



Wellbeing in international schools

The 2018 Report

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Wellbeing in International Schools 2018: Perceptions of International School Teachers and Leaders

This report summarises the results of the first ever global research into wellbeing in international schools. Angie Wigford at International Educational Psychology Services Ltd. (IEPS) and Andrea Higgins at Cardiff University School of Psychology conducted the research with the full support of ISC Research.

What does wellbeing mean to the international school community? What promotes wellbeing and what are the barriers to it in this particular system?

Wellbeing as a concept has become more prevalent in the international school sector in recent years with conferences and articles dedicated to it. Research has established that staff wellbeing is important for motivation and job commitment ¹. Most importantly, increasing levels of staff wellbeing can result in improved academic performance of students as well as improving their wellbeing ^{2, 3}. Enhancing personal wellbeing decreases a person's vulnerability to distress and helps to improve their ability to function effectively on a day to day basis⁴

This investigation provides useful information specific to the characteristics and needs of international schools. The aim was to identify what promotes wellbeing and what are the barriers to wellbeing from the subjective reports of teachers and leaders.

An internet survey was used for the majority of data collection. This approach has an inherent bias in that only teachers and leaders who wanted to complete it are represented. This factor should be kept in mind when reading the report.

Measures of wellbeing were based on a range of established theories^{4,5}. From the many definitions, we prefer the following:⁶

Stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge.

When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing, and vice-versa.



Figure 4. Definition of Wellbeing

This report presents our preliminary findings. We are continuing to analyse the data. Further findings will be available on the [IEPS website](#)

This report is the first of a series of biannual reports on wellbeing in international schools.

Summary

Our findings suggest a **high level of wellbeing in international schools** for staff and students represented in this survey.

Supportive relationships, robust communication, effective support systems and clear, strong leadership were identified as key factors for the establishment and maintenance of staff and student wellbeing. These factors were very powerful in counter-balancing the impact of more negative aspects such as workload demands and pressure for results.

Mobility (school moves) and academic pressures were key barriers to wellbeing.



Research process and participants

An online questionnaire was sent to senior staff in all 9,307 international schools around the world between January and March 2018.

1,056 teachers and leaders completed a 31-question survey about their own wellbeing and that of their students.

In July and August 2018, 18 individuals completed a 30-minute interview answering open questions based on questionnaire outcomes.

Substantial quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Data were anonymised and thematic analysis conducted.

What is an international school?

For the purposes of market intelligence, analysis and data collection, ISC Research defines an international school as the following: if the school delivers a curriculum to any combination of pre-school, primary or secondary students, wholly or partly in English outside an English-speaking country or, if a school in a country where English is one of the official languages, offers an English-medium curriculum other than that country's national curriculum, and the school is international in its orientation.



51% of the research sample were classroom teachers, **22%** of whom had management responsibility.

21% were in a leadership role, **11%** were specialist teachers, **5%** were teaching assistants, the remainder a mixture of counsellors and other specialist staff.

40% of these teachers had between 4 and 11 years of experience teaching

in international schools. **35%** had over 12 years of experience in international schools.



46% of the schools represented in the research had over


1,000 students enrolled. **24%** had less than 400 students enrolled.

International schools from **70** countries participated covering every region of the world.


Cyprus Brunei Darussalam Venezuela Turkey
Hong Kong Germany Dominican Republic UK
Estonia Switzerland USA Guatemala Zambia
El Salvador Thailand Peru Mali Oman Cuba
Argentina Saudi Arabia Portugal Dubai Myanmar
Tanzania Kazakhstan Nicaragua Czech Republic
Sweden Nigeria New Zealand Zimbabwe Colombia
Malaysia Bolivia Qatar Poland Japan India
Paraguay Kenya Norway Trinidad and Tobago
Kuwait Ecuador Bahrain France Ghana Hungary
Singapore Jordan Lebanon Mexico China Chile
Italy Honduras Philippines Sierra Leone Bangladesh
Brazil Romania Spain UAE Botswana South Korea
Austria The Netherlands Indonesia Sweden


What works: for staff?

