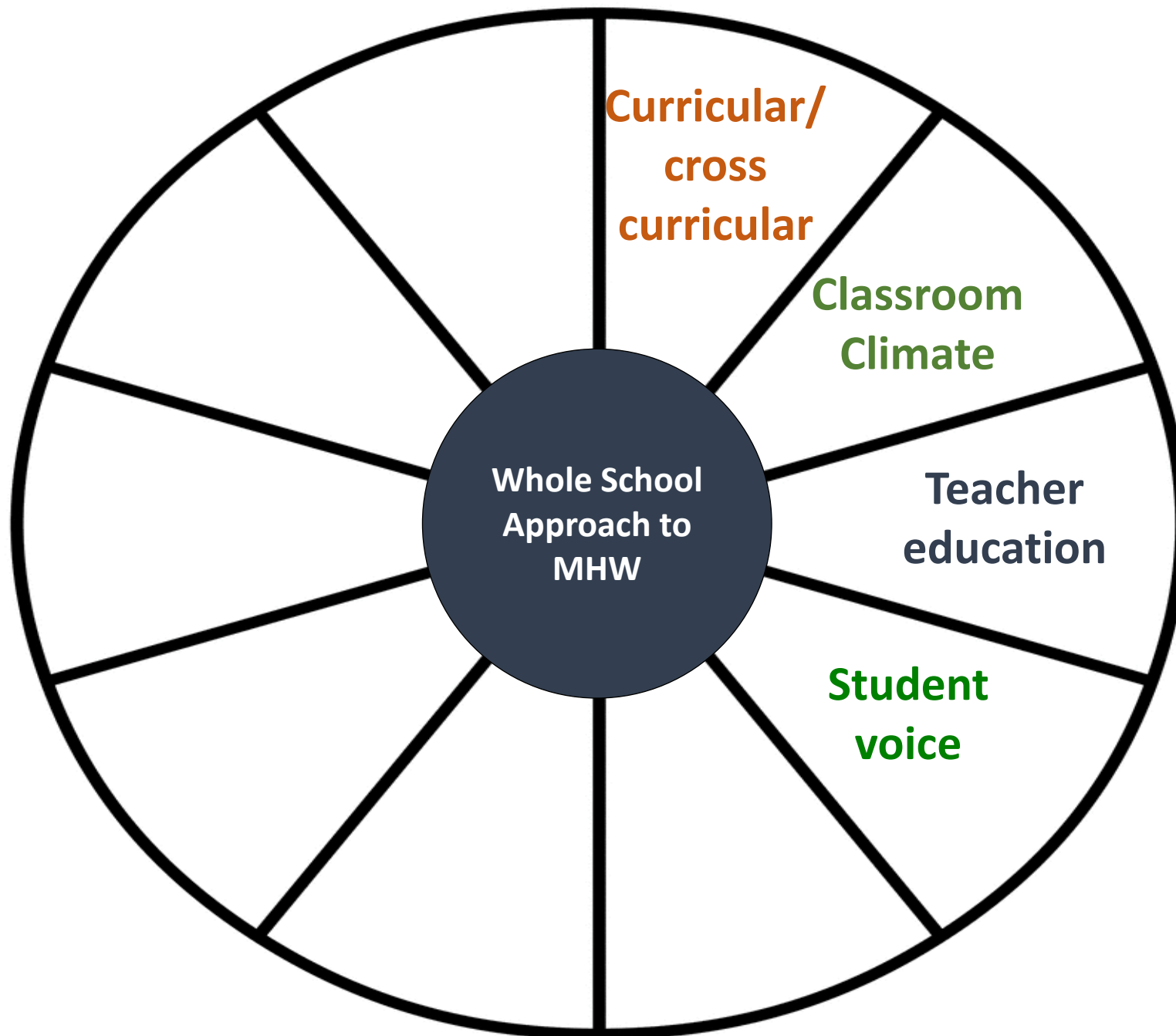
FRAMEWORK OF EDUCATORS' MHW COMPETENCES

Frameworks of the **key educator competences** both in ITE and **in schools** are necessary for the effective delivery of mental health and well-being in schools.

The Role of Teachers

1. Promote Mental Health at universal levels
2. Collaboratively identify MH supports and work together at school to implement targeted interventions
3. Participate in referrals and support intensive, strategic interventions for selected students
 - **Develop**: mental health literacy
 - **Build**: relationships
 - **Create**: mentally healthy spaces
 - **Notice**: the wellness of self and others
 - **Leverage**: their relationships to help others on the pathway to care

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MHW**



From Entitlement to Enlightenment

- ▶ **Children have important things to tell us:** listening to and acting on their insights and perspectives leads to **better decision-making** for children, families and communities
- ▶ **Children's perspectives on their learning, behaviour & wellbeing are different** from those of adults (eg. teachers) as they have a **unique insider experience** of what it means to be a child in a particular context, throwing light on important issues sometimes overlooked by adults
- ▶ Their active participation requires **participatory and collaborative** approaches in research and policy actions



ATKINSON ET AL (2019)

- › With the support of school staff and psychologists, the students developed a whole-school, student-friendly mental health strategy in a secondary school

Students advocated for young person-friendly, innovative and creative ways of

- › communicating information about mental health (eg. use of technology and visual resources), which avoided stigma

*"as the project progressed, it became evident that applying even carefully selected adult mental health models to school contexts might not be **appropriate**".*



Sleep

We all have a need for rest, spending almost a third of our lives asleep. If deprived of sleep, it can have a significant effect on our wellbeing. The NHS recommends:

- 9- to 9.5-hours' sleep per night for young people aged 11-18:
 - It is normal for teenagers to get less sleep than they need on school nights, but to catch up at the weekends.
- A good bedtime routine to tell the brain that sleep is expected soon, including:
 - Stopping blue light technologies (e.g. mobiles; tablets; laptops) 2-hours before bed; activities before bed (e.g. having a bath);
 - Not having a TV in your bedroom;
 - Undertaking thought-provoking/stimulating activities (e.g. homework) away from the bedroom;
 - Avoiding caffeine (e.g. tea/coffee/energy drinks);
 - Limiting drinking during the evening (to avoid needing to go to the toilet during the night).



Feeling safe and secure

It is important for us to feel secure: to know that we have a roof over our head and are not under threat. If we don't feel safe and secure, we can become anxious and stressed.

