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# What is well-being?

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## Policy Research Paper

**Dr Magdalena Balica**  
**Senior Policy Research Manager**  
**International Baccalaureate Organization**



Selma is the headteacher of a primary school. She started as headteacher during a difficult time for the school. Several areas had been identified that “required improvement” in inspections, and the school was evaluated to be in the lowest percentile (10%) for year 6 reading and mathematics progress. Teacher and student morale were also challenged by low motivation to improve. The subsequent changes made by the leadership team were the implementation of a new language and phonics scheme and a school well-being policy. Selma decided to start a well-being team and asked for volunteers from the teaching staff, students and parents to help.

A partnership with a research organization was set up to support the implementation and to monitor the progress on a new reading and mathematics programme in their school. The well-being team gathered as much data as possible on the question

of student well-being and their motivation to learn. Based on surveys and interviews within the school community, a well-being policy was defined to ensure that students lead full, balanced and healthy lives while maintaining the goal of improving academic outcomes in reading and mathematics. The well-being team recommended that the well-being policy be regularly reviewed to adjust to any changes that might occur within their school.

The results have been outstanding. Three years later, the school’s most recent inspection grade had improved to “good” with three “excellent” elements—and the school is now in the top 20th percentile for progress in reading and mathematics. Students and staff report they are much happier, and the school has a stronger sense of community.

This short story describes a common challenge for many headteachers striving to improve their students’ learning outcomes. When you dig beneath the surface of Selma’s actions, she understands that students’ well-being and their motivation to learn are vital in supporting a reading or mathematics programme. Selma has already internalized a deeper understanding of the socio-emotional aspects of learning.

Usually, well-being approaches are not easily recognized by teachers and parents as directly leading to improved student learning outcomes. Headteachers like Selma, however, show a deep understanding of the school context, recognizing well-being as an important influencer of student achievement. Many school leaders and teachers explicitly support a well-being policy and practices in their schools, carefully planning and monitoring well-being as a part of their school planning and implementation process. Others may be implementing well-being practices without yet having an explicit stand-alone well-being policy.

Before reflecting or acting on any well-being policy, it is helpful to better understand the key ingredients of an effective well-being policy, using an evidence-based understanding of well-being to underpin school practice. Selma’s story is a concrete example of considering well-being



as a balanced approach to elevating student learning. Unfortunately, research has shown that many schools do not yet use evidence-based programmes to ensure students' well-being and develop their socio-emotional skills, and even less frequently are policies monitored or evaluated (Durlak et al. 2011).

The International Baccalaureate (IB) suggests that a well-being policy is one of the most effective means for improving students' attainment outcomes. The current paper is meant to support IB teachers and school leaders in better understanding and integrating well-being into the architecture of their school policy and practice as part of successful implementation of IB programmes.

