

# Context matters in programme implementation

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper seeks to report on the evaluation of Zippy's Friends, an international emotional wellbeing programme, for primary school children in disadvantaged schools in Ireland. The paper aims to present case studies of the profile and ethos of two specific schools participating in the programme, their links with the local community, the degree of parental involvement and the factors that influence programme implementation in the local context.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Within the framework of the overall evaluation study, which employs a randomised controlled design, two schools self-selected to participate in case studies. Employing interviews and group discussions, the case study method was used to explore the views of teachers, pupils, parents and key informants from the wider community on the delivery of the programme within the context of a whole school approach.

**Findings** – The findings from two contrasting schools are presented, a large urban school with a multi-cultural profile in an area of multiple disadvantage, and a smaller, almost monocultural, rural school on the border region with Northern Ireland. The findings reveal largely positive attitudes on the benefits of the programme and support for a whole school approach. The data indicate contrasting levels of parental involvement in the two schools and highlight the importance of socio-economic and cultural influences in the local communities and the challenges these present for effective implementation.

**Research limitations/implications** – The paper explores the specific contextual factors in two schools and may, therefore, lack generalisability. However, this effort to focus on the specific local context is useful within the framework of the overall randomised control trial evaluation study.

**Practical implications** – The reality of implementing an emotional wellbeing programme in disadvantaged school settings and effectively engaging teachers, parents and the wider community, is explored through the use of case study methods.

**Originality/value** – The paper explores the real-life context of two schools participating in the Zippy's Friends programme and provides an insight into the contextual factors impacting on programme implementation in disadvantaged school settings.

**Keywords** Disadvantaged groups, Schools, Ireland

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

There is growing international evidence that school-based mental health promotion programmes, when implemented effectively, can produce long-term benefits for young people, including emotional and social functioning and improved academic performance (Durlak and Wells, 1997; Lister-Sharp *et al.*, 1999; Greenberg *et al.*, 2001; Harden *et al.*, 2001; Wells *et al.*, 2002, 2003; Browne *et al.*, 2004; Stewart-Brown, 2006; Adi *et al.*, 2007; Payton *et al.*, 2008). There is also increasing recognition that enhancing children's social and emotional competencies facilitates their ability to learn and achieve academically (Payton *et al.*, 2008, Adelman and Taylor, 2000;



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Greenberg *et al.*, 2003; Zins *et al.*, 2004). Most of the evidence supporting the effectiveness of these programmes has been generated through well-controlled investigations, including randomised controlled trials (RCTs). However, several authors argue that there is a need to recognise the challenges presented when moving beyond RCTs of efficacy to implementation and widespread dissemination in real-world conditions. Bumbarger and Perkins (2008) draw attention to the need to consider the context in which the programmes will ultimately be placed and the readiness of that context to successfully adopt and implement the programme. Rowling (2008) states that RCTs assume that in practice a health promotion intervention has the potential to work equally well in one school as another and that it is the absence of the intervention in the control group that is used to explain difference, not the implementation context. It is argued that understanding how an intervention fosters change, with who, and under what circumstances it fosters this change (effectiveness) is as important as knowing whether a desired change took place (efficacy), particularly when broader implementation of an initiative is planned (WHO, 1998). As a result the emphasis in the field has started to move from efficacy to a focus on effectiveness. Greenberg (2006, p. 4) states “effectiveness trials are critical in helping to understand how high-quality programmes are likely to be implemented with real-world constraints and the factors in these settings that affect the quality of programme implementation”.

Schools are dynamic, complex, multi-level systems with numerous factors that can influence implementation (Barry *et al.*, 2005; Durlak, 1998; Elias *et al.*, 2000; Gottfredson *et al.*, 1997; Hoagwood and Johnson, 2003; Mihalic, 2002; Weissberg and Greenberg, 1998). A review of five meta-analyses of school-based programmes by Durlak and DuPre (2008) reports persuasive evidence of the powerful impact of quality of implementation on outcomes. There is increasing knowledge of the factors that influence implementation quality in school settings (Durlak, 1998; Domitrovich and Greenberg, 2000; Dariotis *et al.*, 2008). Research suggests that implementation represents a complex interaction between characteristics of the implementation system, characteristics of the implementer and various aspects of the setting and organisational context in which the programme is implemented (Chen, 1998; Greenberg *et al.*, 2006). Chen (1998) suggests that programmes operate within an “implementation system” that can either provide support or present barriers to the delivery of a programme.