The psychologist Abraham Maslow suggested that unless our basic needs (food, drink, exercise, sleep, exercise safety and shelter) are met, it will be difficult to get some of our other needs met, as these form the basis for wellbeing (see Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs diagram below)

Tips for wellbeing

Informed by:

Food and drink

Hunger and thirst quickly become our highest priorities if not addressed. Healthy eating and drinking can be addressed as follows:

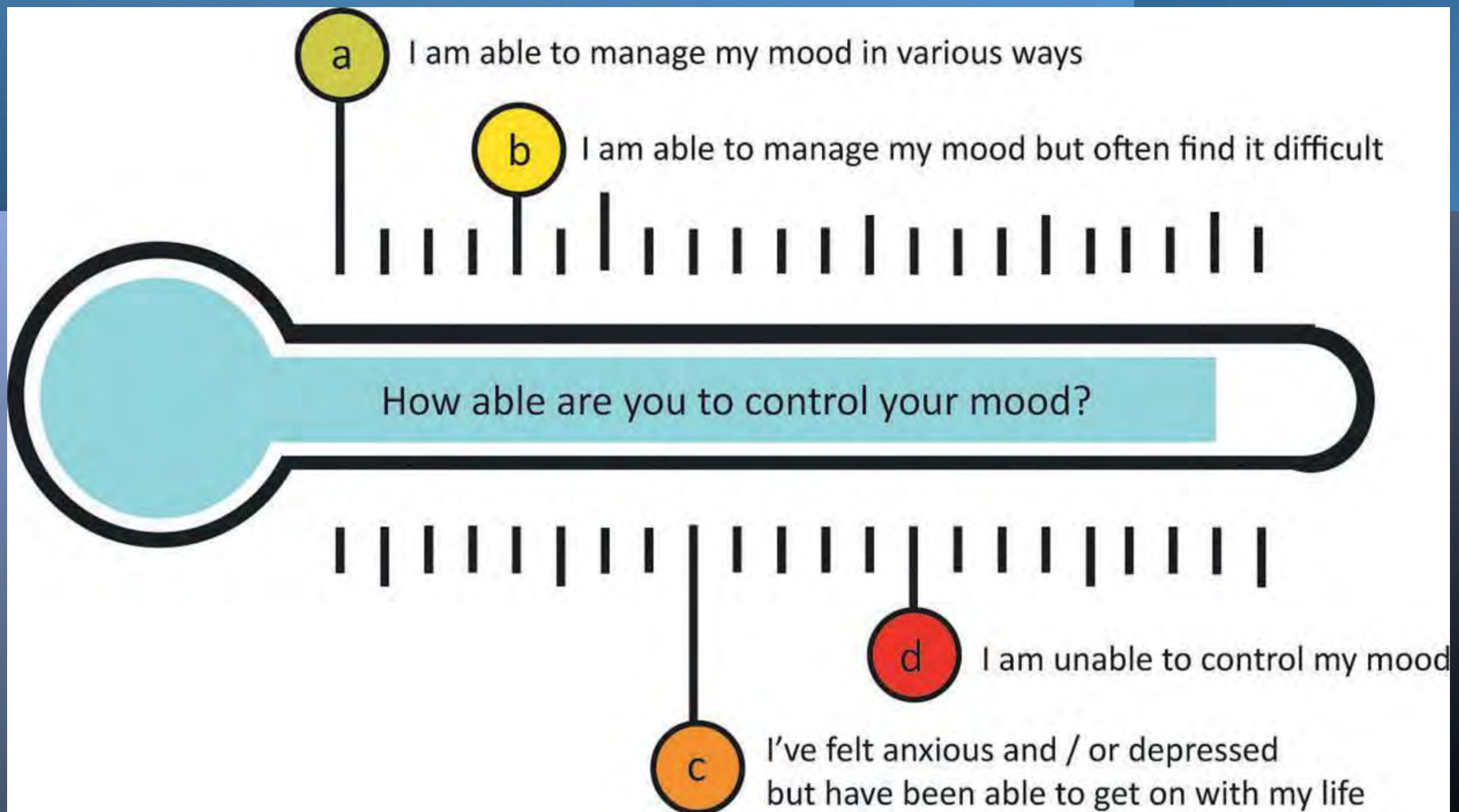
- Eating a wide variety of healthy food at regular intervals throughout the day (i.e. avoid fatty foods/takeaways and snacking).
- Drink water throughout the day and have a large glass of water when you have headache.



Movement and exercise

Research suggests that regular exercise is extremely beneficial for wellbeing. Movement aids circulation, increases our metabolic rate and has a beneficial effect on the health of our entire bodies – including our brain. The NHS recommends:

- 60-minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise per day, including: walking to school; cycling; playing in the park; walking the dog; swimming; running; martial arts; other sports.



a

I am able to manage my mood in various ways

b

I am able to manage my mood but often find it difficult

How able are you to control your mood?

c

I've felt anxious and / or depressed but have been able to get on with my life

d

I am unable to control my mood

SUNRISE: MALTA-NORWAY

- **Supporting young people with Mental Health Issues through Photo elicitation**

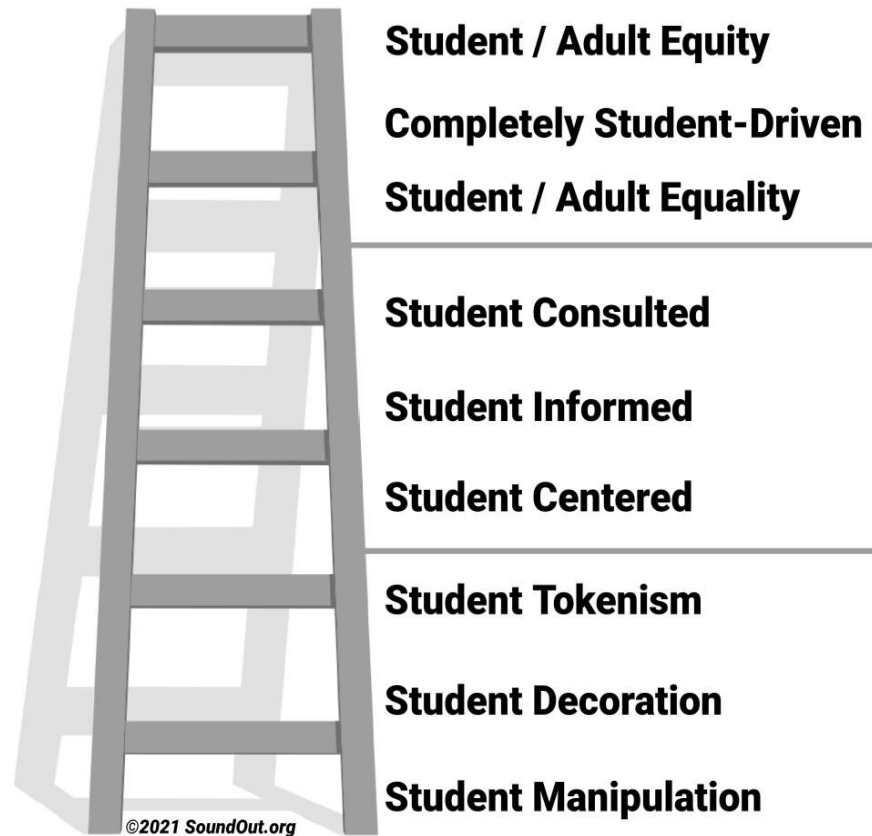




VUČI Toolkit

Welcome to the VUČI Toolkit. Here, you will find a helpful tool designed specifically to measure the impact of child participation on children, adults, and policymaking. This toolkit was created in collaboration with Maltese children to capture the true effect of this right, and it is free for you to use. With your help, we can work together to make life better for all children in Malta. Let's get started!