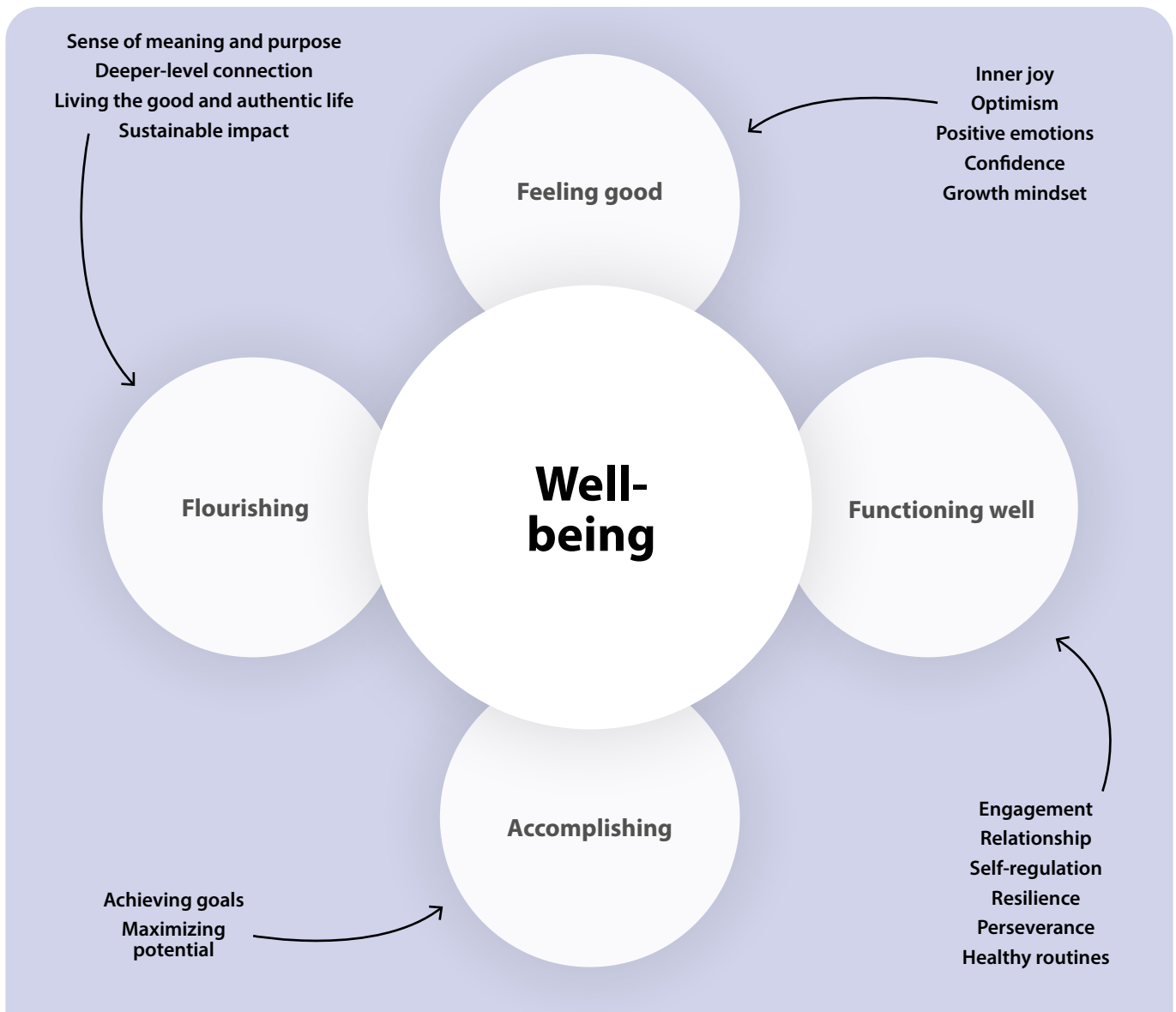
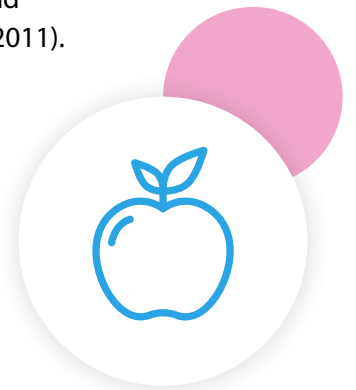


Figure 1. Well-being components (adapted from Seligman 2011)

## What does “well-being” actually mean?

Simply put, well-being is the state of feeling good and functioning well in your life. One of the most influential conceptual models to explain well-being is known using the acronym PERMA. PERMA was put forth by Martin Seligman, a pioneer in the field of positive psychology, and consists of five pillars that collectively define well-being (Seligman 2011).

- **Positive emotions**—feeling good
- **Engagement**—being completely absorbed in activities
- **Relationships**—being authentically connected to others
- **Meaning**—purposeful existence
- **Achievement**—a sense of accomplishment and success



The PERMA model may be used as an initial diagnostic framework for inquiring into well-being in your school. A set of initial questions are constructed around these five elements, which are often used when schools are embarking on a new well-being journey. The questions are equally relevant for school leaders, teachers or students. Think for a moment about your school and the general atmosphere. What are the aspects that make you happy? What are the elements that put pressure on you? How might your perceptions compare to those of other colleagues? How might students, parents and other stakeholders respond to the same questions?