Staff in international schools are happy and enjoy their work

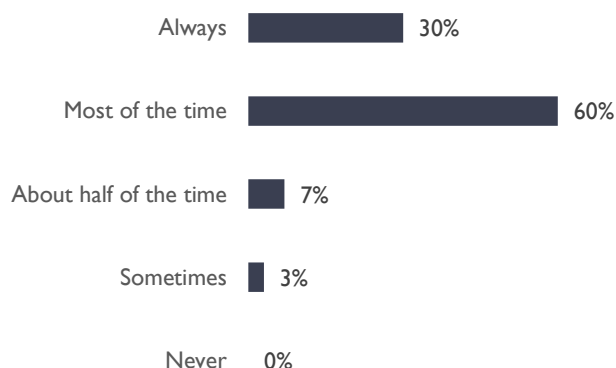
 **90%** of the respondents found their work full of meaning and purpose most or all of the time


 **82%** of respondents said they were satisfied with their job

 **90%** were also proud of their work most or all of the time in relation to their teaching

 **93%** were proud of their ability to support their students' general wellbeing

90% were enthusiastic about their job most or all of the time



 **51%** of respondents reported that they have plenty of energy in work

Themes in supporting positive staff wellbeing:

- Positive relationships with colleagues, students and parents
- A sense of achievement and making a difference
- Enjoying a respectful, harmonious work environment that encourages autonomy and values diversity
- Opportunities for creativity and innovation
- Being supported professionally and personally by school systems as well as by individuals
- Feeling stronger as part of a team
- Being adaptable and flexible professionally and personally
- Strong belief in, and affiliation to, a particular curriculum.

What teachers told us:

“...the things I like most are the autonomy, the resources, the ambition, the lack of political interference, the broad moral purpose (rather than the narrow utilitarian work-force-ready notion) the quality of colleagues, and the variety of students.”

“There is a lot more professional autonomy ...our head has encouraged us to run mini research projects ...that is one of the big motivators you are allowed to just try things, go off on a tangent and see if it works and if it doesn't it is still a learning experience.”

“It is to do with the general ambience of the school... there is an open atmosphere and people support each other very well and we have great leadership teams. The Principal has a very strong belief in what we are doing and how we are doing it, he is very steady.”

“The parents that I've had have been really supportive, and I think that there's a huge community in the school in general.”

“Alignment with colleagues and students and parents around the purpose of education, more than anything else, shared mission. Yeah, shared, meaningful work is the basis of my sense of belonging, for sure, as much as I like my colleagues and I have friends on the staff, that's not the basis.”

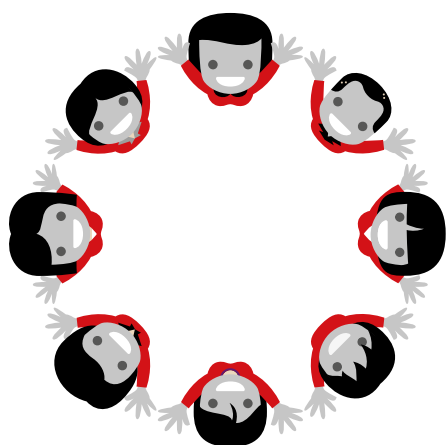
“I'm deciding to teach internationally because I feel my wellbeing is better than teaching in a school in my home country.”

IMPLICATIONS:

International schools can provide models of good practice for other systems to study and learn from.

Relationships with colleagues

Supportive relationships are crucial for staff wellbeing



81% of respondents said they agree or strongly agree that they could count on the support of their colleagues.

When asked to list the three things that help staff to feel positive in school. Staff-staff (colleague) relationships accounted for **30%** of the responses.

What teachers told us:

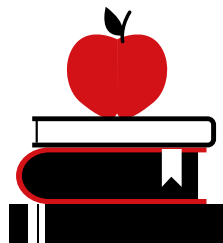
"I love my partner teachers, I adore working with them, I respect them professionally and personally, and that goes a long way for me to kind of overlook the nit-picky things that I might gripe about, and I think that helps quite a bit."

"We are very explicit ...that you can't look after other people unless you look after yourself ...that you do better at work when you look after yourself. We each have an individual mentor ...so there is one person who is looking out for you and you are looking out for. In more practical terms, there are lots of social things ...we also have a programme of wellness opportunities."

IMPLICATIONS:

Relationships between staff are working in many schools and contribute significantly to wellbeing.

Relationships with parents



62% of respondents felt that they could count on the support of over **60%** of parents.

What teachers told us:

"I have always tried to be open with parents and communicate with them frequently. inviting them to come in and observe if they want to ...but because of the culture parents tend to defer to teachers ...so there may be less engagement."

"I cannot really confront the parents, because they would take the students from our school"

"...the parents are really great and supportive of the teachers, which I also know is pretty unique, so I don't take that for granted for sure."

