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'EMBRACING DIVERSITY IN ALL ITS FORMS': THE VOLUNTARY SECONDARY SECTOR IN IRISH EDUCATION

EAMONN CARROLL, SELINA MCCOY AND KEYU YE

AN INSTITIÚID UM THAIGHDE EACNAMAÍOCHTA AGUS SÓISIALTA
ESRI ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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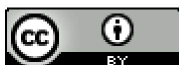

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
AMCSS	Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools
ASD	Autism spectrum disorder
ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CBA	Classroom-based assessment
C&C	Comprehensive and community schools
CDP	Continuing professional development
CSL	Centre for School Leadership
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCG	Design and communication graphics
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DSS	Digital Strategy for Schools
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Boards
EWO	Educational welfare officers
GNI*	Modified gross national income
GUI	*Growing Up in Ireland*
HSCL	Home–school–community liaison officer(s)
HSE	Health Service Executive
ICILS	International Computer and Information Literacy Study
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
JMB	Joint Managerial Body for Secondary Schools
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCE	Leaving Certificate Established
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education

NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PE	Physical education
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SCP	School Completion Programme
SEN	Special educational needs
SENCO	Special educational needs coordinator
SNA	Special needs assistant(s)
SSS	Secretariat of Secondary Schools
SSSF	School Services Support Fund
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TY	Transition Year
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
VEC	Vocational Education Committees
VLE	Virtual learning environment
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Irish education system is undergoing significant change as it navigates the challenges of the 2020s. Schools are at the frontline of Ireland's efforts to integrate migrant families, build an inclusive society and tackle generational socioeconomic inequality. They are also, increasingly, key sites of contestation over deep social questions like the place of faith and secularism in public institutions and the best path to ensuring young people thrive, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. While many of these challenges resonate across the second-level sector as all schools grapple with the difficulties and opportunities of educating young adults in today's Ireland, the focus of this report is on the voluntary secondary school sector.

The report presents rich evidence from a mixed-method research study across 21 voluntary secondary schools. The research was commissioned by the Joint Managerial Body for Voluntary Secondary Schools (JMB), with the research questions designed to examine the features and experiences of students, teachers and school leaders across the voluntary sector. However, the study allows for comparisons between experiences in voluntary secondary schools and other sectors. In particular, the survey of students undertaken in this study is compared to the nationally representative longitudinal study *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) and the International Student Assessment (PISA study) on 15 year olds in Ireland and across the European Union (EU). This approach allows for a deep exploration of the voluntary secondary sector, while also placing experiences in a national and international context.

Voluntary secondary schools, accounting for over half of all second-level schools, are privately owned and managed but are largely publicly funded schools, usually under the patronage of an individual body such as a religious community, a charitable trust or a private charitable company. The voluntary secondary sector includes an increasingly diverse school profile, particularly in terms of denomination and ethos. They are distinct from the other two sectors, Education and Training Board (ETB) schools and community and comprehensive (C&C) schools in relation to the management structures in operation and the type of education traditionally offered. Traditionally, voluntary secondary schools offered academic instruction to 'academic students' while vocational schools (as they were then called) offered vocational and practical instruction, implicitly (and often explicitly) to 'non-academic students'. Such differences have narrowed significantly over time, and the trend remains towards convergence.

This study examines two key issues. Firstly, it seeks to consider whether the voluntary secondary sector remains distinct from the other sectors in terms of the cohort of students who attend. Secondly, it explores two areas in which voluntary secondary schools are distinct – the specific ethos of each voluntary secondary school and the gender mix across the sector. It also aims to capture the contribution of the voluntary secondary sector to the Irish education system more broadly, attempting to take a holistic view of what schools are doing and how they are doing it.

In 2023, a large-scale mixed-method research study was conducted across 21 voluntary secondary schools, selected to represent the national profile of schools in the sector in size, gender and composition. The research included a survey with second and fifth year students (N=2,243), focus groups with students, interviews with school personnel, parents, members of school boards of management and key stakeholders across eight organisations.

RESULTS

The report analyses diverse perspectives within (and beyond) the voluntary secondary sector across key dimensions, including school ethos and culture, school gender mix, the student experience, teaching and learning, the (enduring) impact of COVID-19, student wellbeing, non-academic aspects of school life, as well as the unique challenges and strengths of this sector.

- The voluntary secondary sector has long included a diverse **school profile**, in terms of school size, location, gender mix, denomination and ethos. While nearly 90% of voluntary secondary schools have a Catholic ethos, there are sizeable numbers of Church of Ireland, inter- and multi-denominational schools, and a number of Quaker, Jewish, Methodist, Presbyterian and Educate Together schools within the sector. Differences between the three sectors in intake and outcome have narrowed over time, though some differences remain. However, the diversity *within* the voluntary secondary sector remains pronounced, with different voluntary secondary schools serving different populations in a variety of ways.
- The **ethos** valued by students includes community-building, extracurricular engagement, balancing academic and personal development, and a commitment to inclusion and diversity. Despite varying views on religious ethos, building a school ethos emphasising student-centricity, diversity, inclusion and community-building emerged across the schools.
- In terms of **school gender mix**, historical data indicate an increase in the percentage of students attending coeducational schools. Students, regardless of attending single-sex or coeducational schools, favoured coeducational settings, while preferences varied among staff and parents. Although some students believed their school's gender mix supported their learning and

preparedness for the future, fewer than 20% of respondents in single-sex schools preferred their school's gender mix, compared to almost 90% in coeducational schools.

- In terms of **curriculum**, gender differences persist in the subjects available to students and in terms of their actual subject choices, as well as in the extent to which different subjects are seen as interesting or difficult. Only a small minority of students find learning Irish interesting, raising implications for the national language. At Junior Cycle concerns arose around an excessive emphasis on exams, the added pressure placed on students by the classroom-based assessments (CBAs), the removal of foundation level papers in the Junior Cycle Framework, a perceived lack of challenge, the high numbers receiving a 'merit' and a lack of preparedness for the Senior Cycle.
- Overall, **technology** was seen to enhance teaching and learning experiences, facilitate communication, support collaborative work and develop independent learning skills. However, there was awareness that its effectiveness depends on how it is used.
- Despite strong **environmental awareness**, students reported limited engagement in related activities. While students reflected positively on their social, academic and personal development, they were less positive about their schools' role in building self-confidence, encouraging reading for pleasure and, in particular, making friends with the opposite sex. Although most students actively participated in sports and physical activities (dependent on the volunteerism of teachers), levels of participation declined in Senior Cycle and activity levels were also lower among girls, students with special educational needs (SEN) and those from economically vulnerable families.
- Regarding schools' **academic and SEN supports**, some students expressed concerns about their specific learning needs not being met. There was a preference among students for more individualised or small group supports. Concerns were raised in relation to increasing demands placed on schools, difficulties in securing staff with the necessary professional qualifications and skills, infrastructural deficits and appropriate classroom design to accommodate diverse needs.
- The results provide important evidence of an enduring **impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** on student motivation, socio-emotional wellbeing, social development and ability to reconnect with peers and manage stress.
- **Life satisfaction** levels also varied widely, being somewhat lower among girls, students with additional needs and those from economically vulnerable families. Students who report feeling they belong at school and who perceive better wellbeing supports at school are more likely to score higher on life satisfaction. The potential detrimental impacts of increased technology use on students' wellbeing were also noted, coupled with calls for enhanced professional development for teachers to support wellbeing.
- While the experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and since has highlighted the urgent need for **professional, therapeutic supports** for children and young

adults, the results from this study also highlight the importance of resourcing all school communities to provide a diversity of enriching activities within and outside the classroom to support young people as they develop.

- The report concludes with some over-arching **challenges** facing the voluntary secondary sector, including resources and funding and challenges in relation school leadership. Interviews with school leaders also highlighted concerns related to meeting day-to-day costs such as heating and insurance, as well as challenges in maintaining old and often unsuitable school buildings built for a different era. Finally, the report concludes by discussing the deep attachment and pride felt by many respondents from across the school community towards their schools.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Implications for the voluntary secondary sector

Throughout this study, the evidence has shown that students with fewer family resources and those with additional needs generally fare less well than their peers across a range of domains and outcomes. Students attending DEIS schools were found to benefit in terms of curricular provision, a strong emphasis on literacy skills, opportunities to participate in sports (particularly for girls), their role in decision-making and the nature of their interaction with their teachers. However, two challenges emerged. Schools serving disadvantaged communities that are not part of the DEIS programme struggled to meet high levels of student need. A second larger problem related to the capacity of schools to meet growing student and community need, particularly in a context of funding shortfalls for schools, argued to be more pressing in the voluntary secondary sector. School leaders and wider stakeholders asked the question, how much can schools realistically do?

Students attending fee-charging schools benefit from additional resources, which manifest in a diversity of ways. Students report higher levels of engagement (including liking school, working hard at school and viewing schoolwork as worth doing), lower levels of school absence, higher academic self-image, greater support for higher-level maths take-up, greater levels of participation in sports (particularly among girls), and school cultures marked by a stronger focus on values and student voice. While many stakeholders in fee-charging schools emphasised the inclusivity and diversity of their student body, others pointed to a tension between these values and the exclusionary effect of charging fees. Interviewees in fee-charging schools pointed to the challenges caused by the lower level of public funding they receive, especially in terms of building maintenance and development and teacher retention. However, none of these interviewees foresaw a move away from the fee-charging model in the near term, as they felt this would undermine the school's ability to sustain its current level of curricular and extracurricular offerings to students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and enduring impact on young people and their families and schools. Fifth year students missed out on crucial phase in terms of their maturation, in particular missing out on engagements with school over third and fourth year, which they see as impacting on their learning now. Stakeholders and experts continue to highlight the impact of COVID-19 on young people's mental health, highlighting dramatic increases in referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Additional cost of living supports were provided in Budget 2023 to mitigate inflationary pressures on schools, as well as €5 million for mental health supports for the 2022/2023 academic year. However, it is likely that much greater funding will be required to provide adequate preventive and early interventions as well as treatment in schools and other settings.

The scale of the preference expressed by students for coeducation was a surprise, with only a small minority of students in single-sex schools actively preferring their current school gender mix. One issue that came to the fore in our conversations with students, and in the survey data, related to participation in sports among girls, particularly girls in coeducational settings. Students in some (but not all) coeducational schools highlighted a hierarchy of opportunity, with boys' sports taking centre stage. A dominance of male-orientated sport in coeducational settings has also been found in other countries and is explicitly acknowledged in the European Commission's Gender Equality in Sport statement. There is a clear need to promote gender equality in sport, including school-based sport.

Community featured strongly, reflecting the inclusion of all students and the positive relationships between staff and students. Students see respect as the driving force of the ethos in their school, linked to valuing students for who they are and also to students reciprocating this respect and engagement. The question of how a religious ethos fits into an increasingly secular society is one which raised strong opinions on both sides, as well as a sizeable contingent of people who didn't feel strongly about it one way or the other. Overall, there was a sense in many schools of the ethos developing significantly over time, softening and opening up to more religious diversity among the student population. Religion was also highlighted by students for its important role in promoting awareness, tolerance and respect. Students are less positive about their voice and involvement in school decision-making processes, raising an important issue for schools to address.

