Examining the experiences of students, teachers & leaders at Educate Together second-level schools

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Report Launch

AUTHORS
Georgiana Mihut,
Selina McCoy

Educate Together

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Context

- Ireland has become more ethnically, racially and religiously diverse

- Diversifying school landscape - demographic shifts, stakeholder demands and legislative changes

- First Educate Together second-level school (ETSS) in 2014, 17 schools in operation in the 2019-2020 school year

- ETSSs draw on four principles: equality based, co-educational, learner centred and democratically run

- Given the scale of growth and the distinct ethos of ETSSs, it is timely to examine the experiences of students, teachers and school leaders

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Research questions

1. How do stakeholders reflect on the ethos of ET schools and on the provision of Ethical Education?

2. How do students report on their engagement with, and sense of belonging in, school?

3. How do students reflect on their interactions with their peers & teachers and the approach to discipline?

4. How do students reflect on decision-making processes and the extent to which democratic values are held?

5. What teaching & learning approaches are adopted, including the use of digital technologies in learning?

6. How do schools reflect on their relationship with management bodies and Educate Together?

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Profile of student survey respondents

- 57% did **not attend an Educate Together primary**

- 45% identify as **girls**

- 47% said their **mother attended higher education** (GUI: 45%; 63/28)

- 9% indicated they **do not live with their fathers** (14/5)

- 82% indicated they speak **English primarily at home** (50/4)

- 16% indicated they have a **special need or disability**

- 22% indicated they received **extra help** (37/6)

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Profile of student survey respondents
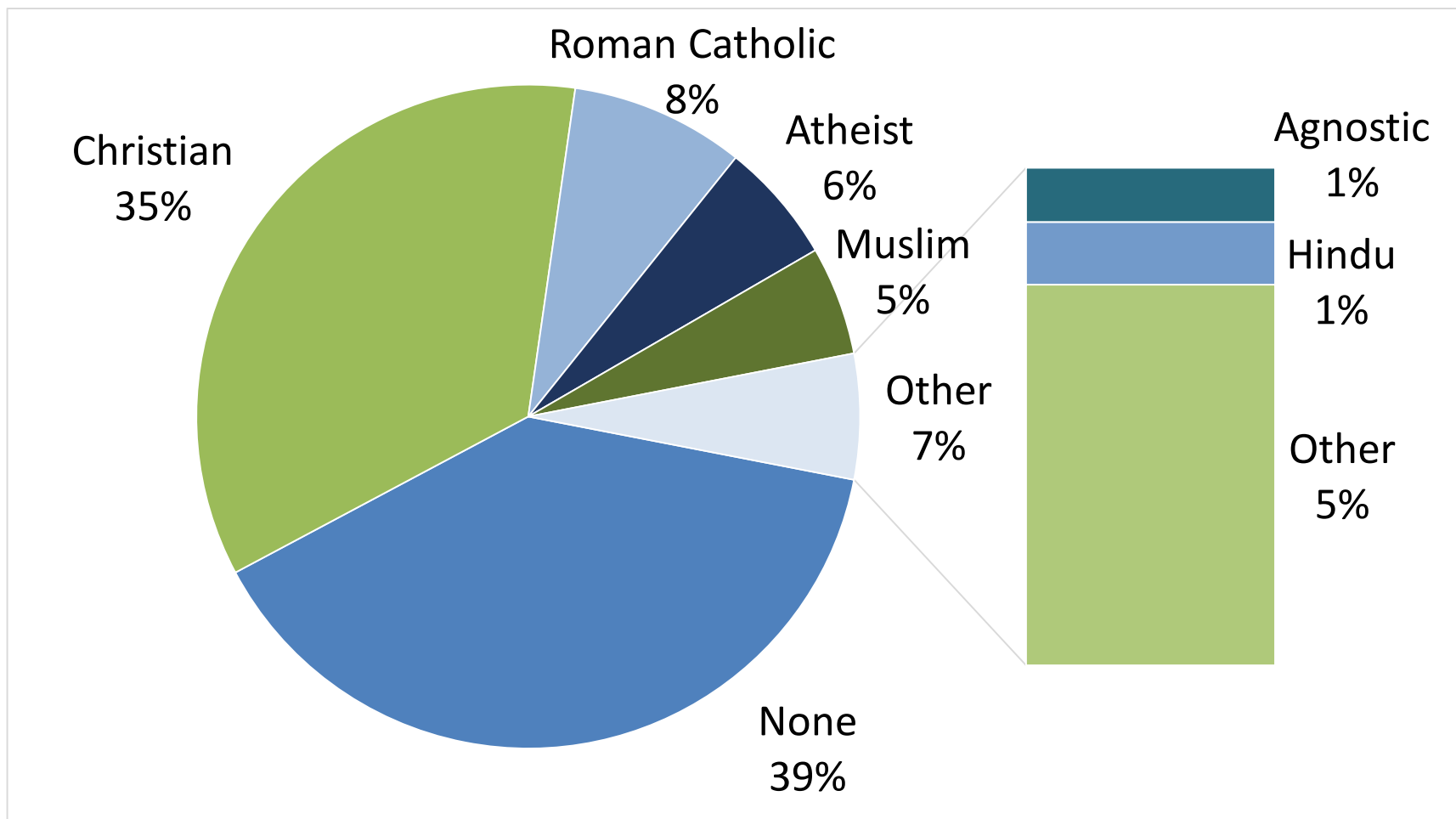
How students would describe their school to a friend: Student centeredness