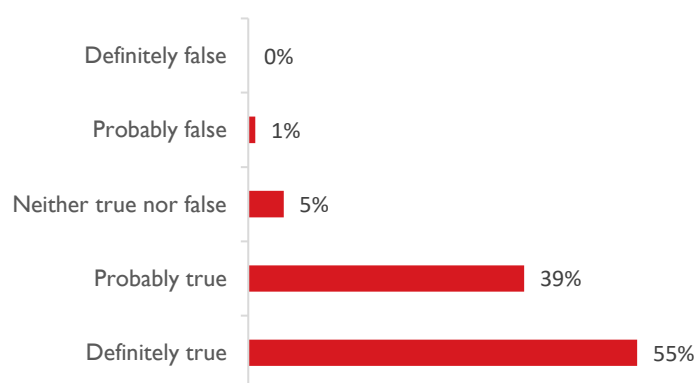
"Parents will be on your back if their child's not getting the correct grades."

IMPLICATIONS:

Managing parental expectations is central to wellbeing for students and important for teachers. Schools may need to do more to foster positive engagement of parents in the education of their children.

Relationships with students

90% of respondents believe that staff in their school are interested in what students have to say.



Nearly all of our respondents said that staff and students within their current school get on well with each other

What teachers told us:

"... treating them with respect and trust in terms of the students I think is a really important part, our assistant principal is very mindful of teacher-student relationships and does a lot of sharing of articles and literature to try and help teachers to do that, to continue to build those relationships."

"In the current school that I'm in, I love the learning culture. I love the attitude of the students.... I can have 14 different nationalities in there and it's such a melting pot of language and culture. I love the fusion that happens in my classroom."

It's a reason why I'm still in the school."

IMPLICATIONS:

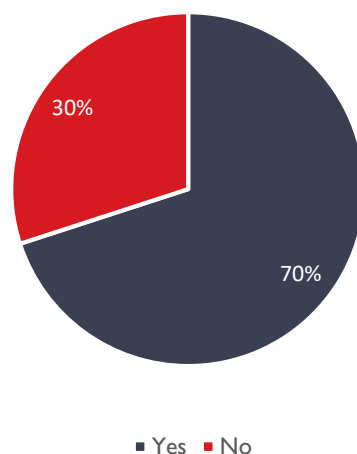
Student-teacher interaction is at the core of teaching and learning. The more positive this is, the more learning is likely to occur.

A sense of belonging, feeling cared for and being acknowledged are necessary for staff wellbeing

79% of respondents felt proud to work in their school

70% felt a genuine sense of belonging to their school but **30%** did not

Genuine sense of belonging to their school



What teachers told us:

“We live and work in a close community; we look after each other.”

“Our school has started implementing ‘new teacher buddies’, which has been really nice, and my last school did that as well, and I enjoyed that and I volunteered for it as well because I felt it was important to reach out to people.”

“One way I think our school could be better with helping support staff wellbeing is to cover mental health on insurance; ours does not cover any sort of mental health treatmentand I think that is completely ignoring the wellbeing of your staff, and ignoring the fact that they're going to struggle, because living overseas is a huge stressor on yourself and on your marriage and on your kids, and I think more schools should acknowledge that.”

The headmaster every day would make sure that he would say goodbye to all the staff. Just seeing his face and him sitting there and saying goodbye to each one of us was nice ...it did show some kind of care, so really, it's more of this interpersonal stuff, and the caring for each other. It's not

really regulated, there's no policy to care for each other, there's no rule that you have to follow to care for each other, but, it's just something that ...I think a good school has people that care about each other, and about students, and that's the most important thing, I think, there is."

"Little things that make your moving in more comfortable ...internet, telephone, legal documents so that you can start a school year feeling that you can do this ...and then you can dig into school and work. I find people who will not renew contracts because they are not supported and they feel it is just too much"

IMPLICATIONS:

Before new teachers arrive, schools can support settling in and generate a sense that they belong and are important in their new community.

What works: for students?

Student engagement is high



78%

of respondents felt that most students behave well

and **68%** felt that students in their school are interested to learn.



75%

believe that most students respect their classmates.

Teachers reported that, in general, student integration into their classes is very

successful with less than **3%** of teachers saying that this was of concern. Less

than **4%** of respondents expressed concern about relationships between

students and only **4.5%** felt that there were difficulties between classmates with respect to diversity.

91%

of teachers said that students care about each other.