Although this might just be a subjective and surface appraisal of your school’s well-being, it can serve as a starting point for increasing awareness and identifying areas where a well-being intervention may be worthwhile in your school.

As a process, well-being comprises four important elements that are intrinsically connected and influence each other: feeling good; functioning well; accomplishing; and flourishing (figure 1). Let’s take a concrete example.

A new student shows up in your school this year. His family has just moved to town from abroad. He is still missing his old friends, and the new school seems very different from his old one. In the transition period, his flourishing and positive emotions may be challenged by the fact that he is not yet well connected in relationships with his new teachers and peers. However, a set of individual characteristics may help him to start building new relationships and improve his overall well-being.

According to the psychological approach, well-being is a subjective reality that is influenced by a specific set of **individual characteristics**. Research has shown that individual characteristics play an important role in the way that students self-report their well-being. Among the most important individual characteristics that will influence student well-being are: social and demographic characteristics (family background, gender, age, socio-economic status); personality traits; socio-emotional skills; academic abilities; and health. Research has shown that a great number of individual characteristics can be developed and improved through education and appropriate stimulation. In the past few years, new empirical research and data suggest that personality traits and socio-emotional skills development programmes embedded in education have a catalytic effect on increasing academic achievement, health, behaviour and prospects in life, including overall well-being of students (Durlak et al. 2011).

## Dispelling some common well-being myths

### **Myth 1: Student well-being is all about feeling good and being happy at school**

Some parents and teachers may enthusiastically embrace any programme or intervention that helps students to feel happy, based on a cultural belief that students need to enjoy a carefree childhood while they learn new things. However, others may be more cautious of initiatives that solely pursue the goal of “feeling good”. For them, education may be understood as a constant effort to acquire knowledge and skills, and feeling good is preferably a secondary benefit.

So far, research doesn't fully support either stance mentioned above, but rather a balance between the two. The comprehensive definition of well-being comprises much more than feelings of inner joy. Positive emotions are desirable and essential in the equation but, to achieve well-being, students need to function well, be healthy and have a sense of engagement and accomplishment through practice, sustained effort and perseverance. Well-being is a more complex and stable state, whereas happiness is a temporary response to stimuli.

### **Myth 2: Student well-being is a fixed innate state**

Research has shown that well-being may evolve over time and contexts. Dynamic interactions of students with others, various contexts and events in a student's personal life history may radically change their

states of well-being. Therefore, well-being is neither permanent nor innate. Many studies have shown that students' well-being encompasses a set of skills that can be intentionally and explicitly cultivated and developed through education and with appropriate support. Well-being skills are usually covered by interventions addressing the development of socio-emotional skills, resilience, a growth mindset and metacognitive abilities.

More recently, studies in neuroscience have emphasized and highlighted the plasticity of the brain, treating well-being as a skill that can be trained through practice. According to neuroscientists, there are four fundamental constituents of well-being (Dahl et al. 2020).

- **Emotional resilience:** The rapidity with which a person recovers from adversity is a skill that requires practice.
- **Positive outlook:** The ability to see the good side in people and events; neuroscience research has shown that even a modest amount of meditation practice can have an important impact on improving a positive emotional outlook.
- **Attention/being focused/being present:** When we're focused in the present moment, we tend to be less judgmental and more creative in finding solutions to challenges.
- **Generosity:** Research shows that engaging in kindness reliably activates brain circuits that support well-being.