As well as concerns over the adequacy of supports and facilities, school leaders highlighted the considerable demands being placed on them across the multiplicity of roles they play – administrative, financial, human resources, industrial relations, infrastructural. Stakeholders repeatedly emphasised the excessive and wide-reaching demands placed on school leaders, the inadequacy of supports provided and the widespread implications in terms of burnout and retention. While research

prior to the pandemic showed wide variation across schools in the extent to which digital technologies were embedded in teaching and learning (Marcus-Quinn et al., 2019), this study shows wide variations persist in the post-COVID era. Students are acutely aware of these differences and are particularly vocal on the perceived shortcomings in teacher competencies in this regard. As well as state-of-the-art digital hardware and software, a key challenge also relates to the availability of digital resources.

Implications for national education policy

Weaknesses in the Junior Cycle Framework have been highlighted in this study, particularly in terms of CBAs not being experienced as a positive learning experience by some students and teachers and a mismatch between Junior and Senior Cycle education, raising important issues for policy. It is interesting to note that recent publications from the longitudinal study of the Junior Cycle Framework echo the results of our research in voluntary secondary schools.

Overall, students across voluntary secondary schools did not seem to be engaged in activities that promote global competence, but largely consider themselves as being respectful towards people from other cultures. In view of the importance of an informed citizenry, the evidence supports the argument for a greater focus on civic and cultural education.

Students, staff and wider stakeholders spoke repeatedly of the importance of inclusion in schools. Many students spoke of their school's ethos as embodying inclusion and inclusive values. Researchers have been increasingly debating what inclusion should look like, particularly in terms of supporting students with additional educational needs. Commentators have suggested that the proliferation of special classes creates a tension with policy objectives around inclusion (Kenny et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2016). Students in this study valued being withdrawn in small groups for extra supports, rather than more fixed and larger groupings, raising an important issue for policy.

Finally, this study has highlighted how school infrastructural deficits and teacher supply problems are impacting the capacity of schools to offer a diversity of curricular and extracurricular activities. The findings also highlight that the system is reliant on volunteerism to provide extracurricular programmes and stakeholders question the sustainability of this. Harford and Fleming (2023) note that while the issue of a steady supply of teachers has been a feature of the evolving complexion of the Irish educational landscape for decades, the problem has become more pronounced in recent years.

Within an evolving system, this report shows some strengths of voluntary secondary schools that should be preserved. In particular, in a time of increasing focus on international standardised assessment measures like PISA or Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) scores as the measure of an education system, the commitment of voluntary secondary schools to the holistic development of students as part of a school community is more important than ever. Schools are not just places where young people learn testable subject matter, they are a dense web of educational experiences and social relations where children are shaped into adults. We hope this report gives a sense of how voluntary secondary schools are going about this work at the moment, and how they might continue doing so in the future.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 MOTIVATION FOR THE REPORT

The Irish education system, like Irish society more broadly, is undergoing significant change as it navigates the challenges of the 2020s. Schools are at the frontline of Ireland's efforts to integrate newcomer families to Ireland, build an inclusive society and tackle generational socioeconomic inequality. They are also, increasingly, key sites of contestation over deep social questions like the place of faith and secularism in public institutions and the best path to ensuring young people thrive, regardless of their gender and sexual orientation. These concerns do not exist in a vacuum; schools are responding to them under the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic and its lasting effects, while trying to keep up with the potential and pitfalls of rapid technological innovation. Education – the core business of schools – is at a possible point of inflection as the dust settles on the implementation of the new Junior Cycle curriculum and plans for Senior Cycle redevelopment begin in earnest. There is also cause for concern in relation to the recruitment and retention of teachers, as well as other vital staff, and to the risk of work overload and burnout across the school community.

While many of these challenges resonate across the second-level sector as all schools grapple with the difficulties and opportunities of educating young adults in today's Ireland, the focus of this report is on the voluntary secondary sector. The Secretariat of Secondary Schools (SSS) was established in 1973 to look after the interests of voluntary secondary schools. The SSS is a professional school management organisation representing the interests of all voluntary secondary schools, promoting the advancement of education, providing support, training and advisory services, and carrying out educational research and development. The SSS is organised into two divisions, the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS) and the Joint Managerial Body (JMB). Each has a distinct role and function. The AMCSS promotes the interests and welfare of Catholic voluntary secondary schools in Ireland. Some of the company's activities are operated by its JMB division, including engaging in discussion and negotiation, and specific supports and services.

Voluntary secondary schools are privately owned and managed schools, usually under the patronage of an individual body such as a religious community, a charitable trust or a private charitable company. They comprise roughly half of the Irish second level sector, both in terms of the number of schools and the number of students attending them. In the 2022/2023 academic year, 385 out of 723 post-primary schools were in the voluntary secondary sector, while 215,955 out of

406,392 students were in voluntary secondary schools. The sector has long included a diverse school profile, in terms of school size, location, gender mix, denomination and ethos. While nearly 90% of voluntary secondary schools have a Catholic ethos, there are sizeable numbers of Church of Ireland, inter- and multi-denominational schools, as well as a number of Quaker, Jewish, Methodist and Presbyterian schools, within the sector. This compares to 47% Catholic schools, 29% multi-denominational schools and 20% inter-denominational schools across all second-level schools in Ireland.[1] Specifically, within the voluntary secondary sector, the distribution of schools is as follows: 1% of the schools are located in Gaeltacht areas, 13% are designated as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) schools, 13% are fee-charging schools, 92% are day schools, and 6% of schools offer both day and boarding services. In terms of school gender, 42% are coeducational schools, while 58% are single-sex schools.[2] They are distinct from the other two sectors – Education and Training Board (ETB) schools and community and comprehensive (C&C) schools – on two main grounds. Firstly, the sector's management structures arise from its origins in private organisations run by religious orders, with many schools and patron bodies pre-dating the State. The ETB sector, on the other hand, was consolidated by the State under local-authority-run Vocational Education Committees (VECs) in the 1930s to provide vocational education. The C&C sector developed in response to a lack of suitable schools in the 1960s and 1970s, with a management structure somewhere between the ETB model of municipal control and the voluntary secondary model of individual, autonomous institutions. While much of schools' running and funding has now been centralised within the Department of Education and standardised across sectors, key differences remain in terms of how schools are run and how that running is paid for across the three sectors.

The second distinction, historically, has been around the type of education offered in each of the sectors and the presumed type of student it was offered to. Traditionally, voluntary secondary schools offered academic instruction to 'academic students' while vocational schools (as they were then called) offered vocational and practical instruction, implicitly (and often explicitly) to 'non-academic students'. McCormack et al. (2020) highlight how vocational schools were perceived as 'the poor relation' to more academically orientated schools, particularly voluntary secondary schools. It has been argued that within a 'dominant academic paradigm' (Polesel and Clarke, 2011, p. 535), traditional academic subjects, which are required for university entry, have high status, while subjects traditionally offered by vocational schools have limited cultural capital and are 'awarded less value' (McGarr and Lynch 2017, p. 58). While the relative cultural

1 Based on 2021/2022 post-primary school enrolment information from Department of Education, https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/post-primary-schools/#20212022.

2 Based on 2021/2022 post-primary school enrolment information from Department of Education, https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/post-primary-schools/#20212022.

capital of academic and practical subjects may not have changed, the strict distinction between 'academic' voluntary secondary schools and 'practical' ETB schools has blurred. McCormack et al. (2020) note that 'ETB schools now offer a full curriculum to their students, including both vocationally orientated and the more traditional academic subjects' (p. 544).

This study focuses on the voluntary secondary sector to investigate two key questions. Firstly, does it remain distinct from the other sectors in terms of the cohort of students who attend? Secondly, what distinctions exist across individual voluntary secondary schools in relation to ethos and gender mix? It also aims to capture the contribution of the voluntary secondary sector to the Irish education system more broadly, attempting to take a holistic view of what schools are doing, how they are doing it and whether it is working across a number of key domains. It is guided by the following research questions:

1) Who is going to voluntary secondary schools?
2) What is distinctive about these schools?
3) What is happening in the classroom in these schools?
4) What is happening outside of the classroom in these schools?
5) What major challenges are these schools facing, including the adequacy of state funding for the sector?

1.2 POLICY CONTEXT

This research takes places against a backdrop of wide-reaching policy reforms in the second-level education system. Here we highlight curricular and assessment reforms, policy developments in relation to supporting inclusion and growing diversity in schools and the state of play in terms of investment in (voluntary) second-level schools.

1.2.1 Junior Cycle Framework

The Junior Cycle Framework is now fully embedded across schools. The most significant change introduced by the Junior Cycle was in the area of assessment. The Junior Cycle allows for new ways of learning and a broader range of skills to be assessed. There is a dual approach to assessment, comprising classroom-based assessment (CBA), an assessment task and a final, externally assessed, state-certified examination. The student's achievement in CBA and state examinations are recorded in their Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (NCCA, 2015).

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has commissioned a four-year longitudinal study exploring the implementation and impact of the

Framework for Junior Cycle in second level schools. To date, two interim reports have been published, and the third report is due to be released in spring 2024 (Department of Education, 2023a).

1.2.2 Senior Cycle redevelopment

Key strengths and weaknesses in current Senior Cycle provision were brought to light in two overviews of the key reflections from the Senior Cycle review process, published in 2019 and 2020 (Smyth et al., 2019; OECD, 2020). Both reviews acknowledged the diverse programme provision in the Senior Cycle. In particular, teachers and students pointed to the range of programmes and subjects available to students, including the role of the Transition Year (TY) programme in offering young people a variety of learning experiences and in fostering a range of skills.

The objective and fair nature of assessment was viewed as a positive feature of the Senior Cycle, with some also highlighting the variety of assessment approaches. In relation to the challenges of this cycle, participants highlighted the heavy workload involved, with teachers and students under pressure to 'cover the course', resulting in a focus on rote learning in order to prepare for the Leaving Certificate examination and a reduced focus on higher order thinking and broader skill development. This situation was seen as having a negative impact on student wellbeing, with reduced involvement in extracurricular and social activities, to the detriment of young people's broader development.

Furthermore, the current system was seen by many as favouring particular ways of learning, thus providing limited pathways to success, especially for those with a more practical orientation and those with special educational needs (SEN). For example, a review by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018) found that students from a lower socioeconomic background might not benefit from the same support to prepare for their Leaving Certificate examinations or TY programme as their peers.

In addition to these challenges, the OECD review identified several other contextual and systematic factors impacting the implementation of Senior Cycle redevelopment. These include aspects related to: curriculum and assessment; school culture and leadership; professional learning, planning, collaboration and support; stakeholder engagement and communications; and societal expectations and influences. The NCCA has also highlighted broader societal changes affecting Senior Cycle redevelopment beyond the school environment, including changes in the wider contexts of society, culture, the economy and technology. Additionally,

the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced emergent changes that need consideration in the ongoing redevelopment efforts.[3]

A series of curricular and assessment changes are envisaged in a new vision for the Senior Cycle, as outlined in a 2022 publication (Department of Education, 2022). New and revised subjects will be introduced to schools. Changes in assessment are also set out, to significantly reduce reliance on final examinations and introduce teacher-based assessment components.[4] The teacher-based assessment, however, was removed from the redevelopment of Senior Cycle in September 2023 in a second announcement by the Minister. NCCA and the State Examinations Commission (SEC) will jointly research and define, in consultation with education partners, how an SEC-externally examined, school-based form of assessment would operate. A new qualification will be introduced at Level 1 and Level 2 of the National Qualifications Framework (NFQ) to provide an appropriate level of assessment to some students with SEN, building on the equivalent programme at Junior Cycle level.