Less than **3%** expressed any concerns about students' lack of

enjoyment about coming to school, although **6.5%** expressed concern about a small number of them.

Themes in positive student wellbeing:

- Friendships, belonging and being included
- Having a voice
- Being cared for and appreciated
- Exciting opportunities and fun activities
- Meaningful and interesting learning
- Humour, fun and play

What teachers told us:

“Students come to school happy.”

“I think one thing our school has done to try to support students and let them have someone to talk to is we, instead of having homerooms we have vertically aligned tutor groups, so you'll have 6, 7 and 8 together, 9, 10 and 11 together, and then 12 and 13 together, and so you're going to have a multilevel tutor group that are in their houses, and so that's also something else that we're bringing in this year to try to get kids to have more connections and more sense of belonging in the school, so that's, having that way to build relationships, I think, goes with wellbeing.”

“We try to develop our PSE programme so people ...really get to know and bond with the people in their class, doing meaningful things about their own growth as individuals so they feel connected as a community.”

“There is a general atmosphere of wellbeing in the school (good wellbeing in the school) the children are very balanced.”

“Yeah, I would say for the most part they are happy and they're really, really great students, honestly, they're very caring, you can tell there's a culture of care, which is really great.”

IMPLICATIONS:

Although high levels of student wellbeing are reported, there is a need to ensure that schools have systems in place to support students who are less engaged, more isolated and have challenges with wellbeing.

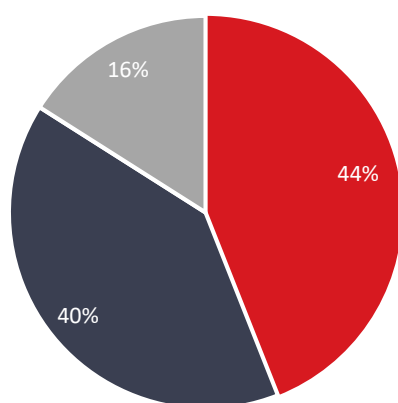
What does not work so well: for staff?

Staff are under a lot of emotional pressure



56%

of responding staff said they feel emotionally drained by their work half or most of the time.



■ Rarely ■ About half of the time ■ Most of the time

43%

of respondents did not feel that their school was concerned about their personal wellbeing.

42%

reported that they were frustrated in their job for half or most of the

time. **23%**

felt pressure with unfinished work tasks on a daily basis.



18%

of staff said that they hardly ever expected things to go their way.

29%

would not recommend working in their school to a friend.



Themes in barriers to staff wellbeing:

- Relationships hampered by difficulties in and lack of communication (including language and cultural barriers)
- Negativity and lack of respect from colleagues and parents
- Organisational challenges at all levels
- Bureaucratic frustrations and curriculum constraints
- Lack of professionalism, leadership and support
- Concerns around students and parents
- Lack of consistency; unnecessary and frequent change

What teachers told us:

"I look for an equal distribution of workload ...if they are well organised and you have the year calendar planned in advance, then it is clear from the start and there are no surprises."

"The administration told us 'well, we're just a high calibre school, so you can't be balanced'."

"I think the biggest challenge is the administrators ...we have our weeks planned out for the semester or something, and then the administrators, they just will just kind of willy-nilly throw in extra work or they'll just throw in activities that need to take place ...so we find ourselves often struggling for the time we need to deliver our content. That's a big thing, I've experienced it in each country you know, but this is really the worst I've ever experienced."

"There are levels of distrust in the leadership; a lack of appreciation and autonomy."

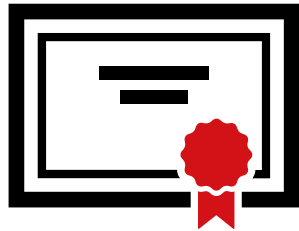
"The problem that I think we face at this school is leadership vacuum, we've had a lot of intern heads of schools come and go and come and go.... lack of vision, lack of long-term, lack of people who aren't afraid to make a decision.... that's just the nature of the beast, if you're not already familiar with us, we're also a missionary school, so we don't pay a salary, we're all volunteers here."

IMPLICATIONS:

There is a need for clear communication relating to administrative demands and changes. Sharing the rationale behind top-down decisions can be very helpful.

What does not work so well: for students?

A small but significant proportion of our students are not doing well



When asked about the number of students who were having

difficulty managing school life, 5% of respondents reported that they felt that this was a problem for **up to 30%** of the students in their school.

8% of respondents felt that about a **third of students had significant problems** that were a cause for concern.