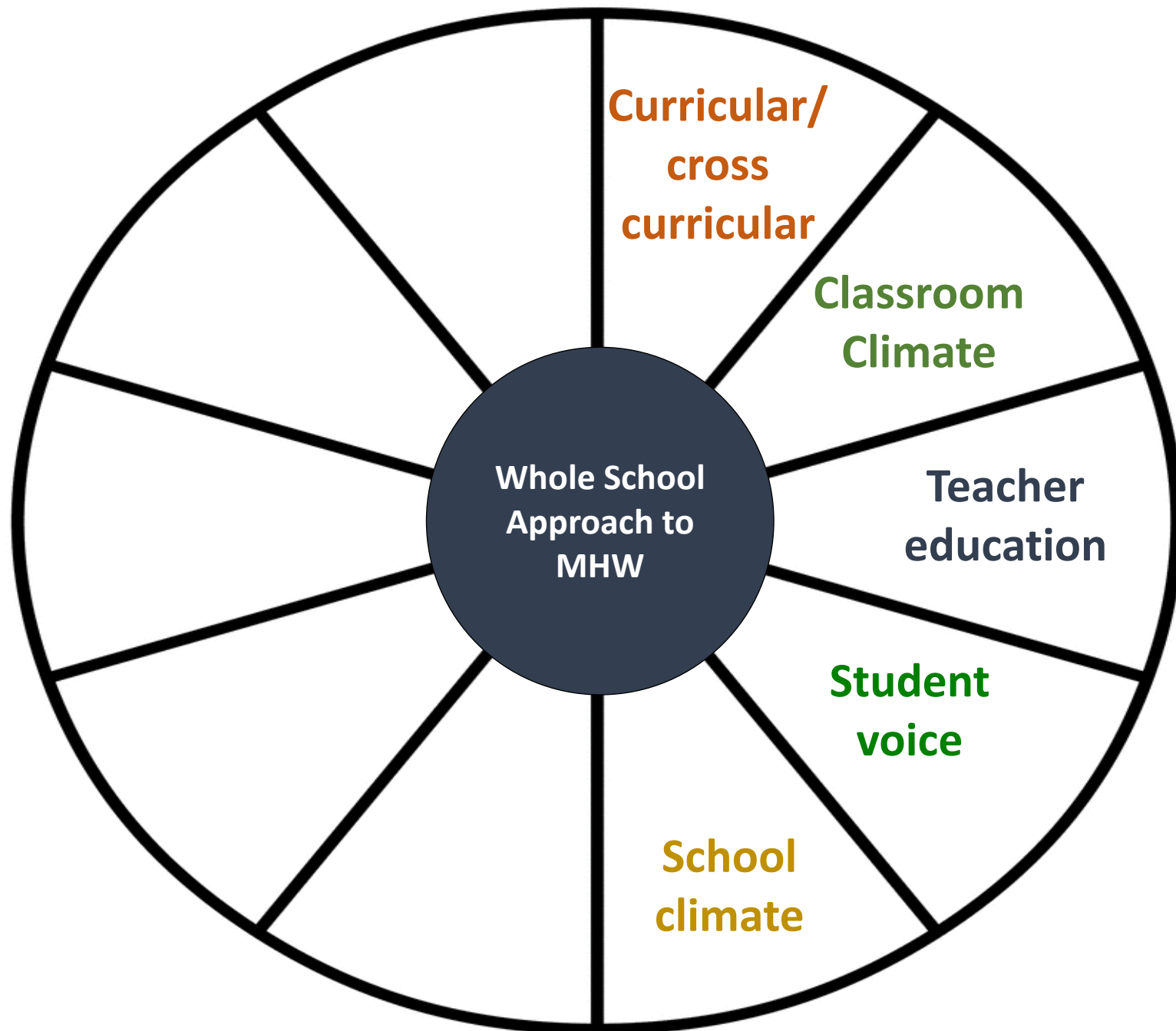
Ladder of Meaningful Student Involvement (Fletcher, 2021)



Examples of authentic engagement include students initiating and leading projects with adults involved in supportive roles and decisions shared amongst students and adults

Forms of pretence voice: **manipulation** (adults use students to advance their own agenda), **decoration** (students used to bolster adult decisions) and **tokenism** (students' apparent voice is actually adult determined, such as giving information or consultation)

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SCHOOL
APPROACH TO
MHW**



A BOTTOM-UP, PARTICIPATORY, APPROACH FITTING THE ECOLOGY OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Teachers, students, parents and the local community need to be actively involved in the planning and implementation of wellbeing initiatives at school.

Parents and local community invited to share responsibility for the WSA to MHW



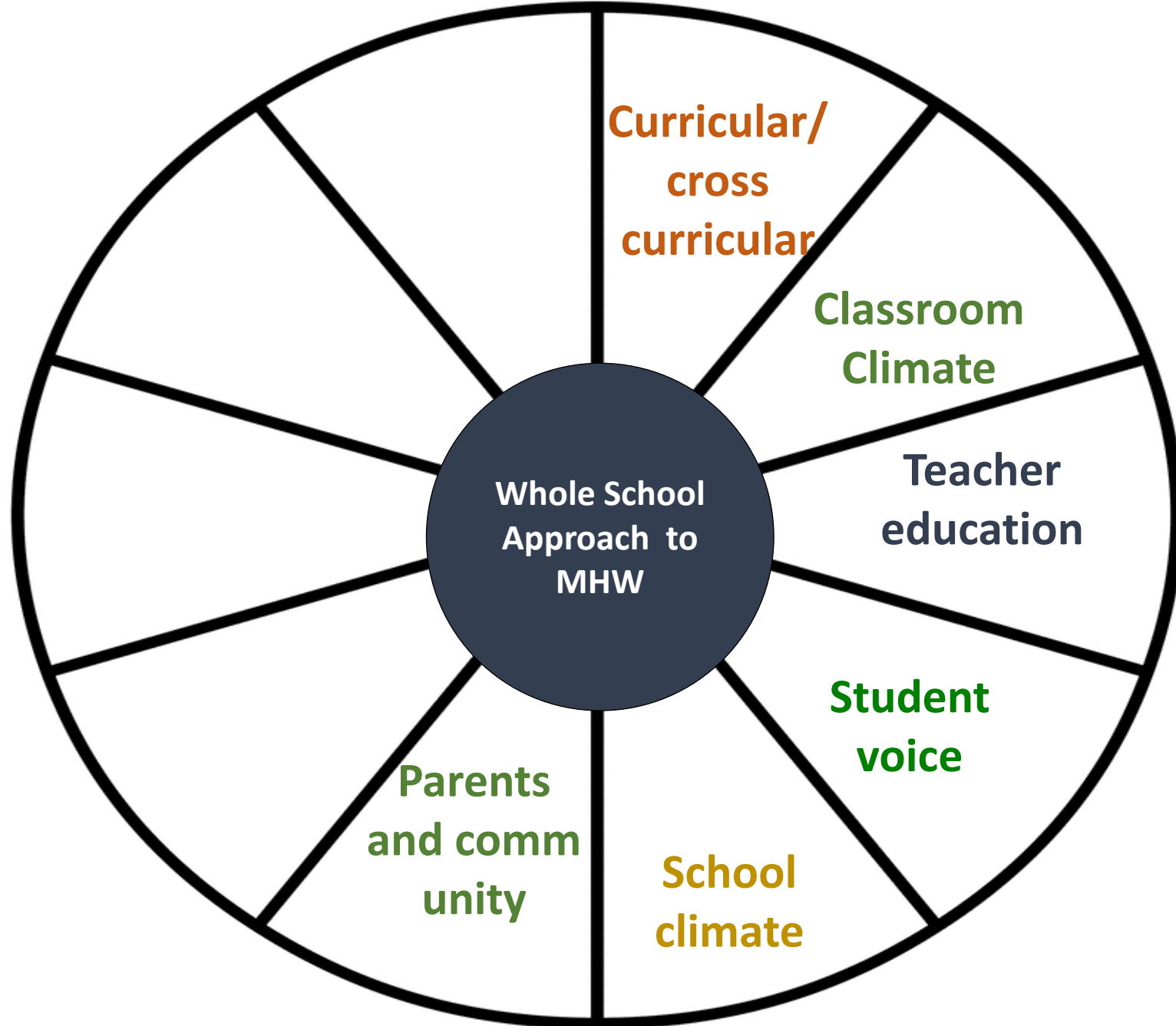
INVOLVING THE WHOLE SCHOOL IN PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING BULLYING