Understanding the organisational and cultural contexts of schools is critical for implementation and sustainability of interventions because children, teachers and other school staff are all embedded in this shared environment (Ringeisen *et al.*, 2003; Bumbarger *et al.*, n.d., in press). Acknowledging and understanding the school context is also supported by current educational quality practice (QCA, 2001). Research has shown that implementation is more likely to be successful in organisations that have strong administration, leadership, and support for the programme (Farrell *et al.*, 2001; Kam *et al.*, 2003; Kegler *et al.*, 1998; Rohrbach *et al.*, 1993), stability in terms of resources and personnel and also communication patterns that are open and clear (Kegler *et al.*, 1998; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 2002; Domitrovich *et al.*, 2008; Rohrbach *et al.*, 2006). Another important organisational practice supporting implementation in several studies is shared decision-making, i.e. collaboration with and involvement of community members, support of parents, local input and local

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ownership (Durlak and DuPre, 2008). At the individual level, teachers' perceptions related to the need for, and potential benefits of the intervention, self-efficacy and skill proficiency could promote or undermine implementation in schools (Domitrovich *et al.*, 2008).

Factors in the whole school context are, therefore, critical for successful implementation. The whole school context includes the school's environment and ethos, organisation, management structures, relationships with parents and the wider community as well as the taught curriculum and pedagogic practice (Weare, 2000). Evidence from systematic reviews supports the effectiveness of universal mental health promotion programmes in schools that take a whole school approach, involving staff and students, the wider school environment and local community (Wells *et al.*, 2003; Lister-Sharp *et al.*, 1999; Stewart-Brown, 2006). Understanding the complex interaction of influencing factors within a whole school context, therefore, plays an important role in determining quality of implementation and hence programme effectiveness. This is of particular interest in relation to programme implementation within the context of a disadvantaged school setting and the multiple challenges faced by staff, pupils, parents and the wider community.

### **Background of the current study**

This paper reports on the evaluation of the implementation of Zippy's Friends, an international emotional wellbeing programme for primary school children in DEIS schools (designated disadvantaged schools by the Department of Education and Science) in Ireland. This universal programme is designed to promote the positive mental health of children aged six to eight years by increasing their repertoire of coping skills and by stimulating varied and flexible ways of coping with problems of day-to-day life (Bale and Mishara, 2004). Delivered by trained classroom teachers over the course of 24 weeks, this structured programme teaches children how to identify and talk about their feelings and cope with difficulties such as bullying, conflict, loss and change. Evaluations of the programme to date indicate improvements in children's social skills and coping abilities (Mishara and Ystgaard, 2006) and improved behavioural and emotional adaptation to the transition from kindergarten to first grade (Monkeviciene *et al.*, 2006).

In 2008, the programme was implemented with children in first and second class in Irish primary schools as part of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum. SPHE, which is a compulsory part of the curriculum in all primary schools in Ireland, focuses on the development of a broad range of skills relevant to children's health and wellbeing within a supportive whole school environment (NCCA, 1999). The overall evaluation framework for the Zippy's Friends implementation in Irish schools employs a randomised controlled design, with assessments before, during, immediately after and 12 months post-implementation (Clarke and Barry, 2010). A total of 730 pupils and 42 teachers from 42 designated disadvantaged schools were randomly assigned to control and intervention groups. The programme, is evaluated by the teachers, children, and parents, using a range of quantitative, and qualitative measures, in order to assess the impact, process, and outcomes of the programme. A 12-month follow-up report on the impact of the programme on the children's emotional literacy, behaviour and coping skills, and academic achievement will be published later in 2010.

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Within the overall evaluation framework, case studies of two intervention schools, a rural and urban school, were carried out in May 2008, when the implementation of Zippy's Friends had reached a half-way stage. The case studies were employed to explore the factors unique to each school, which may affect programme implementation in the local context. The case study approach is, therefore, used in this study to complement the data from the overall RCT design and to explore in greater detail the context-specific issues in two schools participating in the larger evaluation. Although the Zippy's Friends programme is a universal classroom-based programme, it was deemed necessary to understand the broader context within which the programme was being implemented and to determine what supports and structures are necessary to create sustainable whole school change for improved mental health and wellbeing outcomes for teachers and students. The case studies, therefore, aimed to provide a unique insight into the whole school contextual factors, which influence programme implementation.

## **Method**

### *Research design*

A case study method was employed to investigate the implementation of the Zippy's Friends programme within the specific context of two schools, one rural and one urban school, that self-selected to participate in the case study as part of the larger evaluation. The case study method was selected because it offers a more flexible, multi-method strategy with which to explore the uniqueness and situationality of the specific school settings, with the emphasis on understanding rather than explanation (Mabry, 1998).

### *Measures*

The case studies employed a variety of qualitative techniques including interviews and group discussions to explore the views of teachers, parents of the children involved in the programme, and key informants from the wider community. In addition, a number of measures from the wider evaluation study were also included to provide a perspective on the ethos of the schools, the views of the pupils, and level of programme implementation at the time the case studies were conducted. This layered effect was designed to give an overall impression of the implementation of the programme within a whole school context. The following methods were used to inform the case studies.