'... the teachers in here are so understanding of our home problems and problems in school in general ... It's more like -- it's not like a teacher-student barrier, it's more like an older sister or an older brother or both.' (Focus group participant, School Baobab)

'Even though like you're learning stuff and everything, it doesn't feel like you have to go [to school] ... you kind of look forward to going because like the lessons are ... quite interactive... you learn a lot more than just reading from a book because they do a lot more activities, teach you stuff, which I found really good.' (Focus group participant, School Hawthorn)

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How students (and parents) would describe their school to a friend: Diverse schools

'...[this school is] very unique, and it's very diverse. It's quite like mixed and there are quite a bit of ethnicities over here.' (Focus group participant, School Chestnut)

'I'd describe it as an inclusive school. Like, you're not left out of anything. You're accepted for who you are.' (Focus group participant, School Elm)

'Because of demographic changes... it is good to mingle with children from other backgrounds and better understand the world they live in. I think at a mixed school and [at] an Educate Together school they get to learn about different cultures.' (Parent)

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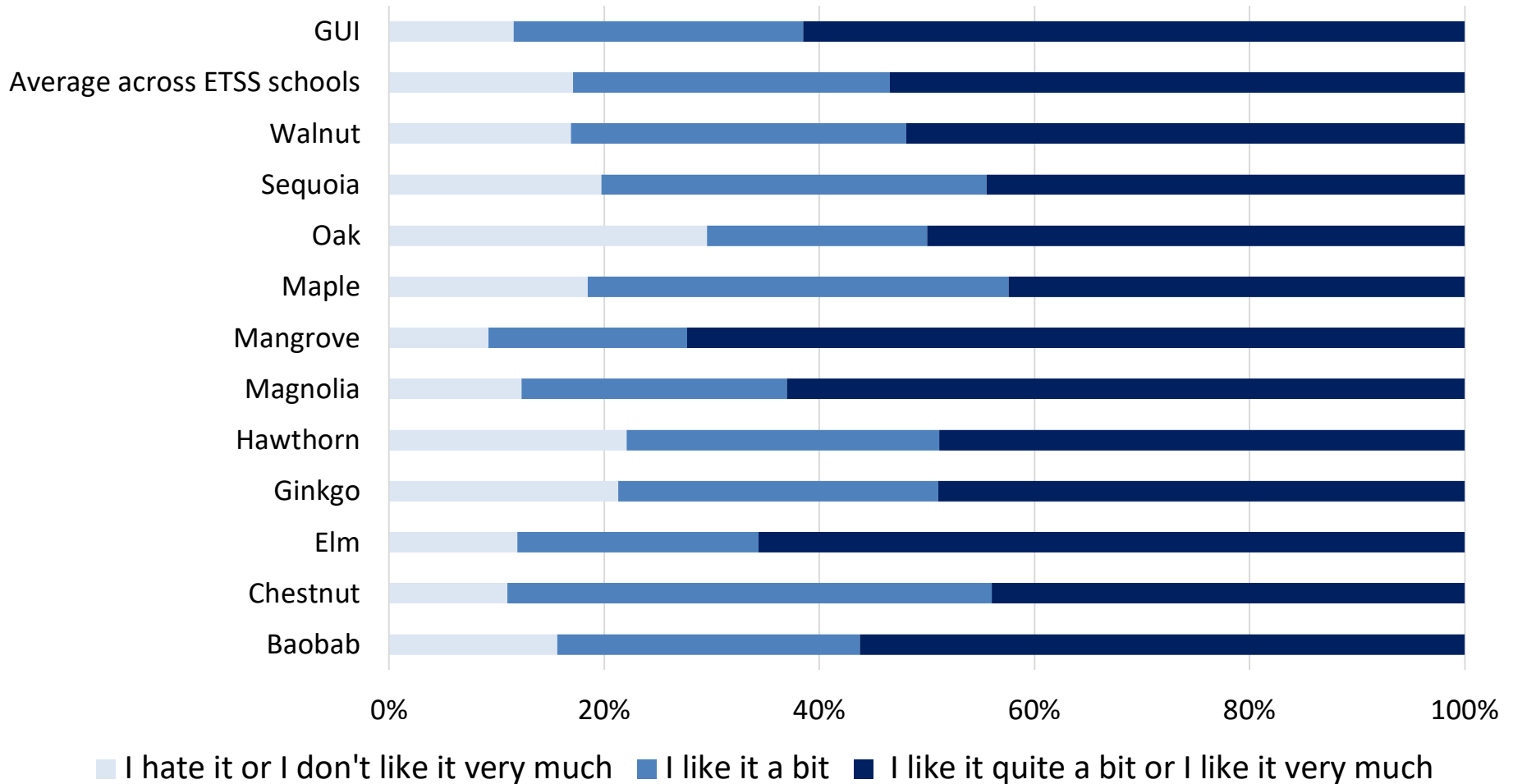
Student belonging

'I suppose if you're in a school where everybody was taught to be the same and then you felt that you were different, you wouldn't feel like you belong because everybody else is the same, but the fact that it's so diverse here ... you feel like you belong even if you're not the same as everybody else. No-one's the same. And you're not taught to be the same.' (Focus group participant, School Mangrove)