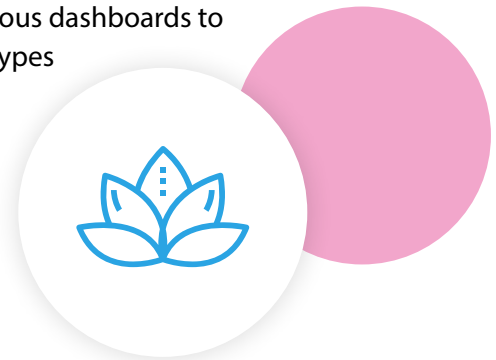
### Myth 3: Student well-being cannot be measured

In the past few years, empirical research has developed diverse and complex ways to capture scientific measures of student well-being. Well-being measurement is complex, but not necessarily impossible. The variety and complexity of the measurement tools are usually consistent with the way we define well-being. The specific approach to student well-being in your school shapes the tools that you use to measure it.

There are several examples of measurement tools recognized by research. An overview of the most common student well-being measurements across the world has shown that student well-being surveys are:

- consistent with a pre-existing well-being definition or agreed-upon framework
- age-appropriate—there are different survey questions for different education levels (primary, secondary, post-secondary)
- built with a longitudinal perspective (data is collected regularly)
- complemented with other well-being surveys (teachers, principals and school surveys).

In general, in the education systems where student well-being is consistently measured, schools have access to various dashboards to analyse their results and to take actions. Multiple types of resources are also available to support teachers and schools to monitor and improve well-being.



## Examples of student well-being surveys

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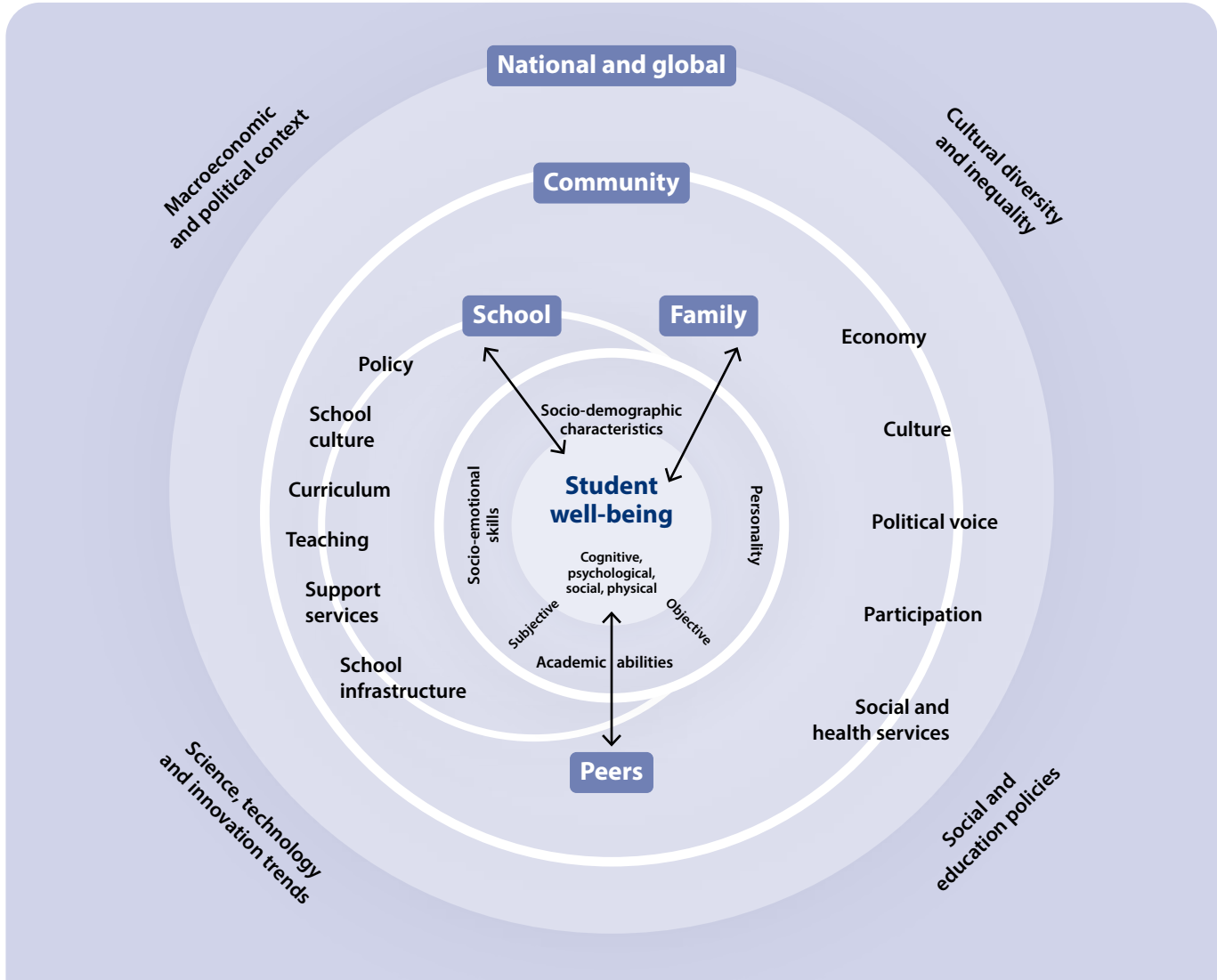