*Interviews and group discussions.* A total of 29 interviews were carried out, 14 in School A and 15 in School B, with intervention teachers, members of staff, parents and members of the wider community. The interviews explored views about the programme, the environment/culture of the school within which the programme was being implemented, parental involvement, links the school has with the wider community and specific changes and challenges the schools face. Overall, there were interviews with 16 staff members, eight parents and 13 community members. Information on the demographic profile of the schools and the local communities were also obtained. All interviews were conducted using open-ended questions in a semi-structured format. Further details may be found in O'Sullivan (2008).

*School Ethos Questionnaire.* The teachers were invited to complete an Ethos Questionnaire designed to provide information about:

- school policies;
- promotion of positive mental health throughout the school;

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- implementation of the SPHE curriculum;
  - school ethos;
  - support from community services;
  - parental involvement; and
  - barriers that exist in promoting positive mental health throughout the school.

The Ethos Questionnaire was adapted for the present study from earlier work (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2002; and Byrne *et al.*, 2004) and also includes questions from the Psycho-Social Environment (PSE) Profile, which assesses qualities of the school environment that support social and emotional well-being (WHO, 2003).

*Children's participatory workshops.* A participatory method of evaluation was employed in this study in order to incorporate the views of the children participating in the intervention schools. Adapted from earlier work developed by Douglas *et al.* (2000) and Byrne *et al.* (2004), participatory workshops were conducted to elicit the perspectives of the children involved. In total 24 children in Schools A (37.5 per cent female, mean age six years, ten months) and 20 children in School B (35 per cent female, mean age six years, 11 months) took part in the interim participatory workshops, which took place at the same time as the case study interviews. The children's views about the programme are presented in this paper.

*Programme implementation.* As part of the process evaluation, teachers were asked to complete a weekly questionnaire indicating which parts of the Zippy's Friends session they had implemented in full, partially or had not implemented. In addition, the children's attendance at each session was monitored throughout the implementation of the programme. Levels of programme fidelity and pupil attendance at the time of the case study data collection are reported as a means of understanding the feasibility of implementing the intervention for the teachers in the two schools.

*Programme review questionnaire.* The teachers also completed an interim review questionnaire, which assesses the teachers' impression of the programme, their views on effects the programme had on the children, themselves and the classroom environment, and factors that helped or hindered the implementation of the programme in their school.

### *Sample*

The selection of the two schools was based on an open request to participate in the study forwarded by the programme coordinators to a number of the participating intervention schools. Two schools, one urban and one rural, volunteered to participate. The case study investigation took place mid-way during the implementation of the programme, i.e. when both schools had completed teaching the first 12 sessions of the programme.

*School A.* School A is a large urban-based Catholic state school in the west of Ireland. It had 482 pupils at the time of data collection, 118 (24.5 per cent) of who were from the travelling community[1] and 200 (41.5 per cent) pupils of international origin. There were 41 teaching staff, of which 22 were classroom teachers and the remainder support teachers, including a home school liaison officer. There were six special needs assistants. The large majority of families are in the lower socio-economic bracket and

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there is a small cohort of middle class families. The 80 children in first class, aged seven years, nine months to eight years received the Zippy's Friends programme. Split into four classes, all first class children were taught the programme by their class teacher.

*School B.* School B is based in a rural area in a small market town in the Republic of Ireland close to the border with Northern Ireland. It is a state school under Protestant management. At the time of data collection there were 170 pupils attending the school. The teaching staff consisted of nine members of staff, of which six were classroom teachers, including the principal and three support teachers. There were five special needs assistants. The Zippy's Friends programme was taught in a multi-grade setting, with 24 children in first class and six children in second class aged six years, nine months to nine years.

#### *Study participants*

*School pupils.* In total, 42 children participated in the participatory workshops. All of the children in first class in School B took part and as there were four first year classes in School A, one class was randomly chosen to participate, in order to maintain relatively equal numbers across both schools

*School staff.* A total of 16 school staff were interviewed. The teachers in School A completed the Programme Review questionnaire and took part in a group discussion. Three of the teachers completed the Ethos Questionnaire. Two special needs assistants and two of the four resource teachers who taught children from the four classes were interviewed individually. The principal and the home school liaison officer were interviewed individually. In School B, the class teacher, the special needs assistant who was assigned to a pupil in first class, two resource teachers and a learning support teacher who worked with the children in first class and the principal of the school were interviewed individually.

*Parents.* All parents of the pupils participating in the Zippy's Friends programme in both schools were invited to take part in group discussions about the implementation of the programme. In School A five parents actually attended and participated in a group discussion and two parents attended from School B. In School B an interview with the chairperson of the Parents' Association Committee was also conducted. The chairperson of the Board on Management and the DEIS coordinators in both schools were interviewed, by telephone in School A and face-to-face in School B.

*Community.* Telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of two statutory agencies and a voluntary agency in School A and with three community agencies that share close links with School B. The health promotion specialists who work directly with both schools were also interviewed and a telephone interview was conducted with the vice-chairman of the Board of Management (who is the local Church of Ireland clergyman) in School B.