'All the teachers would know us properly, they wouldn't just know us as students ... say if you were out sick they'd say something like, "Oh, we missed you".' (Focus group participant, School Ginkgo)
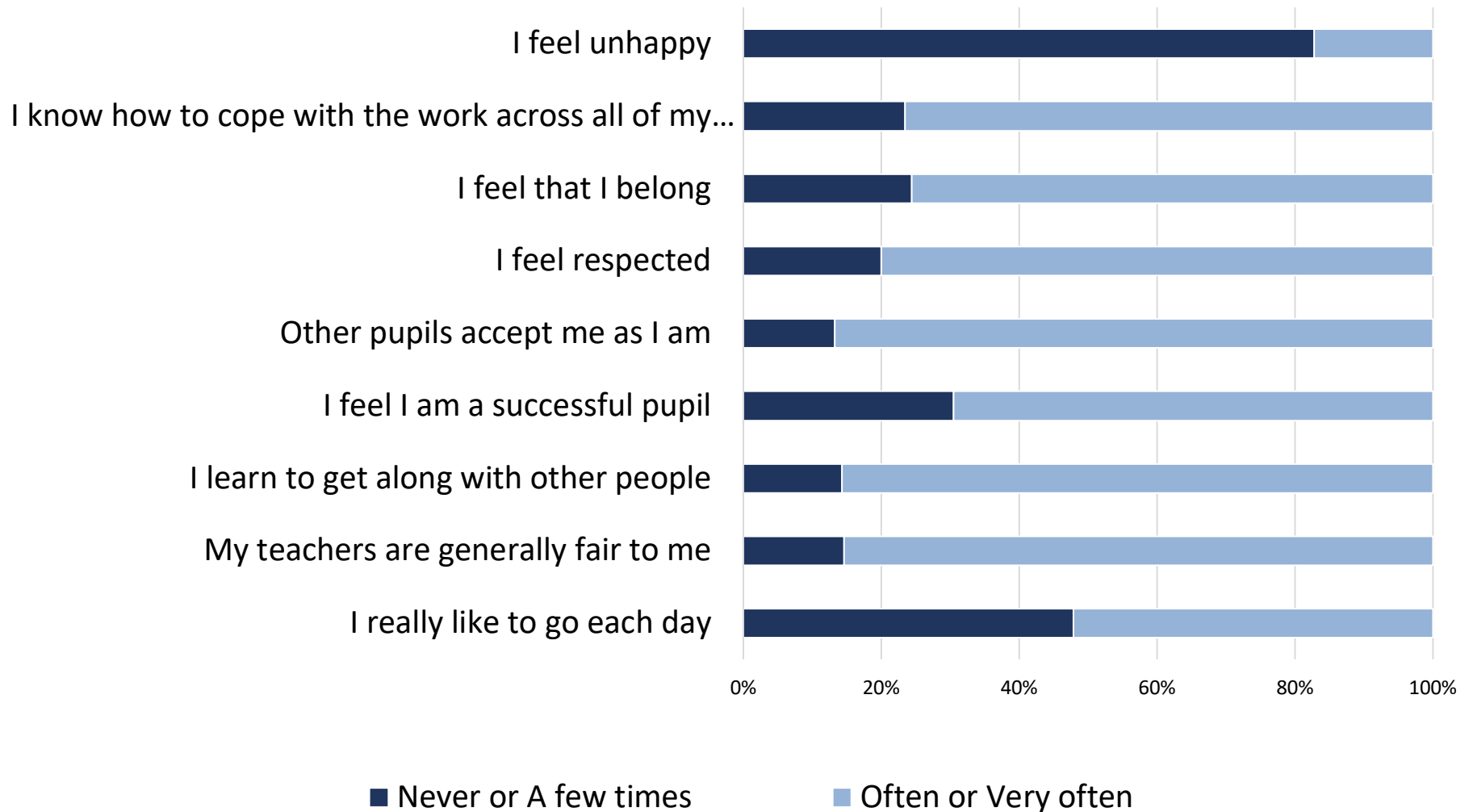
'I do, yes, ... but like I did obviously consider other schools. Like when I came here I loved it and all but I