1.2.3 Inclusive education supports

Over time changes in resourcing have provided a greater level of autonomy for schools in how to manage and deploy special education teaching support. However, the new provisions are being introduced to an education system characterised by a highly prescriptive national curriculum where standardised assessment of student performance on key stages is audited and used to profile schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2017; Kenny et al., 2020). Like many countries, policy in Ireland has been seeking to shift provision for students with SEN from segregated to mainstream provision. Within mainstream schools, students can be placed in a special class designated for a particular disability (or range of disabilities), for some or all of the school day/year, or they remain in mainstream classes and usually receive supplementary teaching (McCoy et al., 2014b). However, experts have suggested that the proliferation of special classes creates a tension with policy objectives around inclusion (Kenny et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2016).

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 radically changed the education landscape in Ireland, enshrining in Irish law the

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3 This led to two temporary alterations in the Senior Cycle phase of education: the postponement of the 2020 state examinations on health and safety grounds; and the introduction of calculated grades and accredited grades processes in 2020 and 2021 as a basis for recognising students' achievements and facilitating the current selection process (the points system) for entry to higher education.

4 Plans to move Leaving Certificate exams to fifth year were postponed, following intensive lobbying from stakeholder groups. The plan was to move English and Irish Paper 1 exams to the end of fifth year in 2024, in the aim of easing pressure on exam candidates by spreading the assessment load over a longer period. The Minister and her officials engaged with teachers, students and parents' representatives in early 2023 and agreed to pause the reforms for a year to address these concerns.

right for all students to access education in mainstream school settings, albeit with caveats regarding assessed appropriate impacts for both the child and their peers in such settings. This was more latterly augmented by the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which was only signed into law in 2018, having been 'adopted' in 2006. This delay mirrors the ongoing failure to also implement some aspects of the EPSEN Act, despite it being signed into law in 2004 (Kenny et al., 2020).

As discussed by Kenny et al. (2020), reports over resources being allocated with alternative purposes, the practice of reduced timetables,[5] and variability in how policy is interpreted reflect the complex reality of enacting policy change in education. Concerns about the availability of, and engagement from teachers with, professional development are very much to the fore, with such continuing professional development (CPD) being increasingly essential given the impact that the reforms may have on roles played by staff within schools. This is particularly the case for school principals given the implications of the reforms for them, whereby they hold additional responsibility for interpreting and managing complex systems for allocation, accountability and staff fidelity within whole-school inclusion. Teachers' roles are also being significantly impacted by the emphasis on fostering appropriate inclusion within mainstream classrooms comprising an increasingly diverse cohort of students, with heterodox profiles and needs.

Most recently, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) announced the pilot of a new integrated model for supporting inclusive education in mainstream primary and second-level school settings, the School Inclusion Model (SIM) (NCSE, 2019). This model is described as a research-based package of education and health supports which aims to build schools' capacity to include children with additional needs and to provide other supports for students, a description similar to the approach utilised within the Access and Inclusion (AIM) model, which was adopted for early years education. The rationale for a radical model for the inclusion of all children within mainstream class settings was linked to the Government's obligations following the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2018. The United Nations (UN) Committee that monitors implementation of the Convention has already advised that having a mainstream educational system and a separate special education system is not compatible with its view of inclusion and that parallel systems are not considered inclusive (NCSE, 2019, p. 3; Kenny et al., 2020). The EPSEN Act is currently under review, the purpose of which is to provide

5 In 2021, the Department of Education introduced guidelines 'to give direction to school authorities around the process to be followed where the use of reduced school days is under consideration for a student, to ensure that the use of reduced school days are limited to only those circumstances where it is absolutely necessary and, that where such usage occurs, schools follow best practice with the interests of the student to the fore'. See https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/198336/d1a62eca-694b-4ff9-922f-060814612d13.pdf#page=null.

assurance that the law that governs the provision of education for children with SEN is adequate.[6]

1.2.4 Inequality and the education system

Schools are a key arena for tackling and reducing wider socioeconomic inequality by giving all young people an equal opportunity to thrive, but the education system can also perpetuate and exacerbate existing inequality by offering stratified opportunity to young people based on their class background (see for example Lucas, 2001). Carroll and McCoy (2021) assess the Irish evidence on inequality and policy levers to address it. They point to a need for greater funding for schools serving disadvantaged communities (particularly DEIS schools) and question the adequacy of modest increases in funding for these schools. Budget 2023 included a further one-point improvement in the staffing schedule for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools at primary level, but no changes at second level, alongside a new DEIS identification model. Budget 2024 did not include any additional measures in this regard. The steps taken in 2023 (and earlier) are welcome, especially for schools that have been dealing with DEIS-level complexity of needs without DEIS-level support. Nonetheless, participants wondered if they will meaningfully address the entrenched gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools.[7]

Broader issues remain for schools not benefitting from the DEIS programme but serving very diverse school populations. Key support staff like school completion programme officers or home–school–community liaison (HSCL) officers and access to programmes like the free School Meals Programme are not currently available to non-DEIS schools, despite the fact that many non-DEIS students would benefit from these supports.

Recently, plans were announced for every primary school child to receive free daily hot meal from 2030 (O'Kelly, 2023). Free hot school meals are to be provided to schoolchildren in every disadvantaged primary school from September 2023 (a doubling of the number benefitting). Research carried out by RSM Ireland produced positive findings about the impact of the current School Meals Programme and argue that the programme should be extended into DEIS secondary schools (RSM Ireland, 2022; O'Kelly, 2023).[8]

6 See https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/e3842-epsen-review-consultation/.

7 DEIS and non-DEIS schools, which do not charge tuition fees, fall under the Free Education Scheme and receive state funding to cover educational and operational costs. Throughout the report, these schools are referred to as 'non-fee-charging schools' for ease of reading.

8 RSM Ireland is part of the global RSM network, comprising independent audit, tax and consulting firms.

1.2.5 Diversity in schools

Ireland has seen significant demographic change in the 21st century so far, and schools have evolved rapidly to serve a more diverse student body. As with the social inequality discussed in the previous section, it is vital that schools provide equal opportunities to students regardless of their place of birth, race or ethnicity. In their eighth Integration Monitor, McGinnity et al. (2023) note that the migrant population in Ireland tends to have higher levels of education than the Irish-born population. In terms of PISA reading scores, scores are significantly lower for migrant students who speak a language other than English in the home compared to Irish-origin students. Overall, there is no difference between migrants from an English-speaking background and Irish-origin students. There are also no differences between Irish-origin and either of the migrant-origin groups in maths and science. However, findings from earlier monitoring reports on integration and other research studies highlight the role of English-language skills, with evidence suggesting that those who speak a foreign language at home may face disadvantages. This underlines the importance of monitoring needs, spending and effectiveness of English-language tuition in Irish schools. Host-country language skills are also key for facilitating economic, social and cultural integration among adults so the lack of any coordinated strategy for English as a second language in Ireland is judged to be of concern (McGinnity et al., 2023). However, it should be noted that English as an Additional Language (EAL) specific inspections are now taking place in schools.

1.2.6 Capital and current expenditure

Overall, international comparisons suggest relatively low levels of investment in education in Ireland, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP). Using this metric, Ireland ranks as one of the highest-performing countries in Europe in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. This stems from relatively low levels of investment combined with high scoring in terms of outputs, at least as measured by PISA (Agasisti et al., 2023). However, stakeholders argue that modified gross national income (GNI*) is a more appropriate metric for Ireland,[9] with analyses suggesting that Ireland's expenditure on secondary education is close to the EU average of

[9] According to CSO (undated), the modified gross national income (GNI) is a metric tailored to measure the Irish economy's size by excluding globalisation impacts. While gross domestic product (GDP) quantifies a country's total economic activity, it often includes profits made in Ireland but immediately transferred to foreign company owners. In contrast, GNI adjusts GDP by excluding net profits sent abroad, accounting for the net income from overseas, making GNI a more accurate reflection of the domestic economy. See https://www.cso.ie/en/interactivezone/statisticsexplained/nationalaccountsexplained/modifiedgni/. The modified GNI (GNI*) is increasingly being used as an indicator in domestic assessment of Ireland's debt position and fiscal sustainability analysis around the public finances (Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, 2023) as well as by the European Commission (European Union, 2023) and other international bodies such as the European Central Bank (Andersson et al., 2023).

1.8, and above the OECD average (Department of Education, 2024).[10] Using this metric, the Irish education system demonstrates high performance with relatively equitable outcomes, as evidenced by high performance in both national and international assessments, most recently in PISA 2022 (Donoghue et al., 2023).

The Department of Education provides funding to recognised primary and post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme by way of per capita grants. The grants are based on the recognised enrolments of the relevant academic year. The two main grants provided are the Capitation Grant to cater for day-to-day running costs such as heating, lighting, cleaning, insurance and general up-keep, and the Ancillary/School Services Support Fund (SSSF) grant to cater for the cost of employing ancillary services staff (such as school secretaries). Following the adoption of a Workplace Relations Commission agreement by Forsa in 2022, grant-funded school secretaries are now placed on the Department's payroll, relieving schools of salary responsibilities.[11] The Ancillary/SSSF grant is being adjusted accordingly.

The DEIS programme serves as a primary policy tool in addressing educational disadvantage in both primary and post-primary schools, aiming to support students at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion while enhancing overall educational outcomes. DEIS grants are provided to support schools in achieving targets outlined in their DEIS action plans, particularly targeting children and young people most vulnerable to educational disadvantage. The most recent figures show that 232 post-primary schools participate in the DEIS programme, with a total allocation of €5.5 million for the 2023/2024 academic year, including €1.452 million for voluntary secondary schools.

Schools also receive a range of other grants such as the Book Grant and programme grants (see Table 1.1 for grant details). Regarding the Book Grant, Budget 2024 allocated funding to extend the provision of free schoolbooks to Junior Cycle pupils in post-primary schools, with the scheme being rolled out for the 2024/2025 academic year. This initiative will benefit over 213,000 students across 670 recognised post-primary schools, ensuring access to essential resources such as journals, copybooks, dictionaries and calculators without the need for parents or guardians to purchase or rent them. To support the administration of the scheme, the Department is providing an Administration Support Grant to post-primary schools based on their size for the 2024/2025 school year, which can be used to cover additional administrative tasks associated with implementing the scheme. Funding for books for Senior Cycle and Transition Year students will continue to be

[10] This information regarding capital and current expenditure was obtained through personal communication with the Department of Education in March 2024, when the report was being prepared.

[11] Circular Letter 0036/2022; see Circular-Letter-0036_2022.pdf (fssu.ie).

provided,[12] with schools in the DEIS programme receiving €39 per student and non-DEIS schools receiving €24 per student. This grant remains in place to assist schools in purchasing schoolbooks, including those for book rental schemes.