#### *Data analysis*

The recordings from the children's workshops, the interviews and the group discussions were transcribed and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The responses were grouped into mutually exclusive themes and a coding frame was devised. This coding frame was used to code all the data and to assess themes that were both common and contrasting across the groups.

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Responses to the ethos and interim review questionnaires were analysed, combining the responses from the four teachers in School A, noting any discrepancies that arose.

## **Results**

### *Case study interviews*

This section draws together the main themes emerging from interviews conducted with the school staff, parents and community members.

*School profile.* School A serves an urban community, which experiences multiple disadvantage characterised by congested social housing and poor infrastructure. A large number of Traveller families and lone-parents families have been allocated local authority housing in the area. Many of the traveller families have low levels of formal education and experience high levels of unemployment and social discrimination, while many of the lone-parent families, mostly young mothers, experience difficulty coping financially, emotionally and socially. The area has undergone major changes in recent years and now has a more multicultural profile. Immigrant families, mostly from Africa and Eastern Europe, moved to the area during the economic boom in Ireland, however, many are unemployed, live in rented accommodation, have low levels of competency in the English language and have very little support. More than 40 per cent of the pupils in School A are now from the international community, with a significant increase three years prior to the present study. Few of the teachers live in the local community. The school has been designated as having the most serious disadvantage status. It has consequently received many extra supports, including additional language support teachers, resource teachers and also more programmes, all of which contribute to the perceived “busyness” of the school, a feature referred to by many interviewees.

Changes in the local community, in the profile of school, together with the presence of serious disadvantage, were the principal themes to emerge from the interviews in School A.

School B serves a different kind of community. The majority of pupils travel to school by bus from a rural catchment area covering an eight miles radius. While there is fertile farmland in the surrounding area and some affluence in the school population, there is also economic, social and educational disadvantage. For example, there are families receiving social welfare support for farmers on small income, high levels of male unemployment, early school leaving and lone-parent families. The negative impact of the conflict in Northern Ireland on the rural communities in the border region provides a complex socio-political backdrop to life in this community. A strong thread of continuity weaves its way through a history of settlement, religion and culture in this area continuing through the more recent history of the Northern Ireland conflict. The segregation of the schools in the town along a religious divide between Protestant and Catholic contributed to the segregation of the communities. Because of this segregation there has always been a very solid support of School B by Protestant families and the Protestant Churches. School B was described by those interviewed as being “very close-knit” and “Families are involved with the school over the years and the teachers know the school, know the families and know the community. They know well the difficulties that some people are facing”. Many of the teachers live locally. There is a notable mutual appreciation and support between parents and teachers.

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Therefore, despite the legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict in this region, the theme of continuity and community emerge as being important from the case study interviews in School B.

*Links with the wider community.* The links that School A has with the wider community were described as being mostly related to services provided by statutory and voluntary organizations. The home school liaison officer organises a local committee representing all the services, which meets once a term, to facilitate these links. Local organisations offer sports coaching and various supports for families and communities including personal and community development, social and financial support, advice, training in parenting and health matters, facilitating ways to embrace multi-culturalism, and advocacy. The school is not generally perceived as being a focus of community activities, which are serviced by the local community centres.

The situation with regard to School B is very different. The links with statutory and voluntary organisations were perceived as being very close and, in contrast to School A, very often involve the school pupils and staff as well as parents. Strong local community links were also reported with school children interacting with children from other schools through sports and cultural clubs and events in the town. School B was described as having a strong sense of its own school community and of its place within the local town and wider region. This situation has developed largely because of historical, political and sociocultural factors. Some of these links exist since the foundation of the school and others since the advent of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland when peace and reconciliation efforts were established to facilitate cross-community and cross-border activities. As a consequence, School B has a lot of contact with other schools and community events in the region.

*Parental involvement.* One of the most striking differences between the schools relates to parental involvement. A recurring phrase in several of the School A interviews was “parents don’t want to be involved”. There is no official Parents’ Association, nobody had turned up to the previous two meetings. Only about a third of parents come to parent-teacher meetings, and as stated by one teacher, “Those that do come don’t even know my name. They don’t care”. Many reasons were suggested to explain this: low self-esteem, negative attitude towards school in general, illiteracy, poor competency in the English language, family commitments, work commitments and decreasing volunteerism. However, parents interviewed in this study thought there was a lack of communication from the teachers and stated that they needed to know more about “what’s happening with our child” and needed more support regarding issues of respect, discipline and social behaviour, including making friends. Some parents thought the school only encouraged them to be involved when the school needed help and they urged a more open policy with regard to meeting with parents and keeping them informed of their children’s progress and how parents can help at home.