Figure 2. Multifactorial well-being framework

## Understanding the complexity of well-being in a school context

While positive psychology explains the internal process of well-being and the individual-level influencers, other areas of research have shown that well-being is a pervasive and multifactorial concept.

The social perspective on student well-being has added far more influencers to the equation of student well-being. According to sociologists, well-being is an outcome of interactions among complex factors manifested in, and influenced by, various contexts.



A well-known model in mapping the social influencers of students is the ecological one (Bronfenbrenner 1992). According to this model, there are three main levels of influencers for student well-being.

- **Micro-level influencers**—family, peers, teachers, school and proximal natural environment
- **Meso-level influencers**—community culture, participation in, and access to, various services and opportunities
- **Macro-level influencers**—national and global factors that indirectly influence overall student well-being

### Micro-level influencers

**Family and peers** are the closest and the most influential factors of student well-being. Research has shown that when family and peers are supportive, students are less likely to develop stress or anxiety. Socializing with friends outside of school is positively associated with life satisfaction, and adolescents who have higher-quality social networks also have better health and overall well-being (OECD 2017).

**School, classroom and teaching** factors are also highly influential. On average, across OECD countries, students who reported that their teacher provides support and is interested in their learning are about 1.3 times more likely to feel that they belong at school. Happier students tend to report positive relations with their teachers, and students in “happy” schools report much higher levels of support from their teacher than students in “unhappy” schools. Teachers modelling well-being behaviours, teaching competences, positively engaging students within the classroom, and school climate are all important predictors of student well-being.

**Natural and physical learning environments also greatly influence student well-being.** According to a recent study, well-designed classrooms can boost learning progress in primary school students by up to 16% in a single year (Barrett et al. 2015). Among the most influential factors are light, temperature and air quality. According to the study, almost a third of the learning achievements are due to individualization of the learning environment (ownership and flexibility) and 23% are due to the level of stimulation (complexity and colour) (figure 3, next page).

### Community influencers

The community acts as a mediator between a student’s well-being in school and the broader social and economic landscape. The participation of students in the life of the community through service learning and engagement has a significant impact on students’ sense of belonging in the community.