TABLE 1.1 POST-PRIMARY CAPITATION RELATED GRANT RATES

Grant type	Voluntary secondary (€)	C&C (€)	ETB (€)	Details
Capitation Grant/Non-Pay Grant	316.00	276.00	276.00	Rate per student
SSSF Grant **	224.50	122.50	99.00	Rate per student
Secretary grants **	66.50	N/A	N/A	Rate per student up to a max of 350 students
Caretaker grants	54.50	N/A	N/A	Rate per student up to a max of 350 students
Cost of living	75.00	75.00	75.00	Rate per student
Junior Cycle Schoolbook Grant	309.00	309.00	309.00	Rate per student for the 2024/2025 school year
TY & 5th & 6th year Book Grant				Rate per student
DEIS	39.00	39.00	39.00	
Non-DEIS	24.00	24.00	24.00	
Physics and chemistry	13.00	13.00	13.00	Rate per student
Transition Year Grant	95.00	95.00	95.00	Rate per student
Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) Grant	60.00	60.00	60.00	Rate per student
Leaving Cert Applied	151.00	151.00	151.00	Rate per student
Special Class Grant	201.00	201.00	201.00	Students psychologically assessed as having a mild or moderate general learning disability and participating in NCSE approved special classes
Traveller Capitation	213.50	213.50	213.50	Rate per Traveller student enrolled in schools
Irish Bi-Lingual Grant	110.50	N/A	N/A	Rate per student where all subjects are taught through Irish

Source: Department of Education (personal communication).

As part of the cost-of-living measures introduced in Budget 2023, €90 million was provided as one-off additional funding to aid recognised primary and post-primary schools within the Free Education Scheme, specifically to address challenges stemming from rising energy costs. This funding, which supported schools in

[12] Department of Education. (2024). 'Schoolbooks Grant guidance for post-primary schools 2024/25', https://assets.gov.ie/286443/3d4d1f02-42c5-4932-9ebd-6541a3a977a0.pdf.

meeting increased running costs, was provided alongside ongoing base increases included in Budgets 2022, 2023 and 2024. Furthermore, the €81 million allocated for capitation, inclusive of €60 million from Budget 2024's cost-of-living measures, aimed to restore capitation to previous levels, benefitting all recognised primary and post-primary schools within the Free Education Scheme. The grant, distributed based on September 2022 enrolments, amounted to €49 per pupil at primary level and €75 at post-primary level, with enhanced rates for pupils with SEN.[13] A total of €21 million was further secured as a permanent increase in capitation funding in Budget 2024. This will support a permanent restoration of funding for all primary and post-primary schools from September 2024, bringing the basic rate of capitation grant to the pre-2011 level of €200 per student in primary schools and to €345 in voluntary secondary schools.

Table 1.2 presents capital expenditure levels from 2020 to date. Capital investment in the voluntary secondary sector since 2020 has totalled €850 million (out of a total of €1.9 billion provided at post-primary level). While it is acknowledged that more needs to be done in relation to both capacity and modernisation (Department of Education, 2024), the figures represent a significant level of investment.

In a recognition of the need to maintain the momentum gained during COVID-19 in the adoption of digital technology in education and continue to invest in building an effective digital ecosystem in schools, the Digital Strategy for Schools (DSS) to 2027 was announced (Department of Education, 2022). The Minister for Education recently confirmed that the ICT grant will be paid this school year, though the date for payment has not yet been confirmed. This digital strategy will support the ongoing advancement of digital infrastructure through targeted funding, working with staff across Government to ensure broadband connectivity to all schools, regardless of location, with the aim of growing their capacity in the use of digital technology.

Funding to support the implementation of the DSS entails a total investment of €210 million by way of an infrastructure grant for schools, which has been delivered in full since 2016. However, funding was not provided in the school year 2022/2023. A commitment has also been made for a further €200 million for the period covering 2021–2027, as well as an annual investment of €13 million for improving school connectivity. The Department plans to issue the next tranche of ICT grant funding in the 2023/2024 school year, with an initial €50 million tranche disbursed to all recognised primary and post-primary schools in late 2021. Additionally, €50 million secured from Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan issued in late 2021, under the NextGenerationEU Recovery

[13] Further information in relation to this grant is available in Circular 0056/2023, available at gov - Cost of living measure to support increased school running costs (www.gov.ie).

and Resilience Facility, was also allocated to all recognised schools in the Free Education Scheme to address the digital divide and support learners at risk of educational disadvantage.

Annual digital grants as part of the capital investment programme are important and necessary to help support schools who aim to embed advanced learning management systems and virtual learning experiences (VLEs) in their schools. Free systems while welcome are not considered adequate, while uncertainty in funding, partly due to the classification of the digital grant as capital investment, makes it difficult for schools to plan. Experts have also identified a significant gap in evidence on the effectiveness and impact of the DSS, with no system-wide measures of the levels of students' or teachers' digital knowledge, skills or competence. Ireland does not participate in the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) and there is currently no national assessment of computer and information literacy that is capable of describing or monitoring standards (Cosgrove et al., 2022). This means there are limitations in the measurement of policy implementation, impact and practice across schools in Ireland. The DSS commits to developing oversight mechanisms for system-level assessment and progress measurement at the school level through self-evaluation processes and teacher self-reflection. Consideration is also being given to Ireland's participation in ICILS, as outlined in the DSS.

It has been argued that the school building programme is poorly funded and this topic was prominent in Project 2040 announcements. Under Project Ireland 2040, [14] the school sector is to receive approximately €4.4 billion in capital investment over the period 2021–2025. This investment aims to advance plans with certainty and deliver high-quality, sustainable building projects for school communities nationwide, focusing on accessibility and state-of-the-art technology. However, the school building programme paused in March 2023. Further, some stakeholders note that there have been considerable delays in schools receiving payments for ongoing building projects. Challenges acknowledged by the Department include demographic expansion at post-primary level, accelerated housing delivery and additional SEN requirements. The Department stress that despite budget limitations, investment decisions strive to balance the programme's overall needs, which may result in suboptimal project timelines.

According to the Department, the school estate comprises close to 4,000 schools, supporting nearly one million learners and 100,000 staff. Special class numbers doubled from 1,451 to 2,910 between 2018 and 2023. The Department has also

[14] Project Ireland 2040 is the Government's 'long-term overarching strategy to make Ireland a better country for all and to build a more resilient and sustainable future. The strategy ensures the alignment of investment plans with the stated National Strategic Objectives for 2040 in a considered, cohesive and defined manner'. See https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/09022006-project-ireland-2040/.

supported the integration of over 18,000 children from Ukraine, achieving one of the highest school enrolment rates across Europe. This year (2024), over 300 school building projects are currently under construction, including 34 new school buildings, additional accommodation projects on existing school sites and modular programmes targeting most urgent school place requirements. Furthermore, the Department has over 1,000 projects worth €1.2 billion in its pipeline at various stages of development (Department of Education, 2023d).

Regarding sports facilities, approximately 90% of post-primary schools nationwide have informed the Department that they possess a physical education (PE) hall or have access to one. Additionally, around 5% of post-primary schools have upcoming building projects in progress that will include a PE hall. PE halls are not currently included in additional accommodation briefs, due to priority being placed on ensuring sufficient school places for all children in the spending of limited capital funding. Moreover, the Department has allocated funding for building officer positions within the JMB as part of recent initiatives aimed at providing additional support for school building projects.

TABLE 1.2 CAPITAL EXPENDITURE FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECONDARY SECTOR, 2020 TO DATE

	Capital expenditure 2020 to date (rounded, in € million)
Large-scale projects	€421.7
Additional accommodation projects, including modular	€207.7
Emergency Works Scheme	€45.3
Summer Works Scheme	€41
Minor Works Grant	€42.8
Other schemes (includes sites, furniture and equipment, capital rental, decarbonisation pathfinder)	€91.2
Total	€850

Source: Department of Education (personal communication).

1.3 OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

The report follows the following structure. Chapter 2 details the research methodology employed and the ethical considerations addressed in undertaking this research. Chapter 3 presents information on the profile of voluntary secondary and other school types (both in historical data and in our sample) and the key reasons underpinning school choice in Ireland, from the perspectives of students, parents and school staff. Chapter 4 examines school ethos and school climate, as well as students' school engagement and their voice in decision making. Chapter 5 assesses school gender mix, including the development of single-sex schools

historically in Ireland, the experience of students in single-sex and coeducational settings and their preferences regarding school gender mix. Chapter 6 explores students' educational journeys, including the transition to secondary school, Junior Cycle experiences, Senior Cycle programmes and curriculum choices, and experiences in relation to subject and subject level choices. This chapter also considers how students see themselves as learners, their classroom experiences, teacher support and autonomy, as well as learning and other supports. Chapter 7 explores technology use at school, including the overall use of technology in classrooms, the benefits and purposes of using tablets/iPads, students' ICT and VLE experiences, as well as issues related to technology use and the development of students' digital skills at school. Chapter 8 analyses students' home learning experiences during COVID-19, and considers whether this has had a lasting impact on the overall learning, motivation, wellbeing and social development of students. Chapter 9 investigates non-academic aspects of schooling, including: student citizenship education and social awareness of emerging global issues; activities outside school; the benefits of school; overall wellbeing and life satisfaction; supports for social and emotional issues; and fifth year students' post school plans and their outlook for the future. Chapter 10 considers a number of broader challenges facing the voluntary secondary sector, including resources and funding, departmental support, as well as challenges for school leaders. The chapter concludes with some key positives in the sector. Chapter 11 provides a summary of the key findings and raises some implications for policy and practice.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from a mixed-method research study conducted across 21 voluntary secondary schools, which were selected based on a theoretically informed sampling framework (see Section 2.2 below). The research was commissioned by the Joint Managerial Body for Secondary Schools (JMB), with the research questions designed to examine the features and experiences of students, teachers and school leaders across the voluntary sector. Given the focus of the study, the primary research does not include schools outside the voluntary sector. This approach allows for rich insights into this sector, but for less consideration of the wider school landscape. However, the study allows for comparisons between experiences in voluntary secondary schools and other sectors, namely Education and Training Boards (ETB) and comprehensive and community (C&C) schools, using other sources. In particular, the survey of students undertaken in this study is compared to the nationally representative longitudinal study *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI), specifically its sample of children born in 2008 (who were 13 years old in the latest wave of available data). It is also compared to the International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 study of 15 year olds in Ireland and across the European Union (EU).[15] In taking this comprehensive approach, the study achieves a deep exploration of the voluntary sector, while also placing these students' experiences in a national and international context.

Between March and May 2023, the research team visited these 21 schools in person and spoke to multiple stakeholders, including students, principals, teachers, chairs or members of the boards of management, and parents. A survey was also conducted with students in second year and fifth year at these schools.

The report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the findings within the voluntary secondary sector across various dimensions, including: school ethos and culture; school gender mix; the student experience; teaching and learning; the lasting impact of COVID-19 on students and schools; student wellbeing; non-academic aspects of school life; and the challenges faced by staff and schools. This chapter highlights the methodology used to conduct the study.

The study began by delving into the historical context and the development of voluntary secondary schools in Irish education. Both international and national research was examined to identify key variables and instrumentation for this study.

15 The PISA 2018 study includes students from more than 80 countries. For this study, we have restricted analysis of its sample to those from the EU/UK to allow for better comparison with our study.

Additional desk research was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the voluntary model and the distinctive ethos characterising these schools.

The empirical analysis is comprised of three main elements:

1. A survey of second and fifth year students in 21 case study schools;
2. In-depth qualitative research with students and a broad range of stakeholders in the 21 selected voluntary secondary schools, as well as stakeholders across statutory and non-statutory education bodies;
3. Analysis of GUI data, PISA data and other existing datasets.