In contrast, School B parents “are heavily involved in the school”. They are directly involved, “coming in and out all the time” and they help out regularly, for example, with computers, the library and school trips. There is a very active parents’ Association which organises school concerts, sports days and fund-raising events, which are very well supported by the main body of parents, by all the staff and by the wider community, including businesses in the town.

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Staff in both schools commented that efforts are constantly being made to encourage involvement of more parents, at every level. Some successful home school liaison programmes have been run where parents came into the schools to help their children, through literacy and numeracy games. Nevertheless, a recurring statement from several interviewees with regard to parental involvement in general was “It’s the same parents always”. However, parents did have a number of practical suggestions regarding how they could be involved more meaningfully in their children’s education.

*Attitudes to mental health promotion and to Zippy’s Friends.* There was unanimous agreement of the benefits of mental health promotion in schools by all interviewed in both schools. In fact, most thought there was a strong necessity to have coping skills taught in school. Recent suicides in the locality of School B had led to heightened awareness of this. Although parents had limited knowledge of the Zippy’s Friends programme, there was general agreement that the programme was attractive and had positive results. Of particular note is the fact that a number of parents in School A perceived changes in their children since the Zippy’s Friends programme. As an example, one parent described overhearing her daughter telling her sisters “It’s ok to feel angry . . . I learned this. It’s ok, but don’t be mean to others”. In order to be really successful, it was deemed imperative to implement the Zippy’s Friends programme throughout all classes in the schools, in all school activities and to involve parents so that lessons learned in school could be reinforced at home.

#### *Ethos Questionnaire*

Three of the four teachers in School A and the class teacher in School B completed the Ethos Questionnaire. Teachers from both schools agreed that the schools provide adequately for the welfare needs of the children and staff and view the promotion of children’s health and welfare as a priority of the school. Both schools were viewed as providing a safe caring environment that actively discourages violence and ensures the valuing of all cultures. With regard to teaching SPHE, all of the teachers feel adequately equipped to educate the children about positive mental health and feel that adequate time is allocated to the teaching of SPHE in their school.

There were discrepancies, however, among the teachers in School A regarding their knowledge of schools policies, with agreement about the existence of only two of the 11 policies mentioned. These related to bullying and reporting of suspected child abuse. The most apparent differences between the two schools were in connection with the environment and ethos of the school, support from local services and parental involvement. Table I shows the contrasting responses from the teachers in Schools A and B in relation to these three areas. In addition, there was a notable difference in the teachers’ responses to “Support is available for children who have been involved in stressful incidents” and “The value of counseling and talking things through is recognised as a high priority in the school”. School A answered “Never/sometimes”, School B answered “Always”. All of the teachers said that there is a need to teach mental health promotion in primary school. Time constraint was the most frequently reported barrier with one teacher commenting; “Time! What happened to the role of the parents?”.

	School A	School B
<i>Environment and ethos</i>		
Opportunities are provided for staff, children and parents to develop positive relationships	Sometimes/never	Always/often
Children are encouraged to participate in the schools decision-making		
Children experience success in a variety of ways		
The school caters for children who experience periods of mental health problems		
<i>Support from local services</i>		
School is committed to regular exchange of information between families, local community and the school regarding mental health services in the area	Sometimes/never	Always/often
School works closely with community mental health services		
Staff are provided with information about local mental health services		
<i>Parental involvement</i>		
A broad range of parents are actively involved in variety of ways in school life	Sometimes/never	Always/often
Parents are given the opportunity to participate and learn about the content of the school's SPHE curriculum		
Parents regularly ask questions and discuss worries they have about their child with the class teacher/principal		

**Table I.**  
Responses to selected items from the Ethos Questionnaire

In the case study interviews, many of the staff referred to School A as being a safe, positive, stable place for the children, where in line with the school ethos each individual child is cherished. A staff member commented:

... often school is an oasis of calm for children ...". A member of a statutory agency in the community described School A as being "... a real tapestry ... a cosmopolitan mix ... the way diversity is reflected, it's just a beautiful school to be in". The school climate was described very positively in general, by staff and parents, using terms such as "lovely", "great", "happy", "absolutely excellent".

In School B, the ethos was described as being "caring and sharing in a nurturing environment with a Christian spirit". The school climate was described very positively, as "happy", "warm and welcoming", "open", "progressive". In fact, progressiveness was one of the main themes to emerge from interviews with staff and others:

... open to new thinking and new methods, new programmes ... a willingness to be part of advances or innovations ... right from the classroom to the Board. At the time of the research there was a major fund-raising drive taking place as it was proposed to purchase four interactive whiteboards for the school.