INVOLVING THE WHOLE SCHOOL COMMUNITY
IN TAILORING INTERVENTIONS TO PREVENT
BULLYING THROUGH PRIORITY ACTIONS AT
UNIVERSAL PREVENTION, COMPLEMENTED
WITH TARGETED INTERVENTIONS

- **A CARING MAJORITY:** values of mutual respect, respect for diversity, inclusion, equality, kindness, and solidarity
- **Guaranteeing a safe environment for all free of violence, harassment and discrimination through effective policies and structures**



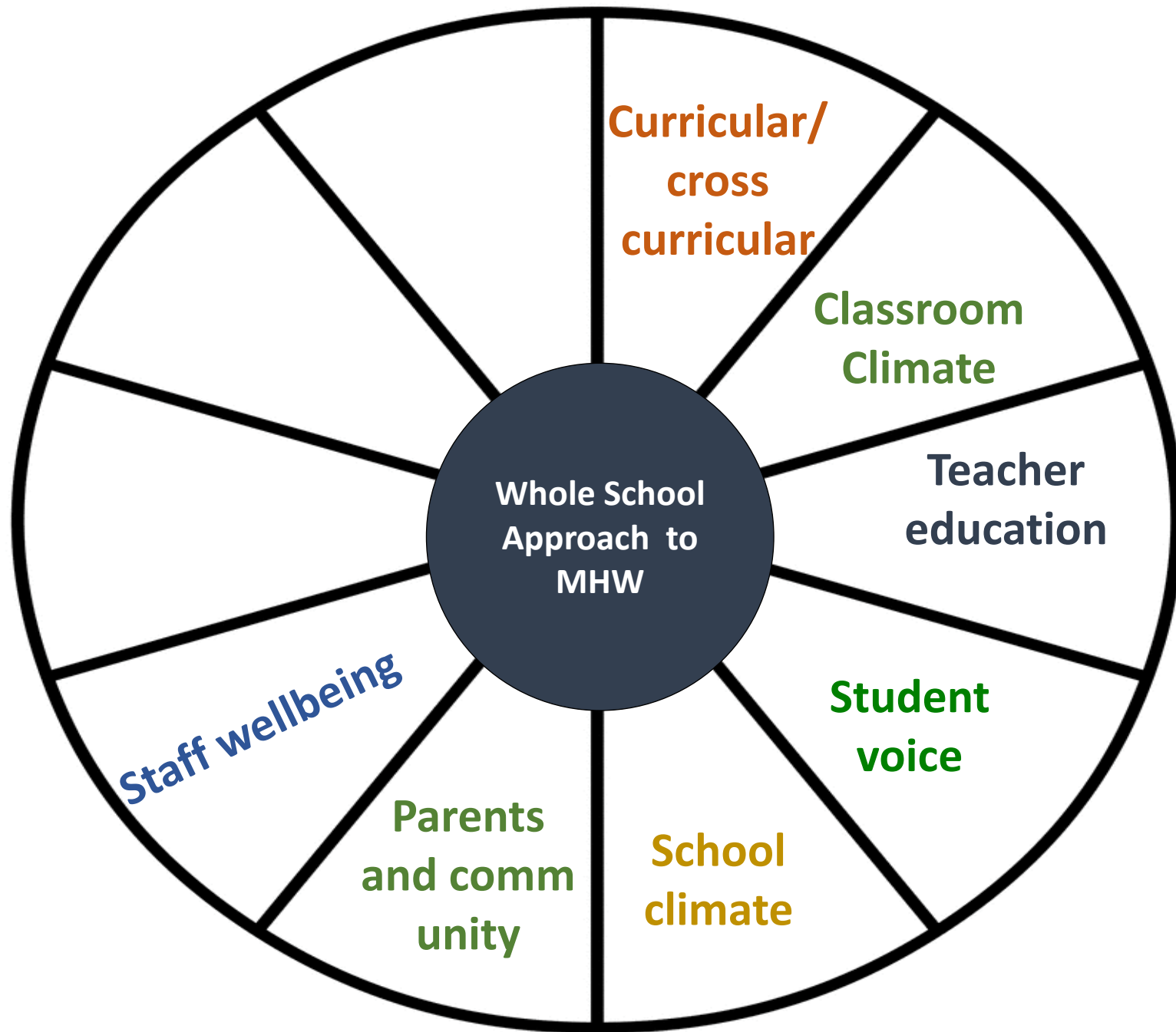
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PARENTS AS ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN WITH ID



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Teachers' Stress and Burnout

- > UNESCO (2024): Europe and North America are 3rd on teacher shortages, with a need for 4.8 million additional teachers
 - > In Europe, teacher shortages are due to attrition and lack of attractiveness of the profession. Europe's decline in leading the teaching profession or avoiding it.
- > Anyoie (2021): almost 1/2 of teachers in NY experience high levels of occupational stress, particularly lack of confidence in managing and motivating students.

CEFAI ET AL (2025)



Mixed profile of teachers experiencing a **moderate level of distress**, but feeling **connected and efficacious**, and having mixed feelings about different aspects of their profession.



Job satisfaction, particularly relationships with colleagues and nature of work, and **sense of wellbeing**, particularly connectedness, foster teachers' mental health and help to **protect them against burnout and mental health issues**.

School connectedness one of the **strongest health promoting and protective factors**.



Young teachers with limited experience are the least satisfied and have lower levels of MHW, making them more at risk of burnout and attrition.

ORIGINAL RESEARCH article

Front. Educ., 25 November 2025

Sec. Mental Health and Wellbeing in Education

Volume 10 - 2025 | <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1708863>

From burnout to growth: the relationship between teachers' job satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health