was thinking like: "When are we getting proper facilities?" and all this stuff, and like I was thinking about that..., but I -- honestly coming here now I don't regret my decision at all.' (Focus group participant)
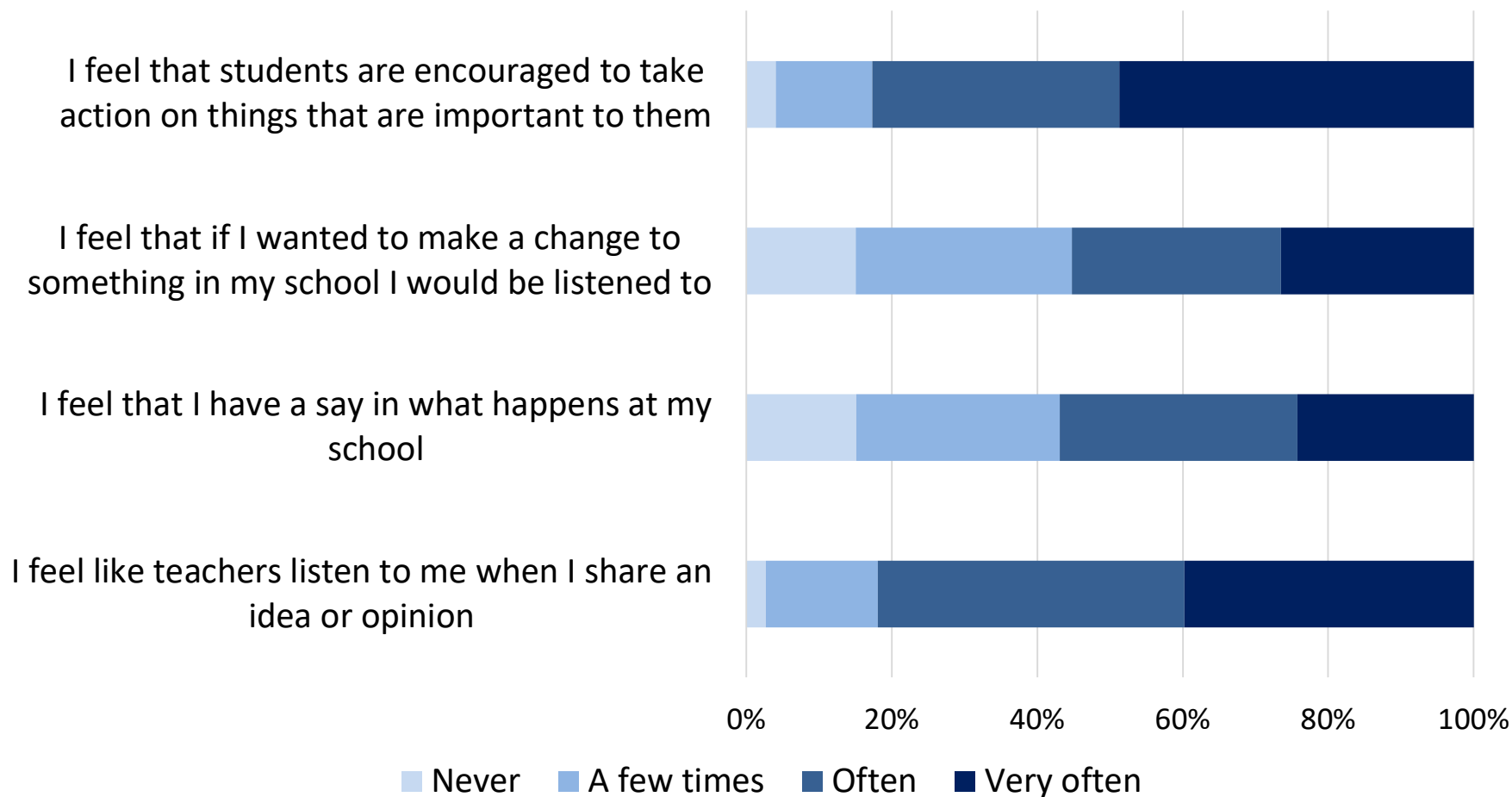
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How do students feel about school in general?