Themes in barriers to student wellbeing:

- Pressure from parents and over-scheduling
- Language, social and cultural barriers (exacerbated by moving schools)
- Lack of sleep and high levels of stress
- Poor quality of teaching and boring lessons
- Multi-lingual difficulties
- Friendship problems including bullying, conflict and isolation

What teachers told us:

“We have a lot of issues in school with parents pushing their children ridiculous amounts, making them work all hours, going to different clubs; so a lot of physical tiredness, children overwrought, children over pressured.”

“I think anxiety is maybe the number one hardest struggle that our kids have, and it's because they've lived in a real pressure cooker, high anxiety environment.”

“In my recent school, there was no learning support department ...in other schools I worked at there was, but of course, this is for different, specific students ...and learning support is a crucial element I think in all of international schools and international education. I think every school has to have a department like that, I couldn't believe that there was no support like that in our school.”

“...but I would say they're much nastier to each other online than they are face to face, you know it's like road rage (cyberbullying)..., but that's the thing, if there is bad behaviour that's where I would see it manifested.”

IMPLICATIONS:

There is a need to recognise that pressure on students, whether from home or school, is an element that cannot be avoided. Students need to be helped to cope with stressors and develop resilience.

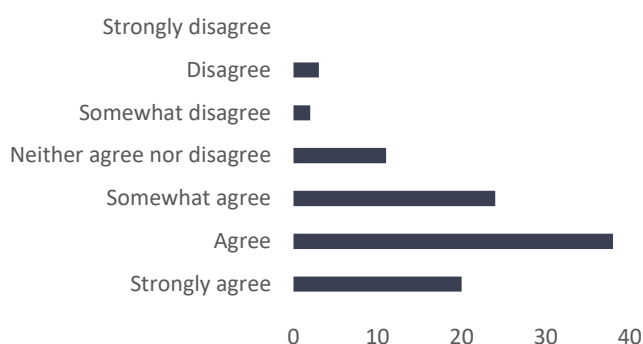
Exam pressure affects exam outcomes



83%

of respondents agreed that exam stress can impact negatively on student outcomes in their exams.

Percentage of respondents who believe exam stress can impact negatively on student outcomes in examinations



What teachers told us:

"I actually asked my head of school that, 'how do we help maintain balance with exams?' especially with high pressure parents and students, and he said, 'We don't, we just don't, you can't do anything about it,' and that was a shocking moment for me."

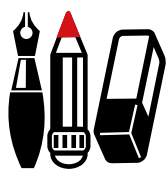
"I don't think we do enough. We should have a testing calendar because they end up having multiple tests in a day."

"I think it's not a ritual but a certain kind of rite of passage in our society, that you have to go through these exams in high school to be regarded as an independent adult... None of the mechanisms I've seen is perfect for it yet, but, I think mindfulness is the way to go, and, trying to make them understand that it's not live or die, and it's not the end of the world if they don't succeed in it, it's more like, more that kind of wellbeing talk that is helpful."

IMPLICATIONS:

Academic success is a key motivator in many schools. This emphasis can cause unhealthy levels of stress. This does not mean the exam system should be changed but that schools need to learn how to better support students to cope with exam-related stress, beyond simply more exam practice.

Mobility impacts on wellbeing



6% of the teachers in the survey had over **70%** new pupils during the 2017-2018 academic year.

48% of respondents felt that transition between schools had a negative

impact on student wellbeing but only **55%** of teachers felt that the strategies their school used for supporting new students were very effective.

What teachers told us:

“The culture shock is hard on students, they have a hard time adjusting, either they love the school, or this is their 14th school and they're just starting to shut down. Why make friends when this is going to just end again?”

“...because if you're mobile, basically you're alone, eventually you'll be alone because you're moving around all the time. You need somebody to be with, like a companion.”

“I don't feel our school gives enough focus. I think it's very difficult for children to come in, they're just overwhelmed.”

“We have had lots of kids, very vulnerable kids, coming with baggage, from problems they've had before, and they fit in very well, and the kids are very open and welcoming, and so, because a lot of the kids are international kids that have moved around a lot, they take people into the group, I think they're pretty good. But I can see problems, and I can see the vulnerable ones.”

“I feel, nowadays, more of us that were Third Culture Kids are entering the workforce and I think that with that in mind, we're able to kind of personalise those transitions and say 'Look, we've been there, we understand it,' I think there's a lot of talk about 'Well, TCK's need this, they need that ...but it's told by people who are observers and haven't lived it, and those of us who have lived it are going, 'No, they need permission to be angry, or they need permission to grieve, they need that permission,' because a little part of you is always missing, and that needs to be acknowledged and okay.”