#### *Children's participatory workshops*

As part of the participatory workshops, the children, sitting together in a circle, were asked three questions about the programme: "What is Zippy's Friends all about?" "What kind of things has Zippy's Friends taught you?" and "What do you like about

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Zippy's Friends?". When discussing what the programme is about, the children in School A talked about the stories that were read to them each week. They named characters in the stories and explained what happened in the stories "They play", "Sometimes they have sad feelings, and they share their feelings and that makes them feel better". In contrast to this, the children in School B responded that the programme was about friendship and how to maintain friends. Some comments included "It's about keeping friends", "You learn to play with them", "Don't hurt them", "Don't bully them". When asked about what kind of things Zippy's Friends had taught them, the children in both schools talked about the Zippy's Friends rules that were on display in the classroom ("Talk one at a time, Put up your hand, Don't say nasty things"). The strategies that were taught as part of each module (i.e. recognition and expression of feelings, communication skills and strategies for maintaining friends) were not discussed. In response to the question "What do you like about Zippy's Friends?" the children in both schools said that they liked the stories and pictures that were a part of each lesson. In addition, the children also said they like the activities, in particular "the games" and "the mystery box".

#### *Programme fidelity*

After each session the teachers were asked to complete an evaluation of the lesson and to indicate what parts of each session they implemented in full, in part or did not implement. The programme fidelity results for both schools from the first half of the programme were reviewed. With the exclusion of one class in School A where the evaluations were incomplete, the overall level of programme fidelity in School A and School B is high. On average the teachers in School A fully implemented 92.9 per cent of the first half of the programme. This is similar to the results from School B where 93.5 per cent of the programme was fully implemented.

*Programme attendance.* Two teachers from School A and the teacher in School B returned the Zippy's roll sheet for the first half of the programme. The attendance was notably higher among the children in School B. One child in School B was present for ten sessions while the remainder of the children attended 11, or all 12 sessions. In contrast 19 out of 40 children (47.5 per cent) in School A were present for ten or less sessions. Five of these children were not present for five or more sessions.

*Teachers' interim review questionnaire.* There is a notable difference in the responses from both schools to questions about their impression of the programme and its effectiveness. The four teachers in School A gave the programme an average rating of 5.7 (1 being "poor" and 10 being "excellent"), while the teacher in School B gave the programme a rating of 8.0. The teachers in School A commented that the children enjoyed some of the activities however, they were of the view that many of the other activities were either too difficult or "long-winded" and could be condensed. In terms of the effect of the programme on the children, the teacher in School B reported improvements in the children's emotional vocabulary, expression of feelings and verbal communication, problem solving skills and their relationships with each other. There was little consistency, however, in the responses from the teachers in School A. One teacher saw no improvement in the children's skills, while the three other teachers were unsure about any improvement in the children's relationship with each other and problem solving skills.

Table II presents the teachers' ratings regarding the perceived effect of the programme on the teacher, the class environment and how much the teacher and children enjoyed the programme (1 being "not at all" and 5 being "very much so"). Within School A there was varying opinion about the effectiveness of the programme. One teacher noted no change in the atmosphere in the class, in their relationship with the children and in awareness of children's feelings. The other three teachers noted some changes. Three of the four teachers noted no improvement in their teaching as a result of the programme.

Teachers' views differed regarding the effect of the programme outside the classroom. Two teachers, one from School A and the teacher from School B, noted positive effects out in the school yard. The teacher in School A wrote: "If a child has no one to play with they know how to approach the situation better now". However, another teacher in the same school wrote "I would say no. The yard was always a battle zone". None of the teachers heard of any of the programme effects translating in the home environment. One teacher in School A wrote; "In a school such as this with many social problems it is doubtful in many homes if they are even asked how their day was". Three teachers (two from School A and the teacher from School B) said that they use "Zippy's Strategies" in other areas of their teaching. All five teachers observed no effect of the programme on the children's academic achievement, however, in response to this question the teacher in School B stated, "It improved their self-awareness and self-esteem but had no effect on their literacy and numeracy".

In terms of factors that helped the programme to run smoothly, teachers commented on the training, the variety of resources and activities in the programme, putting the children into a circle and having the "Zippy's rules". However, the limited time with all children present during the day was reported as hindering the implementation of the programme in their schools.

## Discussion

The case studies provide a unique insight into the ecological factors impacting on programme implementation within the context of two specific schools. Both schools are designated disadvantaged but the nature and impact of this on the two schools is quite different. In the larger sized urban School A, the perceived lack of social cohesion in the local community, with a high percentage of lone parent and ethnic minority families, many of who are unemployed and have low levels of education, contributes to the lower levels of parent and community involvement in the school.

As a result of the programme ...	School A (mean score)	School B
I am more aware of the children's feelings	2.5	4
My relationship with the children has improved	2.3	4
I am more aware of listening to the children	2.3	4
Programme made a difference to the classroom atmosphere	2	4
Programme gave me a structure to help the children cope with difficult situations	2.8	5
I enjoyed teaching Zippy's Friends	3	4
The children enjoyed Zippy's Friends	3.3	4
My teaching has improved as a result of the programme	1.3	3

**Table II.**  
Teachers' ratings of the programme's effects

**Note:** 1 = not at all, 5 = very much so

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In contrast, School B is a small, almost monocultural rural school, which has a central position within its local community and is perceived as a focal point for parents, teachers, the clergy and members of the wider community. Parents are actively involved in the school activities and the school is committed to its involvement with the local community.