Belonging scale

Student voice and democratic participation

I feel that students are encouraged to take action on things that are important to them

I feel that if I wanted to make a change to something in my school I would be listened to

I feel that I have a say in what happens at my school

I feel like teachers listen to me when I share an idea or opinion

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

■ Never   ■ A few times   ■ Often   ■ Very often

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Student relationships with teachers and other staff members

'Yes, it's more of a mutual respect. I think when you can call [teachers] by their first names too, you build-up more of a rapport with them.' (Focus group participant, School Baobab)

'When you have, like, a bond with a teacher, you don't want the teacher being mad at you … you want to, like, meet the expectations that the teacher has for you and do your work.' (Focus group participant, School Magnolia)

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Number of friends
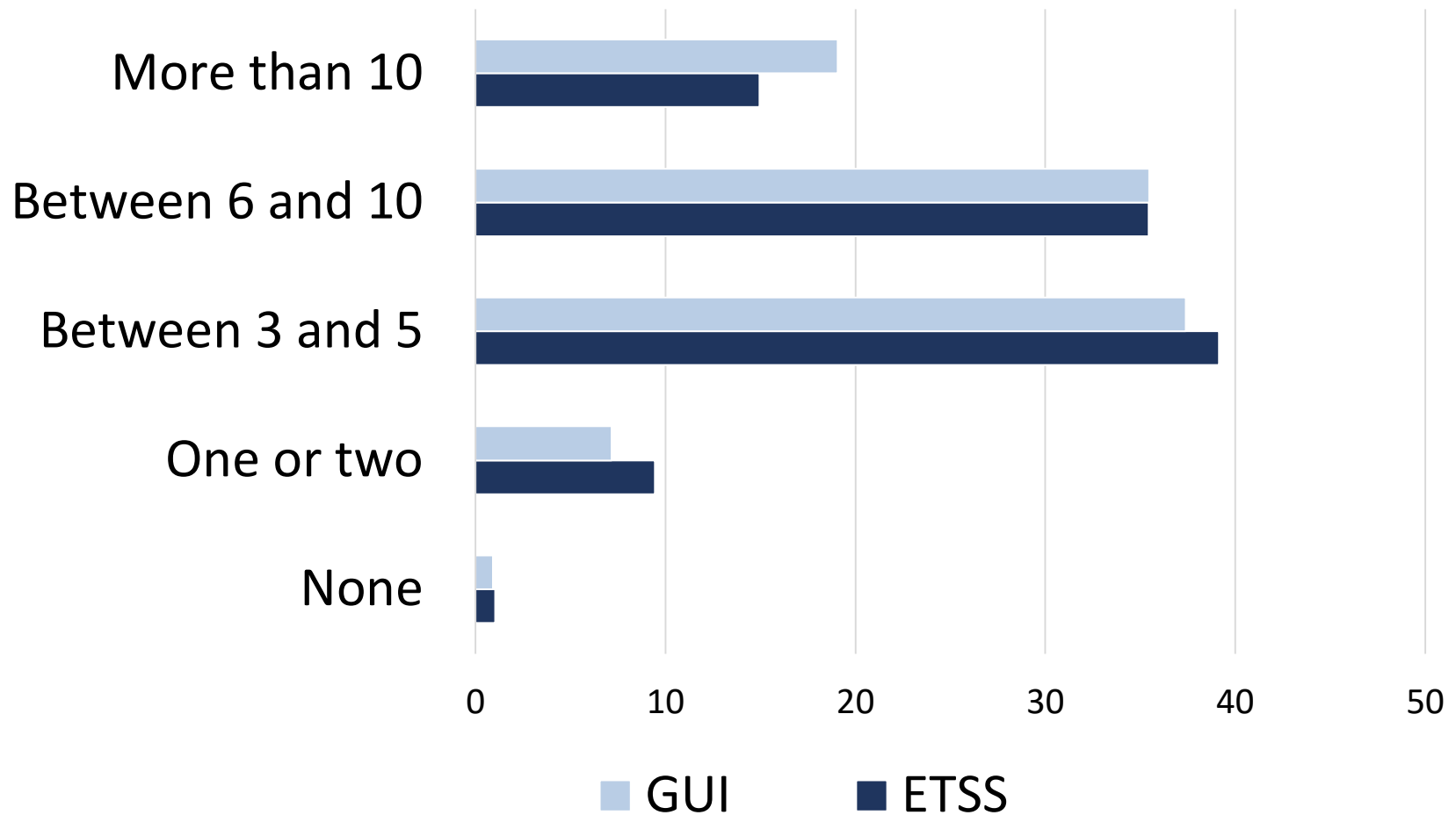
Bullying

- 10% experienced bullying in last 3 months

- 1% bullied someone in the last three months

- Bullying at ETSSs is no higher than the national average, as captured by GUI

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Discipline policies and restorative practice

- Schools varied in levels of disciplinary challenges and approach to discipline

- When asked *'How is discipline handled at your school?',* school leaders and teachers often made unprompted reference to the use of restorative practice and provided multiple examples on how it is used

- Students and teachers expressed some concern about discipline policies and had some misconceptions on the role and scope of restorative practices

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How teachers describe their school

'To someone who's never been here I would say it's an extremely inclusive school...we've had lots of students who have been school refusing in other schools and they've come here...it has reignited their enjoyment of education.' (Teacher, School Elm)

'At centre of it all, the main focus that we have is forming really good relationships with the students.' (Teacher, School Mangrove)

'It's very welcoming, very inclusive, I find that there's kind of a nice atmosphere, nice relationship between staff and students and a really nice relationship between staff.' (Teacher, School Walnut)