IMPLICATIONS:

Transitions are vulnerable points in time for staff and students. Pro-active and planned support for transition both arriving and leaving can be very important for wellbeing.

Recommendations

These suggestions are provided by the authors as guidelines to help schools consider their own situation. They will not apply to all schools.

- ✓ **Whole school approaches to relationship-building** can engender whole school wellbeing. Positive, supportive relationships are powerful in enhancing wellbeing but these do not just happen. Schools need to actively work at this.
- ✓ **Leadership is central to wellbeing of staff.** Staff in leadership roles can support teacher wellbeing by providing opportunities for creativity and supporting **autonomy**. Clear communication is crucial. Avoiding micromanagement and frequent change is important.
- ✓ Staff and students in schools need to feel that the **school cares about them and that they belong**. High quality induction programmes can be very effective. All schools should have established programmes for welcoming staff and students as well as programmes to support those who leave.
- ✓ Schools need to **have systems to support staff and students** who are going through a difficult time and are finding it hard to cope. *All individuals can become vulnerable when challenges exceed their resources to cope.*
- ✓ **Auditing wellbeing** in the school community can increase understanding of issues needing attention. Positive approaches such as appreciative inquiry can be useful. Due to the fluid nature of subjective wellbeing, screening programmes are unlikely to be effective.
- ✓ International schools can have an important role in **helping parents to support their children's wellbeing** through regular communication and information programmes.

Some important questions arising from our research

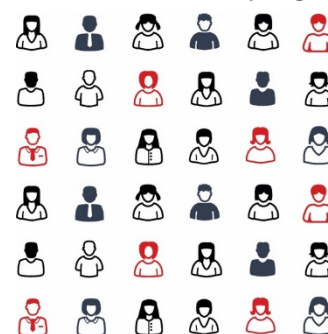
This report is an initial description of the research findings, which are currently being explored in more detail by Cardiff University School of Psychology and International Education Psychology Services.

The research indicates that the international school community can provide models of best practice in promoting wellbeing. It is important that we take this opportunity to recognise and capture these elements in order to support schools to improve. However, it is also important not to be complacent. All schools have the ability to further understand and so enhance the wellbeing of staff and students.

Relationships are key to wellbeing, both in a positive and negative sense. Schools might want to consider what value is being given to relationships throughout their community. How might relationships be further supported and how might schools enhance the sense of belonging that is so important to wellbeing?

Leadership and systemic issues are also key to wellbeing in positive and negative ways. Some schools are starting to challenge the emphasis on the need for academic success. How might others go about this to encourage a more balanced approach? Preliminary detailed analysis has indicated significant differences in the perceptions of teachers and leadership staff. We will investigate further and publish in 2019.

Schools need to ask their students about their wellbeing. However, the challenges are immense and subjective wellbeing is fluid. Information about coping strategies is central as reports of self-harm and suicide are on the increase. How can we do this research to best effect? It seems that there could be a role in helping to support staff and students to develop a sense of acceptance about the things they cannot change (at a point in time) and find ways to manage this stress while also developing the agency to change the things that are alterable. How can international schools be best supported to help with this?



Mobility issues, particularly school changes, appear to be under-recognised. Understanding transition in terms of loss and grief can be helpful. Research in this area could go a long way to supporting students who move around, and their families.

As with most research, there are questions we wish we had asked and ways that it could have been improved. This initial research is a first step to the further understanding of wellbeing in the international school.

About IEPS, Cardiff University School of Psychology & ISC Research

International Educational Psychology Services

International Educational Psychology Services Limited (IEPS) is a group of British-trained Educational Psychologists specialising in providing support for wellbeing in international schools through research, training and consultancy.

www.internationaleps.com

Cardiff University School of Psychology

Cardiff University School of Psychology is a leading research and teaching institution in Wales, United Kingdom. <http://psych.cf.ac.uk/>

ISC Research

ISC Research (ISC) is the leading provider of intelligence, data and trends on the world's English-medium K-12 international schools. It supplies a range of reports, research partnerships and a data portal to support international school investment, development, strategic planning and marketing. www.iscresearch.com

For further information and/or comments regarding this research, please contact: Angie Wigford at angie@internationaleps.com or Andrea Higgins at HigginsA2@cardiff.ac.uk

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