 Carmel Cefai^{1*}

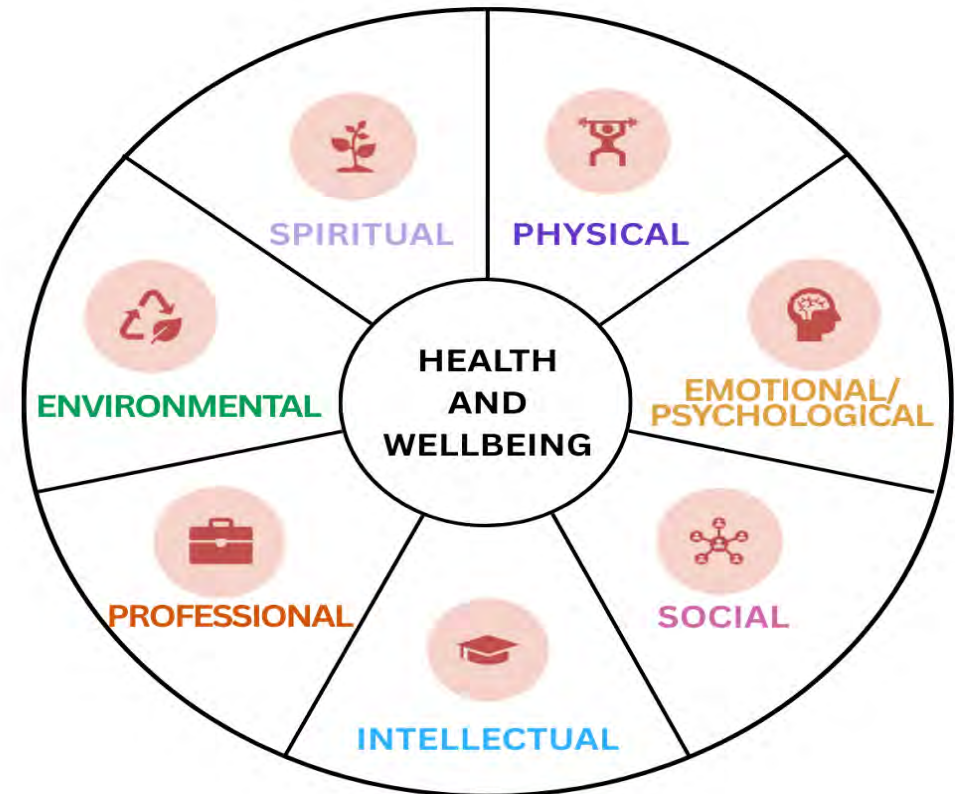
 Natalie Galea¹

 Rachel Spiteri¹

 Valeria Cavioni²

EDUCATORS' WELLBEING

- Educators need active support from authorities, administration and colleagues to deal effectively with the challenges of their profession, and take care of their health and well-being
 - e.g. teachers are less stressed when they feel the school environment is collaborative and supportive and that they have professional autonomy and adequate training (Eurydice, 2021)