'There is some amount of expectation that everyone will work hard, so you work hard but we have fun, enjoy ourselves. It's a good place to work.' (Teacher, School Baobab)
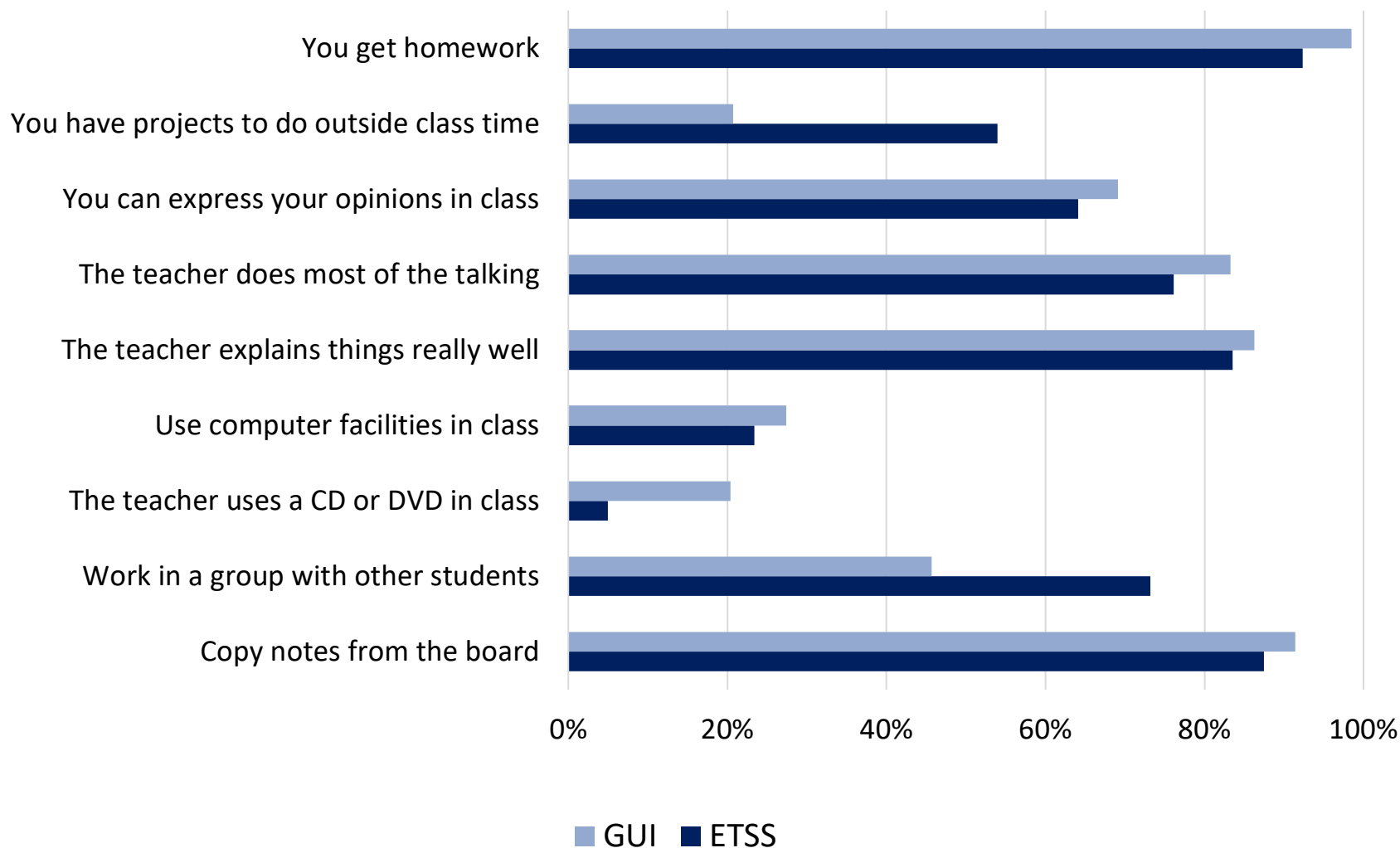
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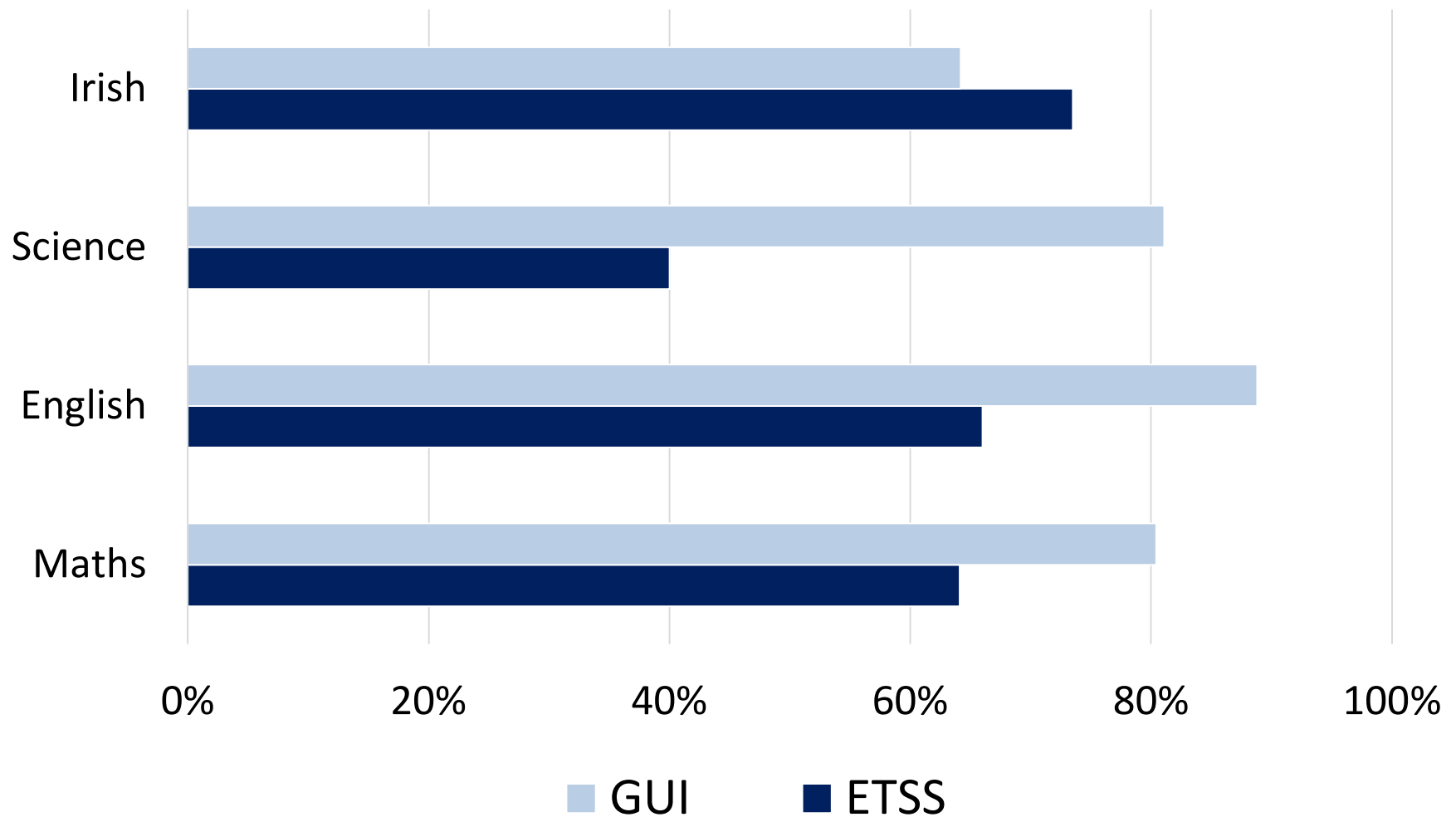
Teacher and student autonomy