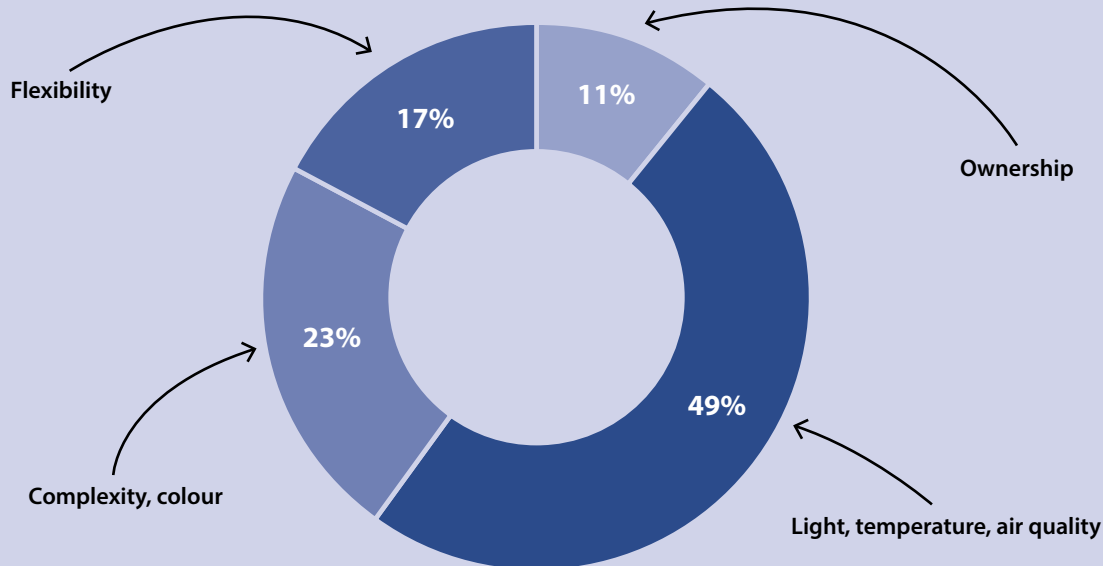


Figure 3. Environmental factors that impact on student learning

### National- and global-level influencers

National and global factors are also found to indirectly influence overall student well-being. National education policies, as well as global trends, are shaping the way we understand the role of well-being in facing present and future challenges for young people. These include, but are not limited to: the exponential growth of knowledge and data that are digitally available, social-media engagement, the volatile prospects of employment and adult life in a fast-changing world, social and political conflicts, and concerns around the sustainability of our planet.

## Building an approach to well-being in your school

Research has shown that an integrated, comprehensive school well-being policy is more likely to be effective than ad hoc measures in response to an individual student being overwhelmed with stress and anxiety. Likewise, embedding well-being into curriculum, practices and school life seems to be more effective than implementing well-being as an “add-on feature”. A whole-school approach ensures that all components of the school organization work coherently together, engaging the whole community, including pupils, teachers, parents and community stakeholders.

At the policy level, four domains are usually covered by the whole-school approach: systems and structures; relationships; teaching and learning; and environment (including the school culture and ethos, as well as physical aspects of the school environment).

On the other hand, targeted well-being programmes consistent with each school context are likely to have a more substantial impact than “universal” types of interventions. Each school may have particular characteristics and understandings concerning student well-being; therefore, your school well-being policy and practice may be unique. If you are an experienced IB teacher or principal, you most likely will have already defined well-being in your context. If this is the case, the following steps will help with confirming the practices that you already use. If you are an IB teacher or principal and student well-being is a current concern in your context, the following questions may provide you with initial guidance on how you can start defining a well-being framework in your school.



### **Step 1. Acknowledge the importance of well-being in your school**

- Why does well-being matter in your context?
- For whom is well-being important in your school, and why?
- What evidence is there to ground the state of well-being in your school?
- What are the areas of development where well-being may have an impact?