While this research employs a mixed-method design, qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently to minimise disruption within the schools. The semi-structured interviews provided flexibility to explore emerging themes based on school observations or student comments, which were not informed by survey results. Similarly, the survey used in the study could not be modified to gather additional evidence on themes emerging from qualitative data analysis.

Survey data were analysed using Stata, with much of the analysis focusing on descriptive statistics and bivariate relationships. Multilevel logistic regression models were employed where applicable. Using a multilevel structure, capturing students within schools, we analyse the likelihood of a range of different outcomes and experiences among students. The aim is to examine how individual, family and school characteristics shape these outcomes and responses. Model results (presented in the appendix tables) are reported in the form of odds ratios, where values greater than one indicate a higher likelihood of that outcome or experience being reported, and values less than one indicate a lower likelihood.

Semi-structured rather than structured interviews were chosen for the qualitative research, an approach that afforded each participant the opportunity to relate their experiences and unique interpretations, unconfined by a more structured approach (Cohen et al., 2007). Underpinning the chosen research method is the epistemology of constructivism, which understands that we all construct our own reality based on our experiences and posits that there is no singular reality (Crotty, 1998). Interviews were recorded, by consent, and transcribed verbatim. All interviews within the case study schools, including focus group sessions and in-depth interviews with key personnel, were conducted by members of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) research team. Qualitative data analysis was carried out using NVivo, with a thematic analysis approach identifying themes directly and indirectly related to school experiences, teacher interactions and student perspectives (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

2.2 SAMPLE DESIGN

In total, 21 schools were chosen to represent a range of school settings in terms of location, school gender mix, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) status, fee-charging status and school size, using data from Department of Education and the JMB.

In terms of the school sample, Table 2.1 shows its current overall shape, as well as the overall numbers of voluntary secondary schools and student population for the relevant categories.

TABLE 2.1 CASE STUDY SCHOOL SAMPLING

		Schools	Schools %	Sample – proportion	Sample – actual
National school type	Fee-charging	52	14.2%	3.0	**4**
	Boarding	24	6.6%	1.4	**1**
	DEIS	68	18.6%	3.9	**6**
	Educate Together	18	4.9%	1.0	**2**
	Non-DEIS	204	55.7%	11.7	**8**
School gender mix	Male	108	29.5%	6.2	**7**
	Female	129	35.2%	7.4	**7**
	Coeducational	129	35.2%	7.4	**7**
School size	Small	118	32.2%	6.8	**5**
	Medium	123	33.6%	7.1	**12**
	Large	125	34.2%	7.2	**4**
School location	Leinster	79	21.6%	4.5	**3**
	Munster	113	30.9%	6.5	**6**
	Dublin	111	30.3%	6.4	**6**
	Ulster/Connacht	63	17.2%	3.6	**6**
School denomination	Catholic	340	92.9%	19.5	**18**
	Multi-denominational/Inter-denominational	23	6.3%	1.3	**2**
	Church of Ireland	17	4.6%	1.0	**1**
	Other	5	1.4%	0.3	**0**

Sources: Retrieved from Department of Education and JMB data.
Notes: 'Sample proportion' is calculated by multiplying the proportion of schools in this category among all JMB schools by the number of case study schools (i.e., 21). 'Non-DEIS schools' refers to other schools not in any other category. The number of Educate Together schools included for sampling only covers JMB Educate Together schools as of October 2022, based on the data provided by the JMB. In total, there are 385 schools in the voluntary secondary sector, including 19 new Educate Together schools with fewer than 100 students. These 19 schools are included in the denomination frame but excluded from the other sampling frames (i.e., national school type, gender mix, size and location) due to their small size and were sampled separately.

We oversampled schools from the DEIS programme, as well as multi-denominational/Educate Together schools and Church of Ireland schools, as we believe this approach allows for a better picture of the diversity found across

voluntary secondary schools; it also allows us to gain rich insights into sectors within the second-level education system that are relatively small. In total, 21 schools were chosen to represent a range of school settings in terms of location, school gender mix, school DEIS status, fee-charging status and school size, using data from the Department of Education and JMB.

Table 2.2 below shows the final sample of schools, including seven DEIS schools, ten non-DEIS schools and four fee-charging schools. The theoretical sampling process ensured wide diversity in terms of school type, gender mix, denomination, size and location, allowing rigorous analysis of student and school experience across diverse settings within the voluntary secondary sector.

A detailed analysis of the profile of voluntary secondary sector schools is presented in Chapter 3.

TABLE 2.2 CASE STUDY SCHOOL PROFILE

School type	School gender mix	School size	Rural/urban	School denomination
DEIS	Female	Small	City	Catholic
DEIS	Coeducational	Small	Highly rural/remote areas	Catholic
DEIS	Female	Medium	Independent urban town	Catholic
DEIS	Male	Small	City	Catholic
DEIS	Coeducational	Large	City	Catholic
DEIS	Coeducational	Medium	Satellite urban town	Catholic
DEIS	Coeducational	Small	Satellite urban town	Multi-denominational
NON	Male	Large	Independent urban town	Catholic
NON	Male	Medium	Satellite urban town	Catholic
NON	Female	Medium	Independent urban town	Catholic
NON	Female	Medium	Independent urban town	Catholic
NON	Coeducational	Large	Highly rural/remote areas	Catholic
NON	Male	Large	Independent urban town	Catholic
NON	Male	Medium	Rural areas with moderate urban influence	Catholic
NON	Male	Medium	Independent urban town	Catholic
NON	Coeducational	Medium	City	Multi-denominational
NON	Female	Large	Independent urban town	Catholic
Fee-charging	Male	Large	City	Catholic
Fee-charging	Female	Large	City	Catholic
Fee-charging	Female	Medium	City	Catholic
Fee-charging	Coeducational	Medium	City	Church of Ireland

Notes: We have also included two Educate Together schools in the study. However, due to the small number of student responses, in order to ensure the anonymity of the schools, we cannot report them individually. Detailed school location information is removed to avoid identification of schools. NON=non-DEIS and non-fee-charging.

2.3 FOCUS GROUPS WITH STUDENTS

In all but four of the 21 schools, two focus group interviews were conducted per school – one with students in Junior Cycle (i.e. in second year) and one with students in Senior Cycle (in fifth year). In one school, only a focus group interview with fifth year students was conducted; and in two schools, only a focus group interview with second year students was conducted. Additionally, in one school no focus group interviews with students were conducted, owing to other events taking place at the school at the time of fieldwork. Each focus group typically comprised a total of six to eight students, with two members of the research team facilitating each discussion. The focus groups followed a semi-structured interview schedule, allowing students to steer and shape the conversations. A flexible approach was adopted, and individualised elicitation supports were provided when needed.

Students who indicated that they were willing to take part in focus groups and were at school on the day of the research team's visit were randomly selected for focus group interviews. Parental consent was obtained prior to the students' participation in the focus groups. Participants were informed that they were free to opt out at the beginning of the focus group, and verbal assent was collected before any data were collected. At the end of each focus group, participants were provided with a debriefing sheet that included support resources available to them if they were experiencing difficulties, including abuse.

As part of the focus groups, students were asked to talk about their overall school engagement and attitudes, their sense of identity and belonging at school, their relationships with teachers and peers, as well as their socio-emotional wellbeing, self-confidence and social awareness. They were also invited to share their experiences and views on teaching and learning approaches used by their teachers, curricular provision, guidance and choice at school, their role in decision making and their perceptions of the school's ethos. Another focus of the research was students' own experience and perceptions of religious or ethical education. Furthermore, students were asked if COVID-19 had left any enduring impacts, across various aspects of their lives, and the changes they would like to see at school.

2.4 INTERVIEWS WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS

In addition to student focus group interviews, we also conducted in-depth interviews across the 21 selected schools with school leaders, guidance counsellors/special educational needs (SEN) coordinators (SENCOs), teachers, members of boards of management and parents in each school.

The interviews explored a number of areas:

- Teaching and learning approaches and supports;
- Available administrative supports and challenges;
- School autonomy;
- Physical infrastructure suitability;
- Sustainability of voluntary contribution model and general funding adequacy;
- Ethos and importance of faith or other value system in the school;
- Strengths and challenges arising from school 'mix' (gender, socioeconomic, additional needs);
- The impact of COVID-19 on the school community, highlighting positive changes and opportunities as well as negative impacts;
- The opportunities and challenges in new developments in curriculum design, especially the new framework for Senior Cycle, digital learning and other key areas of change.

Details of interview designs specific to each group is discussed in the sections below.

2.4.1 Interviews with principals and guidance counsellors/SENCOs

Within each of the selected schools, interviews were conducted with principals and guidance counsellors/SENCOs to explore school policy and practice across a range of areas.

In total, 17 interviews were carried out with principals (including three co-interviews with deputy principals) and two interviews with deputy principals across 17 case study schools. School leaders were asked about the extent of over- or under-subscription at the school, student differentiation and resource adequacy, as well as their perceptions of the school's ethos and the role of religious or ethical education, the teaching and learning methodologies adopted at their school, and teacher professional development. They were also asked to talk about the role of the principal, their relationships with the board of management and the management body (i.e. JMB), decision-making processes and democracy within the school, as well as the distinctive challenges faced by voluntary secondary schools, and the overall voluntary model.

Additionally, ten guidance counsellors, 13 SENCOs, and two home–school–community liaison officers (HSCL) were interviewed across 15 schools. These interviews centred on topics such as the diverse student profile, additional student needs and available support structures for such needs, subject and programme provision, formal and informal guidance and counselling at school, as well as any lasting impact of COVID-19 on the school and students.

2.4.2 Interviews with teachers

In total, we conducted 26 teacher interviews as part of this study. These interviews comprised 20 individual interviews conducted across 12 schools and four focus group interviews conducted in another four schools. Where available, a religious or ethical education teacher, a teacher from Junior Cycle and a teacher from Senior Cycle were included in the interviews in each school. Including religious or ethical education teachers enabled us to have a better understanding of that subject's standing across different schools and its relationship to the school ethos. Additionally, having a teacher from each year group allowed us to understand teaching and learning experiences within the Junior and Senior Cycles. In each school, we relied on principals to distribute interview invitations and randomly selected two to three teachers who were willing to take part in an interview.

The interviews with teachers centred on a variety of topics, including: curricular and programme provision; their teaching methodologies; the available support structures within the school; the extent to which diverse student needs were met; their perceptions of student experiences; student wellbeing and school engagement; and student identity and their sense of belonging at school. They were also asked about students and their own involvement in school decision-making processes, and their views and understanding of school ethos and religious or ethical education. Religious or ethical education teachers were asked to talk about their confidence and capacity to teach religious or ethical education.

2.4.3 Interviews with parents

In total, ten parents were interviewed as part of this study, to provide additional insights into how students and their families were experiencing diverse aspects of school life. The research team requested school leaders to send an interview invitation to parents of second and fifth year students, and we randomly selected two to three parents among those who had indicated a willingness to participate. The interviews took place at a convenient time and were conducted by phone or online.

These interviews were typically more structured than other interviews. During the interviews, parents were asked: a number of background questions; their views on the school; their children's experiences within the school; reasons for their choice of the current school; their perspectives on teaching and learning methods employed by teachers (such as the use of technology and strategies to accommodate diverse learning needs); their views regarding the school's ethos; and the involvement of students and parents in the school's decision-making processes. Additionally, parents were invited to discuss how well the school operated during the COVID-19 pandemic and any enduring effects it may have had on their children.