'I have a lot of autonomy. I think when the relationships are good it's easy to have autonomy.' (Teacher, School Walnut)

'I do differentiate tasks every week on a Friday based around a novel of their choice that they're reading and a plethora of different tasks, learning tasks that they can complete… I think they actually have a lot of autonomy to choose their learning tasks, you know. I think it's really important to give them that freedom as well because not every kid learns the same.' (Teacher, School Oak)
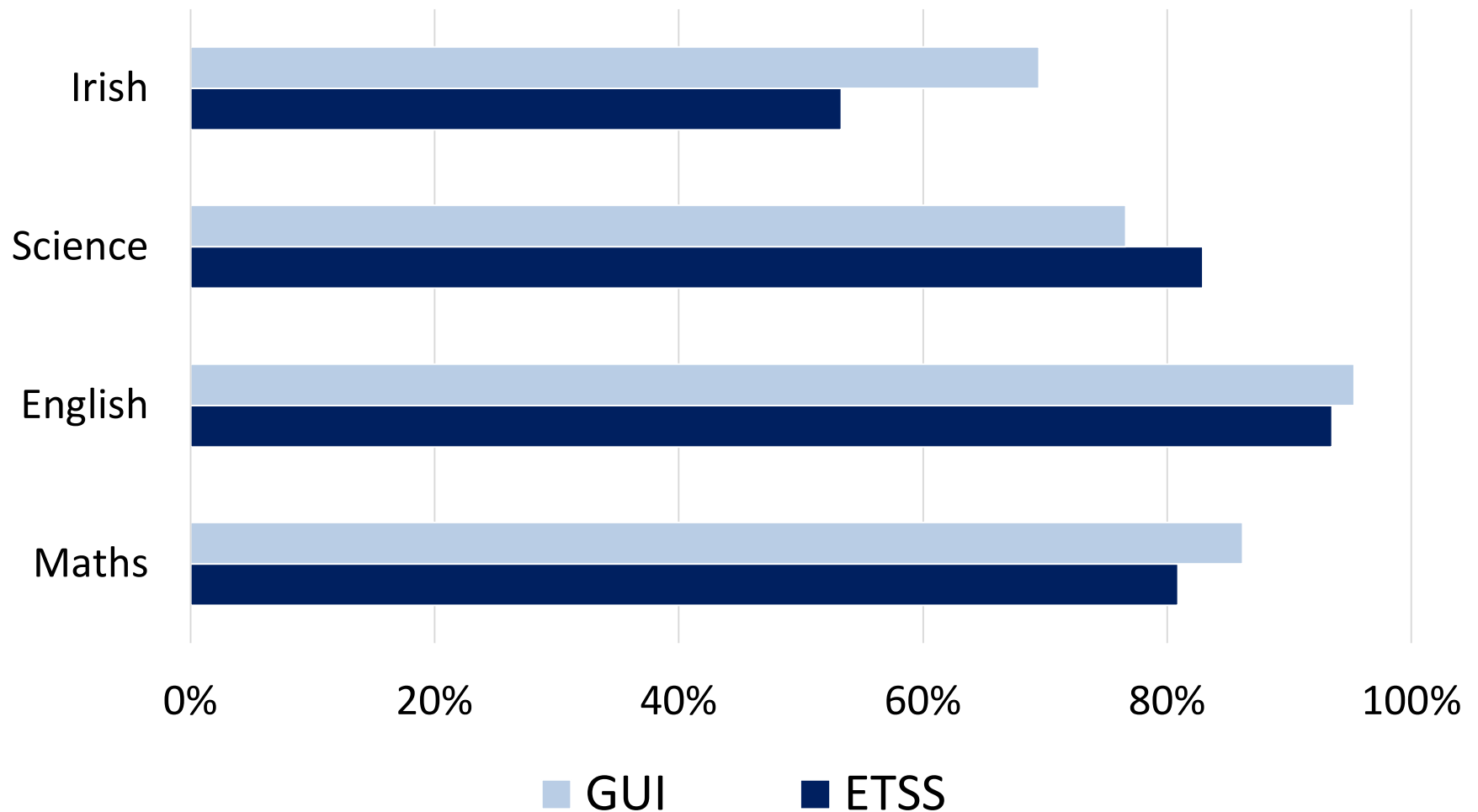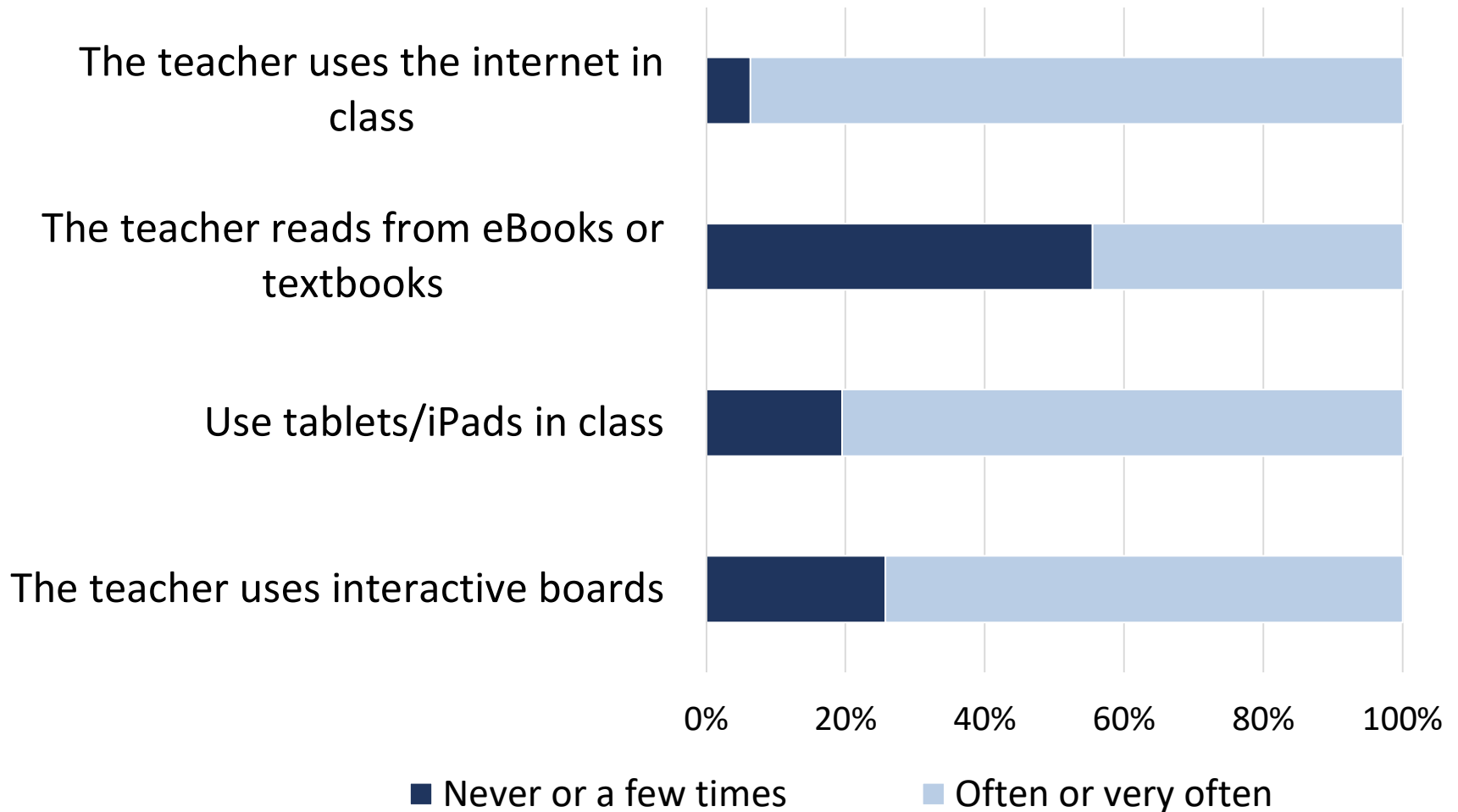
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Teaching philosophy and practice