### **Step 2. Define well-being in your context**

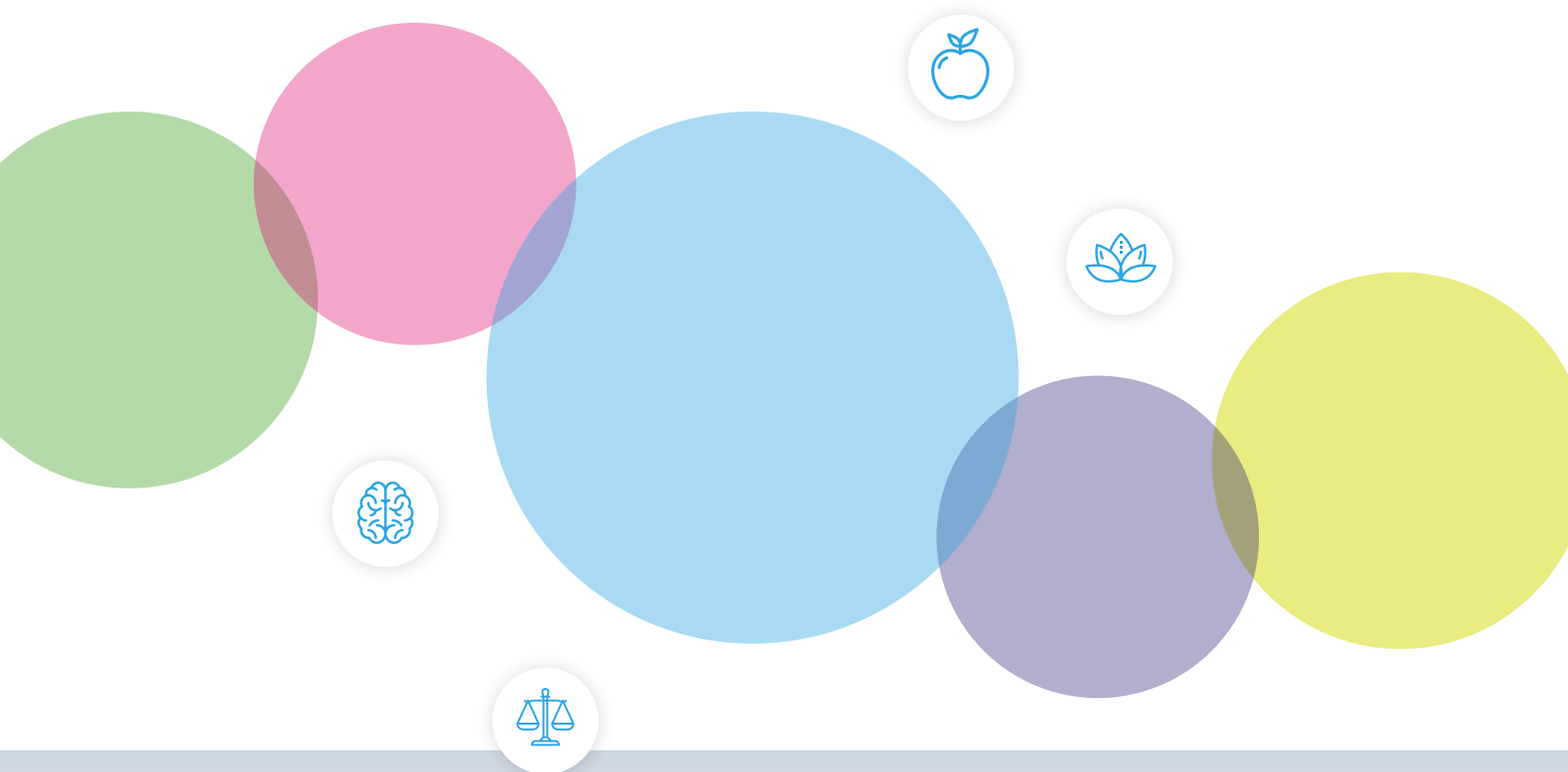
- How do various stakeholders in your school define well-being?
- What is common and what is different in the way well-being is defined?
- What are the dreams and triggers for well-being in your school?

### **Step 3. Map the well-being influencers in your school**

- What factors support or challenge well-being in your school?
- What are the factors that can potentially add value for a future well-being policy?
- What are the domains that concern you the most regarding well-being: systems and structures, relationships, teaching and learning, or environment?

#### Step 4. Measure and compare well-being in your school against relevant benchmarks

- What types of measurements and tools are available in your context?
- How do these tools relate to your school's definition of well-being?
- Why, and what, do you particularly need to measure in order to better understand the well-being reality in your school?



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