2.4.4 Interviews with board of management chairs and other members

The research team interviewed ten chairs or members of school boards of management. During these interviews, participants were asked about how they came to be involved with the school, the roles and responsibilities of the board, the decision-making processes within the school and the level of school autonomy. Additionally, they were asked to share their perspectives on the school ethos and religious/ethical education, student and parental engagement, their perceptions of school governance, the primary challenges they encountered, and the unique challenges facing the voluntary secondary sector (e.g., sustainability of the voluntary contribution model and general funding adequacy).

2.4.5 Interviews with representatives of management bodies/patron bodies/other key personnel

Interviews were conducted with ten key stakeholders across eight organisations. These were selected to represent key national education bodies, as well as organisations representing patron and trust bodies involved in second-level education. These included organisations representing curriculum and assessment development, school leadership development and teacher unions. The interviews did not include stakeholder groups such as parent bodies or student representative groups. The final interviewees included representatives from the Department of Education, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI), Centre for School Leadership (CSL), Edmund Rice Schools Trust, CEIST Schools Trust, Le Chéile Schools Trust, Educate Together, as well as the JMB.

These interviews explored a number of areas, including: their views in relation to school ethos, school leadership and school gender mix; the lasting impact of COVID-19 for teachers and students; unique challenges facing Irish voluntary secondary schools (e.g. finance, governance); and the strengths and weaknesses of voluntary secondary schools compared to schools in other sectors. Areas such as teaching and learning at school, the use of technology, and Junior and Senior Cycle redevelopment were also explored.

All interviews were recorded, by consent, and transcribed verbatim. Members of the ESRI research team conducted all interviews both with stakeholders and in the case study schools, including the focus group interviews and in-depth interviews with key personnel. The qualitative data were analysed across a range of key themes, seen as directly and indirectly related to school, teacher and student experiences within the voluntary secondary sector.

2.5 STUDENT SURVEY

The student survey was specifically designed by the research team for the purpose of this research project. The survey was carried out with second and fifth year students in each of the 21 schools in March and April 2023. The survey was administered during in-person school visits, with researchers present to assist students and answer questions. Parental and student consent was obtained prior to data collection. We are confident that schools distributed the consent information to all relevant parents and that there are no differential patterns in relation to which parents provided consent across the school settings.

In 18 of the 21 schools, an online version of the survey was administered, and managed through Lime Survey. Each student received a Lime Survey link unique to their school and year group and was asked to complete a brief questionnaire,

either on their personal device or a school-provided one. In two schools, a paper version of the survey was used due to issues with device availability there, as well as preferences of the school leaders. In one school, an online survey was used by students present on the day of the research team's visit, with a paper survey completed at a later time by students who had been attending an event away from the school on that particular date.

All second and fifth year students were invited to participate in the study. Students were given the option of completing the full survey or a shorter, more accessible version. In total, we received 2,243 responses across both year groups, with four accessible surveys collected by second year students and 57 by fifth year students. The overall response rate is 59.4%, with substantial variation observed across schools: response rates ranged from 23% to 87%. Two schools had a low response rate (30% or below), eight schools had a moderate one (between 31% and 50%), and ten schools had a high response rate (51% or above).

The survey included student's demographic characteristics, including family structure and parental education, their experiences of school (with a focus on engagement, ethos and gender mix) and their aspirations and preparedness for the future (academic and non-academic plans and values). Two versions of each survey were prepared, with one designed to be more accessible to students with particular needs, so as to ensure accessibility for all young people.

Responses from students across the 21 schools were analysed to assess student experiences within and across the sector. Table 2.3 below summarises the two primary data sources used in this study to compare students within the voluntary secondary sector to broader populations. Where available, the responses were compared to the broader experiences of the thousands of 13 year olds who participated in the sixth wave of the GUI study ('08 Cohort). The '98 Cohort of the GUI is not used for comparison, as the ten-year lag in the timing of the fieldwork and the large contextual and societal changes that have since occurred reduces the comparability of two cohorts across many of the dimensions we are studying. The PISA 2018 study, focusing on 15 year olds, was also used to draw comparisons between the experiences of our students within the voluntary secondary sector in Ireland and the broader population, both in Ireland and in other EU countries (including the UK).

Additionally, a number of scale measures were constructed to capture students' school experiences across a range of dimensions. These include aspects of the nature of expectations for students, the nature of student–teacher interaction, the extent of value emphasis, social and academic engagement at school and the extent to which students have a role in decision making. Table 2.4 presents details on how these measures were constructed and the reliability of the scales created.

These measures are used alongside individual variables to capture diverse aspects of school climate and student experience.

TABLE 2.3 SECONDARY DATA SOURCES

	GUI infant cohort ('08 Cohort)	2018 PISA study
Study information	GUI is a longitudinal nationally representative study in Ireland. It began by interviewing families of '08 Cohort (the infant cohort) when their children were 9 months old in 2008/2009. The same families were subsequently interviewed when the children reached ages 3, 5, 7/8 (conducted via postal survey), 9 and 13 years. The study offers rich insights into the experiences of children and their families.	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assesses students' knowledge in reading, maths and science, as well as their ability to apply this knowledge. PISA 2018 was the seventh round, with a focus on reading in a digital environment.
Time of fieldwork	Between July 2021 and June 2022.	2018 (exact dates for the fieldwork can vary by country).
Sample	Thirteen year old students attending all school types in Ireland. Sample size included for our analysis is 6,655.	Fifteen year old students (at the time of being surveyed) across different school sectors in 79 participating countries/economies (including 37 OECD countries and 42 OECD partner countries/economies). To ensure comparability, only responses collected in Ireland and other EU countries (including the UK) were included for analysis. The sample size included for analysis is 5,577 for Ireland and 197,709 for other EU countries (including the UK).
Key areas for comparison	GUI data allow us to compare the experiences and outcomes of young people in voluntary secondary schools with those in other sectors. Key areas for comparison include students' home learning experiences during COVID-19, their participation in structured and unstructured activities outside school, their experience and views of technology use at school, teaching and learning experiences, school engagement, interactions with teachers and peers, and their wellbeing.	The 2018 PISA study enables us to compare our students with a wider range of peers in various school sectors, both within Ireland and across the EU and UK. This allows us to gain insights into national and international differences. We primarily compare aspects such as students' awareness of critical global issues (e.g., climate change, global health, gender equality), their involvement in related social activities and their attitudes toward diversity. We also explore variations based on student characteristics, such as gender and family background, seeking to identify any shared or distinctive trends. Due to the unavailability of school characteristics data, we cannot differentiate student experiences across different school sectors.

TABLE 2.3 (CONTD.) SECONDARY DATA SOURCES

	GUI infant cohort ('08 Cohort)	2018 PISA study
Source	*Growing Up in Ireland* Cohort '08 summary report, July 2033, https://www.growingup.gov.ie/pubs/Key-Findings-Cohort-08-at-13.pdf	https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/pisa-2018-results.htm McKeown et al. (2019). *Learning for the future,* https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/B23321-PISA-2018-National-Report-for-Ireland-Full-Report-Web-4.pdf. OECD. (2021). *PISA 2018 technical report*, https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/pisa2018technicalreport/PISA2018-TecReport-Ch-01-Programme-for-International-Student-Assessment-An-Overview.pdf.

Note: The results reported from the GUI study and the PISA study are statistically adjusted using the weighting factor(s) provided by the study teams.

TABLE 2.4 SCALE MEASURES USED FOR SURVEY ANALYSIS

Variable name	Individual items used	Response category	Scale reliability	Cutoff point used to create the binary measure
Positive school engagement (ref: less positive)	1. How do you feel about school in general? 2. School work is worth doing. 3. The subjects I study interest me. 4. I am encouraged by teachers to continue my education or training when I leave school. 5. I get all the support I need to learn.	The response for the first item ('How do you feel about school in general?') used a scale from 'I hate it' (1) to 'I like it very much' (5), with higher values indicating more positive response. The response for the remaining four statements used a scale from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5), with higher values indicating more positive responses.	0.76	The *school engagement scale* is calculated by summing scores from the listed five individual items, resulting in a total score ranging from 5 to 25. A score of 21 to 25 represents the top 19% and indicates positive school engagement. Scores outside this range refer to less positive school engagement.
Positive teacher interaction (ref: fewer positive interactions)	1. You are told that your work is good by a teacher. 2. You ask questions in class. 3. A teacher praises you for answering a question. 4. You are asked questions in class by the teacher. 5. You are praised by a teacher because your written work is well done.	Students were asked how often the events listed happened in school on a scale from 'very often' (1) to 'never' (4), with lower values indicating higher frequency.	0.74	The *positive teacher interaction* scale is calculated by summing scores from the listed five items, resulting in a total score ranging from 5 to 20. A score of 5 to 10 represents the top 24% and indicates positive teacher interactions. Scores outside this range refer to fewer positive interactions with teachers at school.
Negative teacher interaction (ref: fewer negative interactions)	1. You are given out to by a teacher because your work is untidy or not done on time. 2. You are given out to by a teacher for misbehaving in class.	Students were asked to rate the frequency of events in school on a scale from 'very often' (1) to 'never' (4), with lower values indicating higher frequency.	0.72	The *negative teacher interaction* scale is calculated by summing scores from the listed two items, resulting in a total score ranging from 2 to 8. A score of 2 to 5 represents the top 19% and indicates positive teacher interactions. Scores outside this range refer to fewer negative interactions with teachers at school.

TABLE 2.4 (CONTD.) SCALE MEASURES USED FOR SURVEY ANALYSIS

Variable name	Individual items used	Response category	Scale reliability	Cutoff point used to create the binary measure
Positive teacher expectation (ref: lower expectation)	1. I can talk to my teachers if I have a problem. 2. My teachers help me to do my best. 3. My teachers have high expectations of me. 4. My teachers are generally fair to me.	Students were asked the extent to which they agree with these statements on a scale from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5), with higher values indicating a more positive response.	0.75	The *teacher expectation* scale is calculated by summing scores from the listed four items, resulting in a total score ranging from 4 to 20. A score of 17 to 20 represents the top 22% and indicates positive teacher expectations. Scores outside this range refer to lower teacher expectations.
Positive social engagement (ref: negative engagement)	1. I learn to get along with other people. 2. Other students accept me as I am. 3. I feel respected. 4. I feel that I belong.	Students were asked the extent to which they agree with these statements on a scale from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5), with higher values indicating more positive response.	0.82	The *social engagement* scale is calculated by summing scores from the listed five items, resulting in a total score ranging from 4 to 20. A score of 17 to 20 represents the top 24% and indicates positive social engagement at school. Scores outside this range refer to less positive social engagement.
Strong value emphasis at school (ref: weaker value emphasis)	1. I respect people from other cultures as equal human beings. 2. I treat all people with respect regardless of their cultural background. 3. I give space to people from other cultures to express themselves. 4. I respect the values of people from different cultures. 5. I value the opinions of people from different cultures.	Students were asked to rate how close they felt they were to the listed descriptions, on a scale from 'Very much like me' (1) to 'Not at all like me' (5), with lower values indicating more positive response.	0.93	The *value emphasis at school* scale is calculated by summing scores from the listed five items, resulting in a total score ranging from 5 to 25. A score of 5 to 9 represents the top 80% and indicates a strong value emphasis at school. Scores outside this range refer to a relatively weaker value emphasis at school.