The challenges of programme implementation within these two settings are quite different and will, therefore, require different types and levels of support. Having a strong sense of community, as in School B, is recognised as an important factor in predicting readiness for implementing change (Chilenski *et al.*, 2007). Parents with lower levels of education are less likely to be involved in their children's educational activities (Kohl *et al.*, 2000) and parent involvement has long been recognised as a key component of school success for low-income children. Specifically, parent involvement can be a key protective factor that fosters cognitive and emotional resilience in the face of multiple stressors (Garmezy, 1991; Waanders *et al.*, 2007). The perceived lack of a cohesive community context and low levels of parent involvement contributes to a more challenging environment for programme implementation in School A. Despite the efforts of the home school liaison officer in School A to engage with the parents and the local community, parents felt that there was a lack of support and communication from the teachers and the school as a whole. Interestingly, the teachers in School A regarded the problem to be with the parents and their lack of engagement with their children and the school as a whole. Waanders *et al.* (2007) argue that perceived community context variables are predictive of the teacher-parent relationship and that teachers may be unaware of the impact of economic and social factors on parent involvement. Efforts to increase teachers' awareness of how contextual factors can act as barriers to parental involvement could be important in fostering more positive attitudes to parent/community-teacher relationships. As suggested by the parents in this study, the adoption of alternative ways of engaging parents, other than through more traditional parent-teacher school meeting needs to be considered.

A number of differences were also found between the two schools in terms of the perceived school ethos and environment, which also have implications for effective programme implementation. The results from the Ethos Questionnaire indicate that the teachers had different views of the environment and ethos of the two schools, particularly with regard to support from local services and parental involvement. For example, there was a greater awareness of, and emphasis on, supporting children during stressful periods and developing positive open relationships between staff, children and parents in School B. The presence of such an ethos can be expected to impact positively on school engagement in the successful implementation of the Zippy's Friends programme. This is confirmed by the programme implementation findings.

Despite the fact that both schools implemented the first half of the programme with high fidelity, with over 93 per cent of the programme being fully implemented, there is a much more positive view of the programme in School B. The teacher in School B reported positive changes in the children's emotional and behavioural wellbeing and a positive programme influence on the classroom atmosphere and her own capacity to help the children, however, the same results were not replicated in School A, where teachers' attitudes were much less positive. The results from the Child Participatory

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Workshop would also seem to suggest that the children's understanding of the programme in School B was slightly more advanced than the children in School A. When asked about Zippy's Friends the children in school B were able to identify one of the key elements of the programme – friendship and how to maintain friends. In contrast, the children in School A identified the characters and events that took place in the stories. Further evidence of the actual impact of the programme on the children's emotional skills and behaviour will be confirmed by the end of programme outcome measures, which will be reported later this year.

At the classroom level, the rate of absenteeism from the programme was significantly higher in School A, where 19 children (47 per cent) of the children were absent for two or more lessons, in contrast to one child (4.5 per cent) in School B that was absent for two lessons. The teachers indicated that one of the factors that hindered the implementation of the programme was finding a time during the day when all of the children were present, as a number of additional learning supports were provided to individual children. It is possible that the lack of time to implement the programme affected the teachers' enthusiasm towards the programme and hence the quality of programme implementation (Mihalic, 2002; Rohrbach *et al.*, 1993). The overall busyness of the classroom and school in general has implications for teaching a programme such as Zippy's Friends in terms of getting commitment from all teachers and finding the space, time and resources to support its implementation within an already over-stretched timetable. In this context, it is essential that a mental health promoting ethos would be adopted throughout the school so that the strategies taught in a programme such as Zippy's Friends would be reinforced throughout the curriculum and the school day and not just during Zippy's class.

It is important to note however, that the staff of both schools viewed mental health promotion as an essential part of school business. The positive attitudes of the teachers in both schools towards the promotion of positive mental health is an important factor to build on in the context of developing a whole school approach. Teachers' judgments of the need for, and, acceptability of, an intervention significantly influences their interest, and willingness to implement a programme, and the degree to which they do so with fidelity (Durlak and DuPre, 2008, Reimers *et al.*, 1987).

The results from the case studies indicate that despite the fact that both schools are disadvantaged, they are at very different stages of "readiness" in terms of programme implementation within a whole school context. Research indicates that strategies for school organisational change need to "fit" the "growth" stage of a particular school (Reynolds and Teddie, 2001; Hopkins *et al.*, 1997). It is important therefore, to understand the local context within which programme implementation occurs and to understand the needs of key stakeholders from a whole school perspective. To support further the effective implementation of the Zippy's Friends programme in these schools it will be necessary to understand how the resources and capacities of each school and its local community can be mobilised to support implementation of the intervention to a high standard. Site readiness assists in the creation of what Bumbarger *et al.* (n.d.) refer to as "fertile ground" at the pre-implementation stage and increase the likelihood of programme adoption, quality implementation, positive outcomes and sustainability.