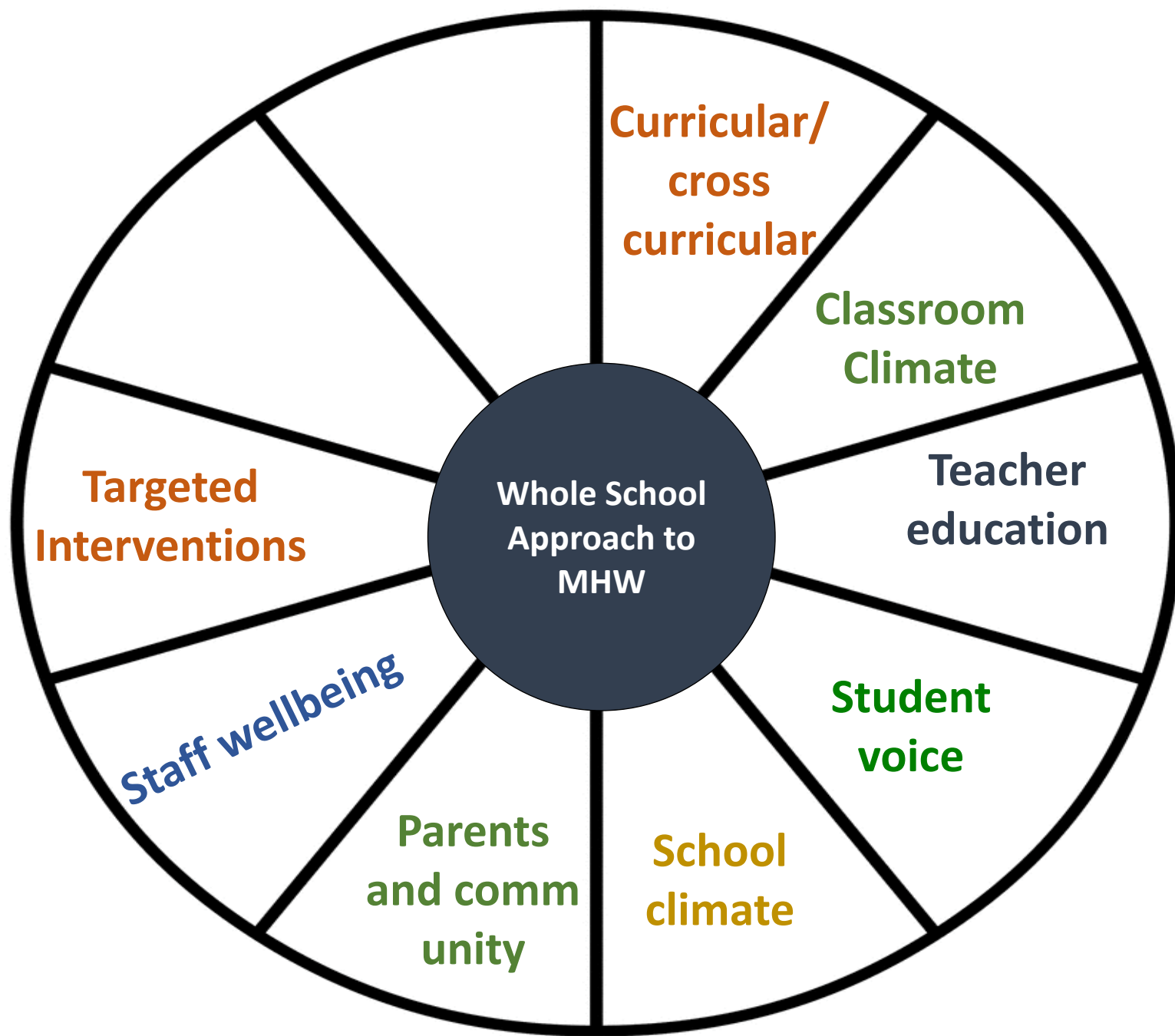




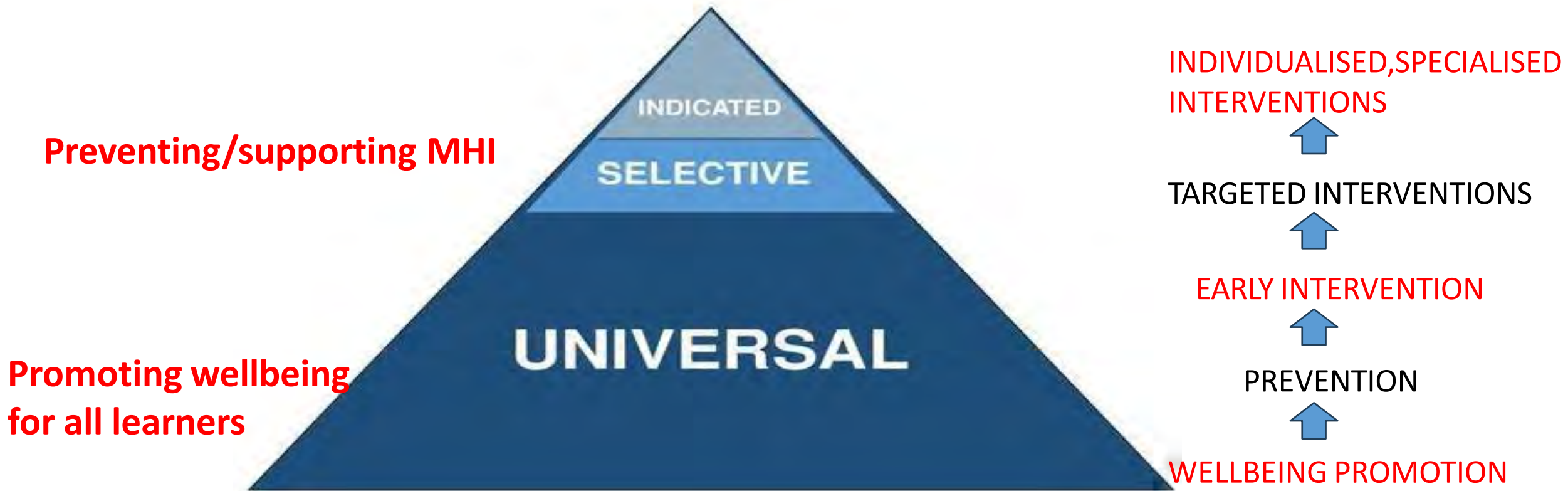
Three good things that
happened today

Journaling

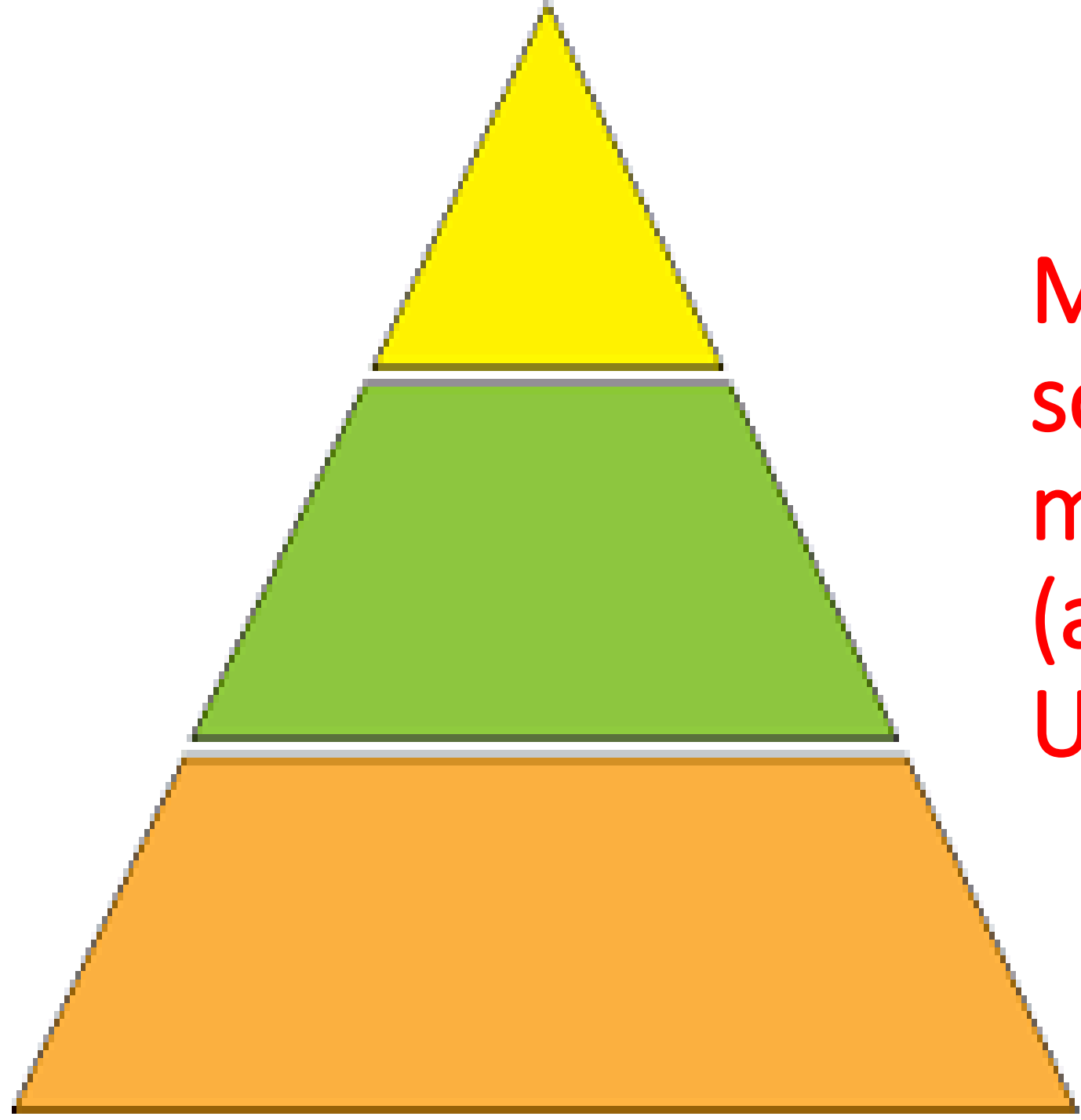
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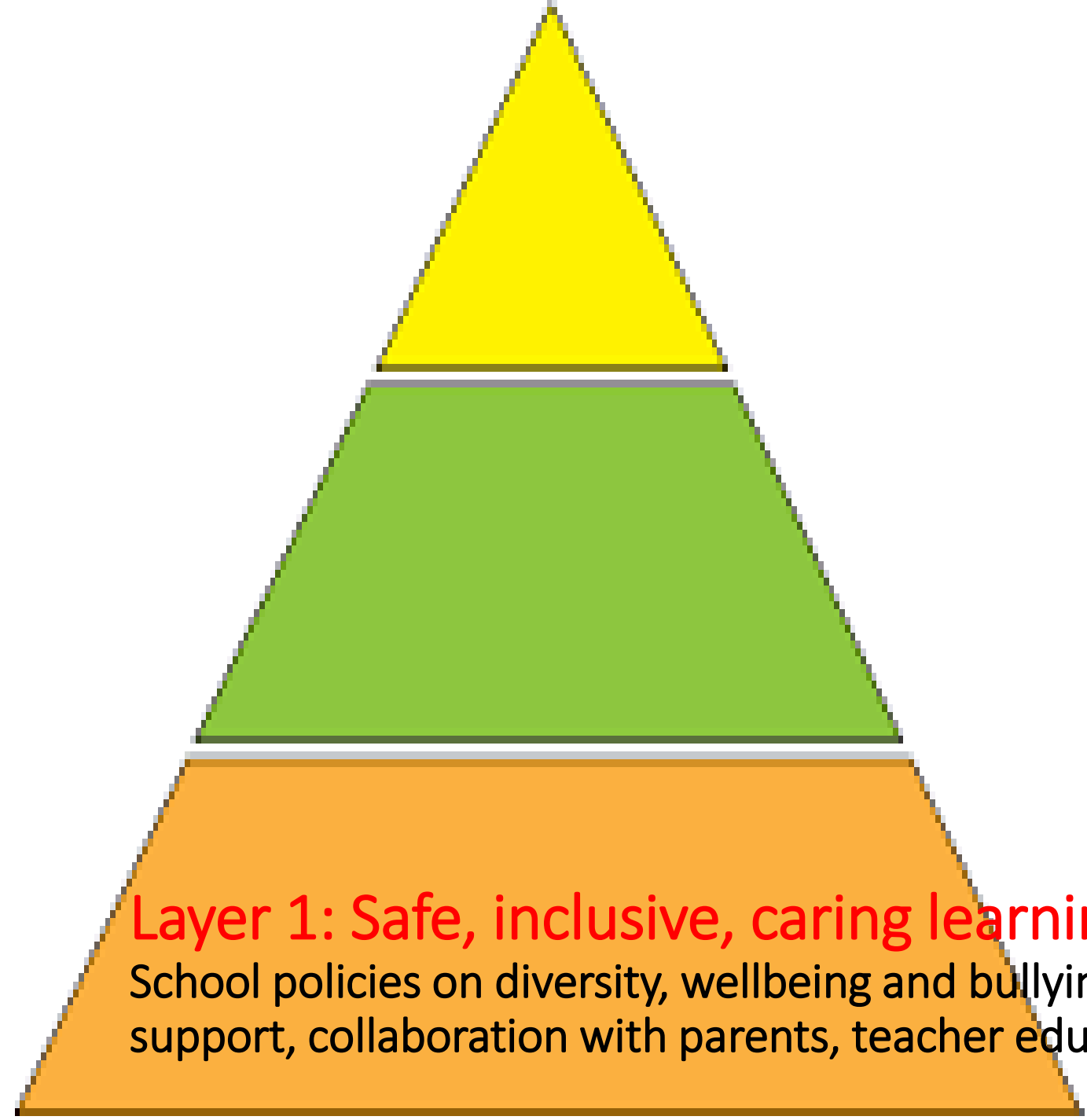
MULTI-TIERED APPROACH: students with additional SE need needs extra support