TABLE 2.4 (CONTD.) SCALE MEASURES USED FOR SURVEY ANALYSIS

Variable name	Individual items used	Response category	Scale reliability	Cutoff point used to create the binary measure
Student-led ethos (ref: less student-led)	1. I am encouraged to make up my own mind. 2. I am encouraged to express my opinions. 3. I am encouraged to discuss the issues with people having different opinions.	Students were asked how often the events listed happened in school using a scale ranging from 'very often' (1) to 'never' (4), with lower values indicating higher frequency.	0.73	The *student-led school ethos* scale is calculated by summing scores from the listed three items, resulting in a total score ranging from 3 to 12. A score of 3 to 4 represents the top 31% and indicates a more student-led school ethos. Scores outside this range refer to less emphasis on a student-led ethos.
Stronger school ethos (ref: weaker ethos)	1. Promoting spiritual and human development 2. Achieving quality in teaching and learning 3. Showing respect for every person 4. Creating community 5. Being just and responsible 6. Encouraging different types of achievement (music, sports, drama, debating, young entrepreneur etc.).	Students were asked how their school promoted the listed values on a scale from 'very badly' (1) to 'very well' (5), with higher values indicating more positive responses.	0.8733	The *school ethos* scale is calculated by summing scores from the listed 6 items, resulting in a total score ranging from 6 to 30. A score of 25 to 30 represents the top 20% and indicates a stronger school ethos. Scores outside this range refer to a relatively weaker school ethos.

Note: Regarding the cutoff points used to create binary measures, our standard approach was to select cut-offs close to the 20/80% mark and we applied this consistently across scale measures.

2.6 RESEARCH ETHICS

A detailed research plan was submitted to the ESRI Research Ethics Committee in October 2022, to ensure that the study adhered to the highest ethical standards. The committee approved the approach to surveying and interviewing young participants and the protocols for data storage. Given that all student participants are below the age of 18, all focus group interviews were conducted by two researchers. Both the young individuals and their parents were explicitly informed, in plain and understandable language, about their participation in survey research and, for a sub-group, qualitative focus group interviews. They were assured, in a clear and comprehensible manner, that all gathered information would be confidential and would not be disclosed in ways that may lead to the identification of an individual participant. Written parental consent was obtained for all students who participated in the survey and/or the focus group interviews.

Confidentiality was similarly assured for school personnel. At no time do we identify any of the participating case study schools and for this reason we do not attribute quotes to individual schools (even using pseudonyms), but rather to schools with particular characteristics (such as DEIS status or the school's gender mix).

The research team followed best practice around sensitivity when interviewing young people. Special consideration was given to vulnerable groups such as young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with additional needs. In cases where a school had special classes operating for second and (less likely) fifth year students, the researchers liaised with the school contact person on whether to administer a survey (and in what format – paper, online, modified version) or whether to complete the surveys individually with students in the special classes, if necessary with the support of their teacher or special needs assistant (SNA). The research team also gathered information regarding any further accommodations required to ensure the inclusion of students with diverse needs.

Given that the research primarily focused on students' broad experiences at school, the survey and/or interviews were unlikely to upset participants or to lead to disclosure of abuse or risky behaviour. Nevertheless, comprehensive protocols were established in advance of the fieldwork in case such disclosures were to occur. The information sheet and consent/assent forms, as well as the introduction at the beginning of each focus group interview, explicitly stated that if a researcher had concerns for the safety of a young person or another vulnerable individual, they might have to inform someone who could help. It was emphasised that participation in the research was completely voluntary, and that participants could choose not to answer any questions or to withdraw at any point. Additionally,

researchers provided their contact details to each participant, should they have any questions about the research or decide to withdraw their consent at a later date.

Researchers conducted interviews in pairs when working with student participants. All focus group interviews were conducted in school, an environment familiar to the students, and researchers were never alone with children/young adults.

All focus group interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were stored separately from the school contact details. The project team maintains exclusive control over the qualitative data. Lastly, anonymised data are securely stored on a server accessible solely to members of the research team. At the end of the study, the audio files will be deleted.

2.7 SUMMARY

The study took a mixed-method approach, and this report draws on both quantitative analysis and in-depth qualitative interviews to explore how students experience voluntary second-level education and their school ethos, and how this varies across different contexts. This design allowed the researchers to reach an understanding of some of the complexities associated with the voluntary secondary sector. By using select questions employed by GUI and PISA studies, this study report is also able to offer comparisons with nationally and internationally representative thresholds, though only on select items. The report highlights the implications for policy development and provides benchmark exploratory information as a basis for further (longitudinal) research, particularly drawing on the survey instrument designed for this study.

CHAPTER 3

School profile

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Before considering what voluntary secondary schools are doing, the report will begin by looking at which students attend these schools. School profiles vary in terms of students' social and economic backgrounds, students' special educational needs (SEN) or disabilities, the location of the school, and the size of the school. In the Irish context, a key factor of the school profile is the school's specific ethos and gender makeup, addressed in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. Some of the variation cuts across sectors – for example, there are schools in each of the sectors in urban and rural settings across the country and schools in each of the sectors participating in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme on the grounds of socioeconomic disadvantage in their area. Variation within the sectors is significant: this chapter will highlight the variation within the voluntary secondary sector and explore whether there remains a clear distinction between the sectors. It will begin by tracing the historic development of the sector in terms of the proportion of students attending, their characteristics and their outcomes. Data from the latest round of the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study will then be used to investigate whether different school types still serve different populations of students. The current profile of the students attending the 21 voluntary secondary schools in our sample will then be described using quantitative data from our survey of students and qualitative material from our interviews with students, school staff and parents. Finally, the qualitative material will be used to analyse the role of parent choice and competition between schools in shaping the profile of the school.

3.2 HISTORICAL SCHOOL PROFILES

In a previous report on funding and governance across the different sectors, Darmody and Smyth (2013) trace the gradual transformation of voluntary secondary schools over the course of the 20th century from entirely private institutions to (almost entirely) state-funded institutions subject to centralised policy but retaining a level of autonomy in key governance areas. As the religious orders who had founded many of the schools became less prominent in their running, the schools became more professionalised and increasingly reliant on government funding in the form of staff salaries, capitation grants, grants for infrastructure and other capital and current spending supports. While funding is still administered and calculated differently across the sectors, the overall trajectory is, however gradually and unevenly, one of convergence. Whether this

convergence should continue to the point where no distinction remains is something we will return to in Chapter 10.

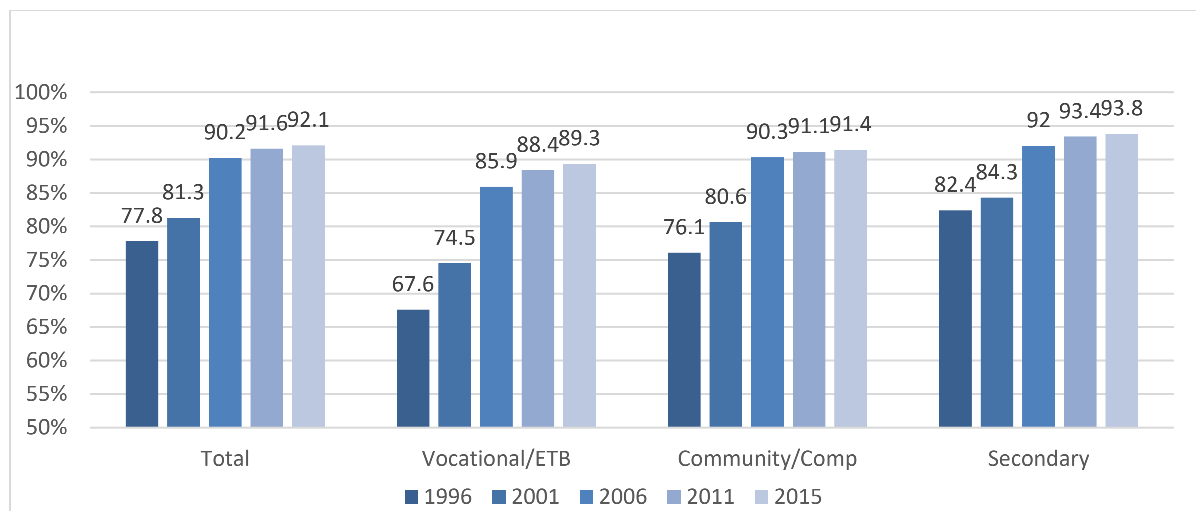
Alongside this shift in school funding and resourcing, Darmody and Smyth (2013) describe a converging trend in curriculum and cohort across the sector. The historic academic/practical split between voluntary secondary schools and Education and Training Boards (ETB) schools is no longer a straightforward dichotomy, with common curriculum across Junior and Senior Cycle in all three sectors. However, the convergence remains incomplete around schools' offerings in terms of practical choices and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). We will return to this question in Chapter 6 when we consider subject choice within the voluntary secondary sector.

The question of whether the sectors are still serving distinct cohorts is key to how schools are positioned in terms of the type of students they are understood to serve: 'academic' or 'practical', middle class or working class. Several stakeholders interviewed for this study argued that this was no longer the case:

> *The demographic of the family that would have traditionally attended the voluntary secondary sector and the state sector, they now have morphed into one.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)
>
> *Fair enough in a traditional town set up, you had your DEIS school, VEC, ETB, tech, you had your convent and you had your brothers, your two voluntary* [secondary] *schools. Traditionally people who were better off financially went to those schools … But that has changed hugely. So much so that it's hard to distinguish between your tech and your voluntary secondary schools in terms of the students that are going.* (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

Existing secondary data sources suggest that, overall, there has been convergence in this area, but that the populations in each sector remain distinct. In terms of outcomes, Figure 3.1 below shows Leaving Certificate retention rates by school type between 1996 and 2015. The data show the gap between voluntary secondary schools and ETB schools has narrowed significantly over that period, from almost 20% in 1995 to roughly 5% in 2015. Much of this narrowing is due to the changing profile of the sectors, as well as the strengths of the DEIS programme in combating early school leaving and the wider growth in Leaving Certificate completion and progression to further and higher education (McCoy et al., 2014).

FIGURE 3.1 LEAVING CERTIFICATE RETENTION RATES BY SCHOOL SECTOR AND YEAR OF ENTRY



Source: Retrieved from Department of Education data.