This study highlights the uniqueness of both schools with their differing community histories, cultures, structures, and local politics. The development of local

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capacity is very different for both schools, particularly with regard to reaching out to and receiving support from parents and local agencies. Research suggests that programmes which actively involve parents, local community and key local agencies are more likely to have an impact on student behaviour, resiliency and mental health, as well as learning (Durlak, 1995; Alvord and Grados, 2005; Brooks, 2006). Thus, in order to maximise the effectiveness of mental health promotion in schools, parents and the local community need to be viewed as key contributors to the implementation and change process and more importantly, need to be supported to perform this role.

The greatest challenge identified by teachers in implementation of the MindMatters whole school programme in Australia was addressing school ethos and environment and extending partnerships with parents, community groups and health agencies (Wyn *et al.*, 2000). Collaboration among school staff, pupils, parents and community stakeholders is essential for developing capacity to support sustainable change. Effective communication is a key starting point for developing successful collaborative relationships (Weist *et al.*, 2006). To help with this process, some interventions have recruited a “programme champion” and/or a core team whose role is to manage the project and act as the link with the wider community and external networks of support (Bond *et al.*, 2001; Wyn *et al.*, 2000). Building such a relationship, for example, with the home school liaison officer who has already established links with parents and the wider community, could be a valuable resource in developing sufficient capacity for effective implementation of the Zippy’s Friends programme. Given the importance of community support, it may be useful for programme implementers to devote more energy to establishing community coalitions and other supportive structures that serve to increase awareness and provide support as well as facilitate implementation efforts.

In relation to the teachers, it was evident that the teachers in School A were less positive about the effectiveness of the programme than the teacher in School B. Pre-implementation, both schools received the same number of hours training pre-implementation, however, strong links between the local health promotion officer and the school were firmly established in School B and not in School A. It is possible that these pre-established links had a positive effect on the teacher’s internal motivation and openness to taking on the intervention. The less positive attitudes of the teachers in School A would suggest the need for ongoing technical assistance and support in targeting perceived barriers to implementation. Fixsen *et al.* (2005) state that the conventional approach of “train them and send them on their way” is ineffective in promoting high quality implementation. Bumbarger and Perkins (2008) also argue for follow-up training and support for teachers in enhancing the readiness of the school for interventions. The need for ongoing support in addressing the influence of contextual factors in the local community, school environment and parental involvement would appear to be quite important in terms of implementing Zippy’s Friends, particularly within disadvantaged school settings.

#### *Unique contribution and limitations of the present study*

The advantages of using a case study approach to assess implementation, within the framework of a more traditional randomised control design, are evident in this study. The findings reveal the complex nature of implementing an emotional wellbeing programme in two disadvantaged primary school settings. Relying solely on experimental research could not possibly capture the contexts within which the

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programme is being implemented or the complexity of inter-relationships at play during programme implementation. The case study approach facilitates a greater understanding of how local contextual factors can influence programme implementation and hence programme outcomes in “real world” settings. The case study adds depth to our understanding of the implementation process through presentation of the multiple perspectives of key stakeholders and through opportunities for greater experiential understanding (Mabry, 1998). However, the limitations of the study also need to be borne in mind. How the schools were selected, the relatively small number of interviews conducted, especially with regard to parents, and the subjective nature of the views expressed, all limit the conclusions that can be drawn and may, therefore, lack generalisability beyond the two schools in question. However, Mabry (1998) suggest that understanding one case promotes understanding of similar cases and of general issues encountered in programmes. This leads to cumulative improvements in knowledge, which can contribute to overall improved understanding for strengthening local programmes.

### **Conclusion**

The case studies provide a useful insight into the reality of programme implementation in two disadvantaged schools and exemplify how the local contexts for programme implementation can differ so much within a relatively small regional area. The findings reveal that many of the factors, which affect programme implementation are whole school practices whose particular combinations create a unique school culture within which programme implementation occurs. This indicates the need to see the school as a starting point and to understand the complex interaction of factors operating at the classroom, school and wider community level that impact on programme implementation. The collection of data on programme implementation plays an essential role in interpreting the programme outcomes and in advancing knowledge on practice-based evidence (Barry and Jenkins, 2007). Without data on implementation, research studies cannot document precisely how the programme is conducted or how outcome data should be interpreted (Durlak and DuPre, 2008). More detailed research on the implementation process will provide a deeper understanding of the contextual factors impacting on programme implementation and will thereby facilitate better implementation and more effective capacity building for sustainable change at a whole school level.

### **Note**

1. Travellers are an indigenous nomadic Irish group with their own language, customs, and traditions.

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