Prevention and intervention need to be implemented within an inclusive setting avoiding labelling and stigmatisation and ensuring they are accessible



Multi-layered psycho-social interventions for migrant children
(adapted from UNESCO, 2019)



Layer 1: Safe, inclusive, caring learning environment

School policies on diversity, wellbeing and bullying, trauma-based education, peer support, collaboration with parents, teacher education



Layer 2: Psychosocial support for mild to moderate issues

Mindfulness, stress management, Psychological First Aid, SEL and resilience programmes, extra-curricular activities, creative art, exercise and sports, play-based interventions and therapy, art therapy, parenting education Led by trained teachers, mental health professions, parents and volunteers

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School policies on diversity, wellbeing and bullying, trauma-based education, peer support, collaboration with parents, teacher education



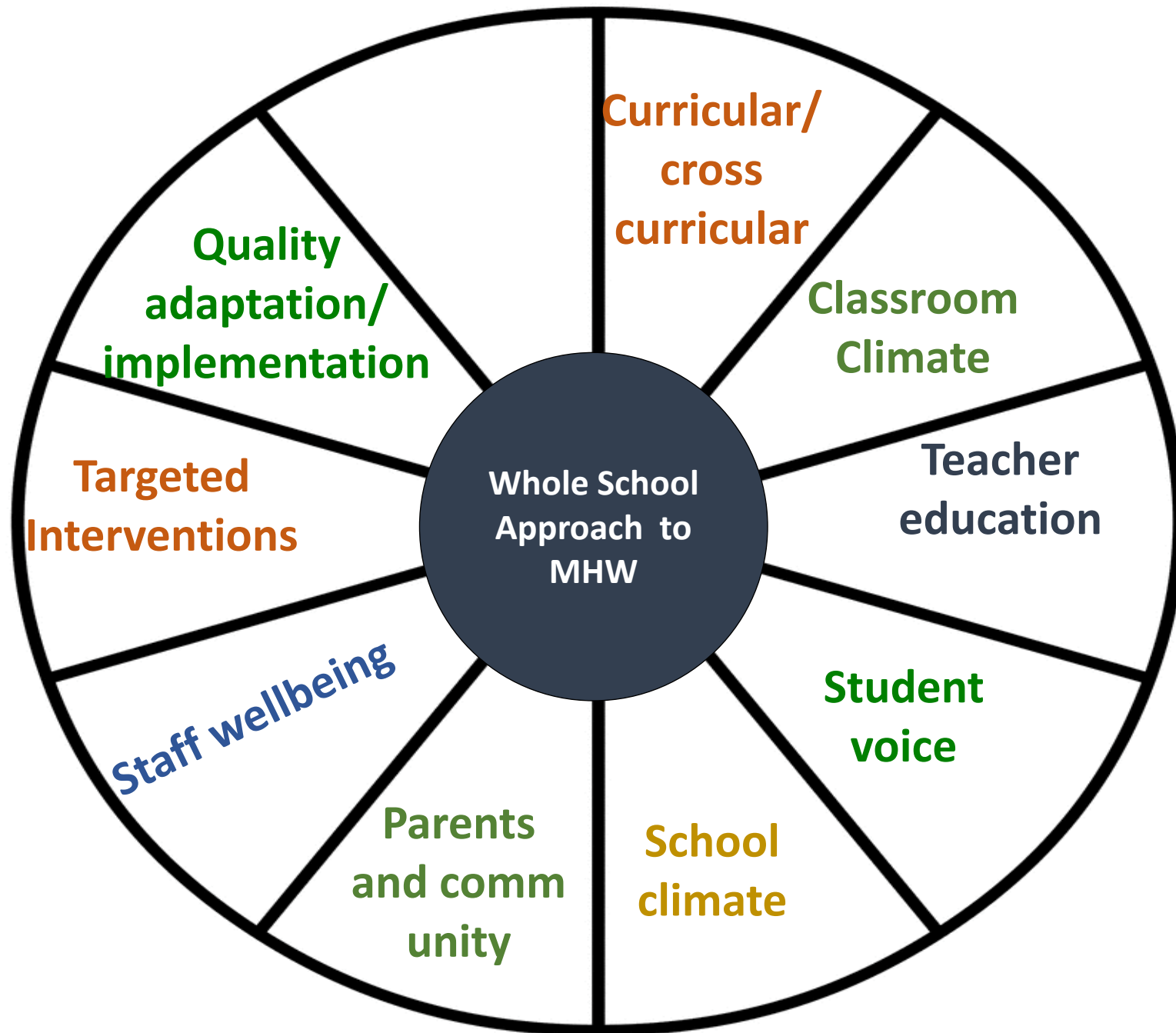
Layer 3: Therapeutic interventions for complex/severe mental health issues: Tf CBT, dialectical behaviour therapy, trauma systems therapy . Led by mental health professionals

Layer 2: Psychosocial support for mild to moderate issues
Mindfulness, stress management, Psychological First Aid, SEL and resilience programmes, extra-curricular activities, creative art, exercise and sports, play-based interventions and therapy, art therapy, parenting education Led by trained teachers, mental health professions, parents and volunteers

Layer 1: Safe, inclusive, caring learning environment

School policies on diversity, wellbeing and bullying, trauma-based education, peer support, collaboration with parents, teacher education

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QUALITY IMPLEMENTATION

Deighton et al (2025) Evaluation of YAM and GUIDE with a total of 12,166 Year 9 (aged 13-14) students from 15 secondary schools in the UK. Schools were randomised to receive YAM, The Guide, or continue usual practice.