Finding key subjects 'ok' or 'interesting'

Finding key subjects 'ok' or 'not difficult'

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Use of technology

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Challenges faces by ETSSs

'My biggest responsibilities are the safety of my children first, the education of my children second… So rather than trying to lead learning, which is what a principal should do, that has become second to the nature of what I am doing as a principal, and to me that's very sad.' (School Leader)

'Last year we still had the same amount of resource hours that we had in our first year even though we had a 350 per cent increase in the number of students that needed help.' (Teacher)

'I'm not on full-time hours, I would have a couple of extra part-time jobs as well… For me personally the challenge is trying to balance everything… try and provide the best lessons that you can in school is like my main priority. But… I can't go home and just relax, I have to go to another job every day of the week.' (Teacher)

'There are significant difficulties at the minute in terms of recruitment, which is impacting on the school's capacity to fill all the vacancies' (School leader)

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Summary

- The 11 schools have a diverse student composition; on some aspects more diverse than the typical Irish school

- Irrespective of gender, SEN status & language spoken at home, students in ETSSs experience similar levels of belonging & engagement

- Students, teachers, school leaders and parents illustrated how the schools are learner-centred and democratically run

- The starter school status, particularly for schools in temporary accommodation, impacted student, teacher & leader experiences and has created additional challenges for ETSSs

- ETSS were able to attract teachers and school leaders committed to the Educate Together ethos, and to creating school communities in which very diverse students say they belong.

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We would like to thank the principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, students, parents and chairs of the Board of Management of the schools included in this study. We would also like to thank the representatives of the management bodies who engaged so positively with the research.

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