- **Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM):** no significant impact on emotional difficulties at the short-term follow-up, potentially due to inconsistent implementation across schools, as several failed to deliver the intervention as planned.
- **Mental Health and High School Curriculum GUIDE:** Participants who received all sessions of the GUIDE curriculum experienced greater benefits compared to those who attended fewer sessions.

MENTAL HEALTH
& HIGH SCHOOL
CURRICULUM GUIDE
UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTAL ILLNESS
VERSION 3

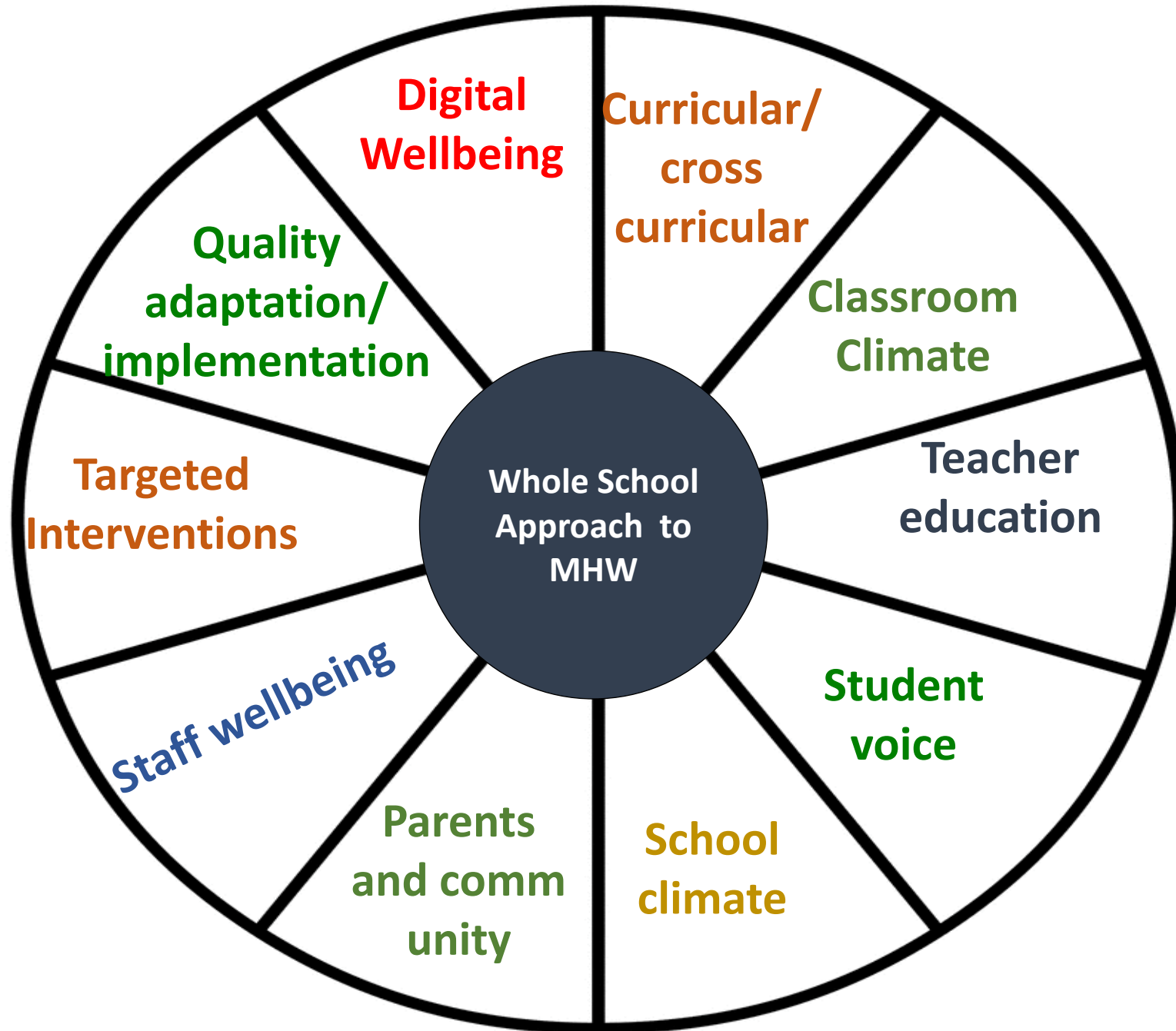


CULTURAL SENSITIVITY



- › While ready-made programmes may be attractive, these need to be adapted to fit the ecology of the school for them to have a positive impact and be sustainable.
 - › when schools do not see interventions as addressing their own specific needs, interventions are unlikely to be sustained in the long term.
 - › adaptation needs to take place through a participatory approach, with active involvement of staff, learners, parents and local community

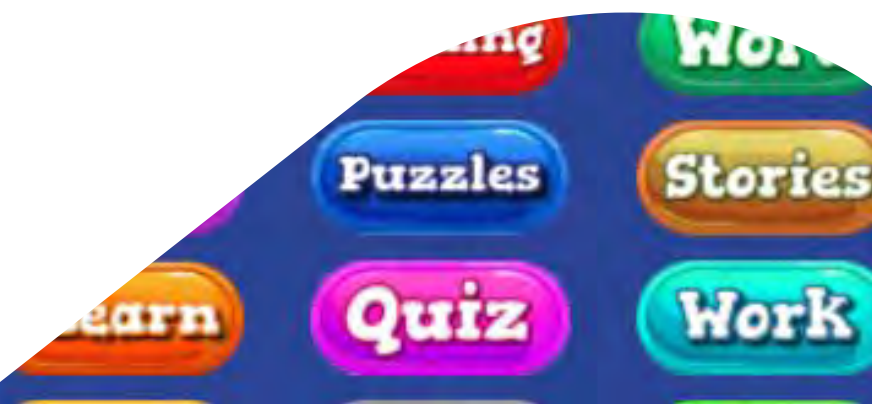
**A WHOLE
SCHOOL
APPROACH TO
MHW**



How are you feeling today?

- Improved Social Connections and Inclusion (eg. social media)
- **Relaxation and Emotional Expression** (eg. apps)
- **Mental Health and Self-Care** (eg. cognitive technologies and assistive tools)
- **Mental Health Wellbeing** (eg. digital wellbeing sessions)
- **Early Detection and Prevention**

Supportive tools for
SAD and MHW



Risks of using mobile devices

- Excessive screen time (from 6 to 9 hours a day for adolescents) results in physical activity, sleep disruption, and mental health
- **Social Media pressure and unrealistic expectations and comparison**
- Cyberbullying and Online harassment, social pressure and cyberbullying may lead to poor self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (WHO 2021: 15% of adolescents are victims of cyberbullying, 12% increase from 2018)
- **Mental health issues**
- Isolation and reduced face-to-face interactions
- **Exposure to inappropriate or harmful content**
- **Reduced attention span**
- **Distraction from learning**



Need for guidance and
advice to protect children's
wellbeing and mental health

- setting screen time limits
- Teaching digital literacy and safety through education
- Cyberbullying prevention through anti-cyberbullying programmes and safer internet centres and hotlines
- Encouraging offline activities and face-to-face connections
- Training of school staff and parents



THANKS!

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How wonderful it is
that nobody need wait
a single moment
before starting to
improve the world

-anne frank