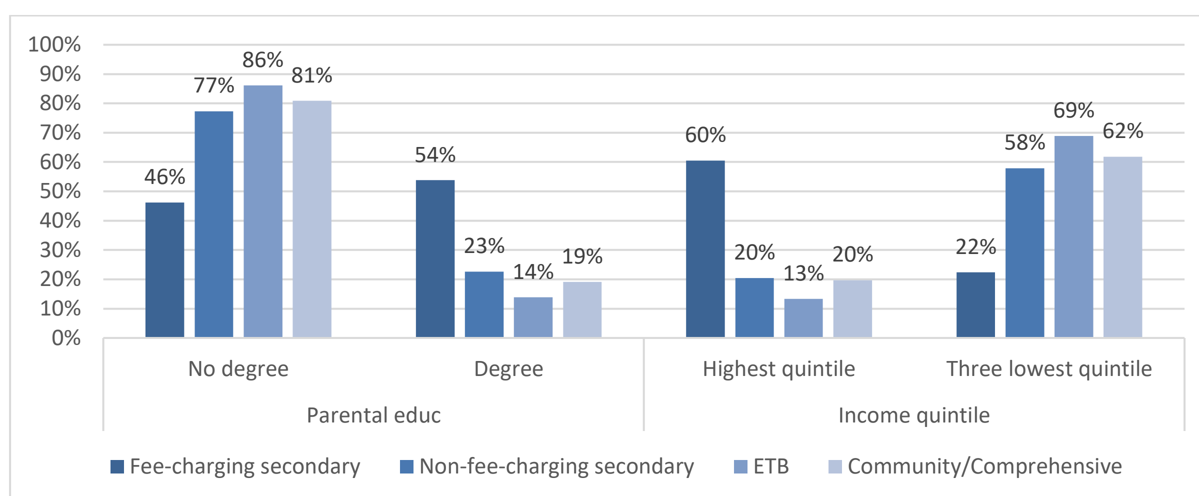
Focusing on the cohort of students attending schools within the different sectors, we can see a similar dynamic of differences reducing over time but still somewhat evident. In 2017, for example, 33% of students in the voluntary secondary sector received an examination fee waiver compared to 47% in the ETB sector and 42.8% in the C&C sector (McCoy et al., 2019).

Figure 3.2 below shows primary caregiver education and household income quintile by sector in GUI data from 2021, with the voluntary secondary sector broken into two groups: fee-charging schools and schools in the Free Education Scheme.[16] Primary caregiver educational attainment is one potential indicator of social class and a useful proxy measurement (for a recent example, see Carroll et al., 2022), and the GUI data show a sizeable difference between the sectors.

Just over half of students attending fee-charging voluntary secondary schools had a primary caregiver with a third level degree, compared to just over one-fifth of those attending non-fee-charging voluntary secondary schools, almost one-fifth of those in community or comprehensive (C&C) schools and one-seventh of ETB students. The difference between the sectors (fee-charging schools aside) was less stark in relation to household income. Twenty-two per cent of students in fee-charging secondary schools and 58% of students in non-fee-charging voluntary secondary schools were in the lowest three income quintiles, compared to 69% of students in ETB schools and 62% of students in C&C schools.

16 Schools in the Free Education Scheme are referred as 'non-fee-charging schools' throughout the report for ease of reading.

FIGURE 3.2 STUDENT SOCIAL PROFILE IN GUI '08 COHORT DATA



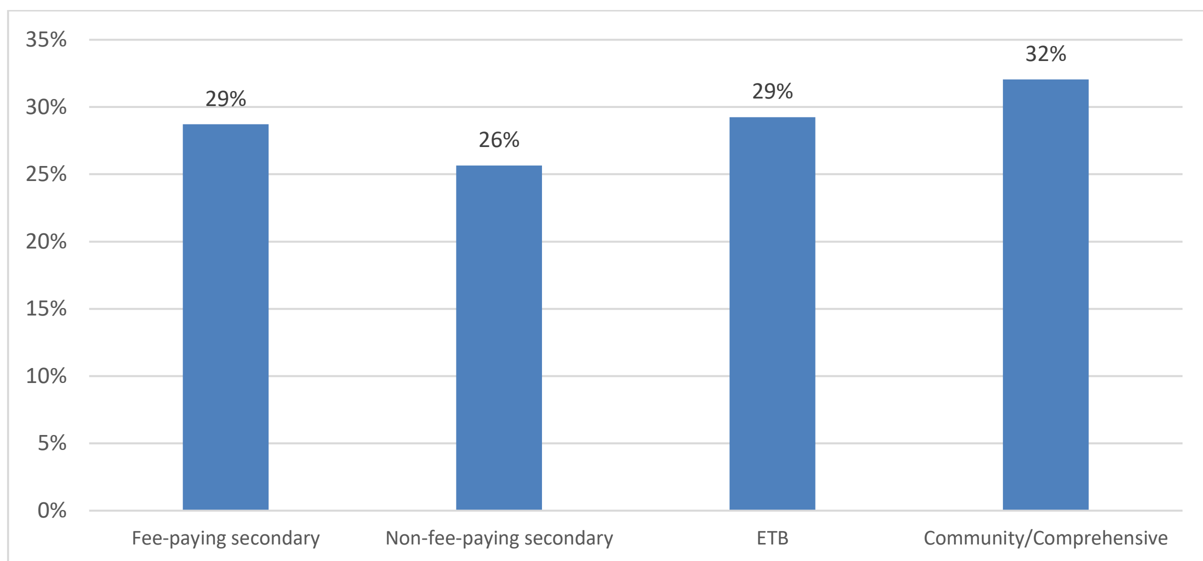
Source: GUI '08 Cohort, Wave 6.

Note: In the GUI analysis, the education level of primary caregiver is used, using primary caregivers' self-reported education. 'No degree' refers to those without a third-level degree, and 'Degree' refers to those with a third-level degree.

The other key area where the sectors may be enrolling different cohorts of students is in the extent to which they include young people with SEN. Figure 3.3 below shows the difference between the sectors in the proportion of students identified by their parents as having a SEN or a disability in GUI data from 2021.[17] Again, there is a slight gap between the sectors, but all four sectors show large cohorts of students with SEN.

[17] In Wave 6 of the GUI's '08 Cohort, primary caregivers were asked whether the subject child had any of the following conditions: blindness or vision impairment; deafness or hearing impairment; physical difficulties; intellectual disability or general learning disabilities; difficulties with learning, remembering, or concentrating; psychological, emotional, or mental health issues; breathing difficulties; pain difficulties; and any other ongoing chronic physical or mental health problems.

FIGURE 3.3 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WITH SEN/DISABILITY IN GUI 08' COHORT WAVE 6 DATA



Source: GUI '08 Cohort, Wave 6.

Table 3.1 below presents the academic performance of 15 year olds in Ireland, as captured by the 2022 PISA study, measured by their mean scores in reading, maths and science. Significant disparities are observed based on school type and DEIS status. Students in voluntary secondary schools showed higher performance in all three areas compared to those in C&C schools or ETB vocational schools. Likewise, students in non-DEIS schools achieved higher mean scores in reading, maths, and science compared to their peers in DEIS schools.[18]

[18] The ERC report (2023) also states that, given the upward bias present in the PISA 2022 estimates and particularly the greater level of bias observed among students in DEIS schools, the estimated difference between the scores of students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools is likely to be an underestimate. Furthermore, the DEIS programme was extended in 2022 to include an additional 38 post-primary schools, meaning that two DEIS schools in the PISA 2022 sample were not classified as DEIS schools in 2018. Therefore, comparisons with the corresponding estimate in previous cycles should be interpreted with a high degree of caution. See https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/B23617-Education-in-a-Dynamic-World-Report-online-1.pdf.

TABLE 3.1 15 YEAR OLDS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN IRELAND, 2022 PISA DATA

	Secondary school type and gender composition					DEIS status	
	Girls	**Boys**	**Mixed**	**C&C***	**ETB (ref. grp)**	**DEIS**	**Non-DEIS (ref. grp)**
%	17.8	16.5	19.1	16.2	30.4	21.0	79.0
Mean reading performance	**531.8**	519.7	518.8	505.2	508.8	**486.5**	523.8
Mean maths performance	493.1	**513.0**	491.6	483.1	483.8	**463.5**	499.1
Mean science performance	**509.3**	**523.2**	504.3	492.5	495.9	**472.5**	512.2

Source: PISA 2022 study: Donohue et al. (2023). See pp. 60, 84 and 105.
Note: Significantly different mean scores are in bold (compared with the reference group).

The vast majority of C&C and ETB schools have a mixed gender composition. As the number of single-sex community/comprehensive and ETB schools is very small, they are not considered as separate categories in this analysis.

Overall, the GUI and PISA data suggest that voluntary secondary schools are still enrolling a slightly more educationally and economically resourced cohort but the differences are much less pronounced than they used to be. This evidence thus partly supports the assertion that 'The demographic of the family that would have traditionally attended the voluntary secondary sector and the state sector, they now have morphed into one' (principal, non-DEIS school), if the fee-charging sector is excluded. We will now turn to the data collected for our study to analyse school profile as experienced in schools and to explore the variation in school profile within our sample of voluntary secondary schools.

3.3 SCHOOL PROFILES IN OUR SAMPLE

Table 3.2 below shows the makeup of our sample across key school characteristics: school social profile (DEIS, fee-charging, other non-DEIS schools); school gender mix; school size; and school location. Table 3.3 shows the makeup of our sample across key student characteristics: gender; SEN; parental education; economic difficulty; home language; nationality/ethnic background; and religion.[19] Each of these will now be explored in further detail below, except for school gender mix and student gender, which will be explored in Chapter 5.

19 School characteristics were recorded at the school level and added to student responses in Stata while student characteristics were recorded in the survey.

TABLE 3.2 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ACROSS KEY SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

School characteristics		% students in full sample
School type	DEIS	23.3
	Non-DEIS	58.5
	Fee-charging	18.2
School gender	Coeducational	27.2
	Single-sex girls	42.8
	Single-sex boys	30.0
School location	City	34.9
	Satellite urban town	7.9
	Independent urban town	41.6
	Rural areas with moderate urban influence	3.3
	Highly rural/remote areas	12.4
School size	Large	47.3
	Medium	41.1
	Small	11.6

TABLE 3.3 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ACROSS KEY INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Individual characteristics		% students in full sample
Gender	Female	55.5
	Male	44.6
Disability/SEN	No disability/SEN	85.5
	Had disability/SEN	14.5
Parental education level[20]	No degree	54.8
	Degree	45.2
Economic difficulty	No economic difficulty	77.7
	Had economic difficulty	22.3
Home language	English	87.3
	Gaeilge/Other	12.7
Ethnicity	Non-White	11.5
	White	88.5
Citizenship	Non-Irish	11.6
	Irish	88.4
Religious	Non-religious	18.5
	Religious	81.5
Religion type	Roman Catholic	81.4
	Non-Roman Catholic	11.7
	Other	6.9

3.3.1 School social profile

Among the students in our sample, 23% attended DEIS schools, 18% attended fee-charging schools, and the remaining 59% were classified as 'other'. The qualitative material sheds light on differences between DEIS schools and non-DEIS schools and the importance of DEIS supports. The differences mean that there is an increased school role in many students' lives, from providing food during the day, to a greater need to motivate students, to the supports provided to students living in poverty.

> *Up until they're 16 you're saying that by law they have to be in here, it's after that I'm finding it really difficult … Some of it is just motivating the kids … getting the parents in, seeing how we can help them. We've organised a lot of counselling, we've paid for it.* (Home–school–community liaison (HSCL) officer, DEIS school)

[20] For data analysis using the survey of voluntary secondary schools, 'Degree' refers to those with both university-educated parents, while 'No degree' refers to those with either or neither university-educated parents, or those who did not know their parents' education level.

> *Dealing with kids who are in temporary accommodation, emergency accommodation, hotels, travelling across the city. Where migrant parents, maybe English isn't a first language, haven't been in the education system, don't know the language. Don't know what a CBA* [classroom-based assessment] *is, don't know what a Leaving Certificate Applied is, don't know how to apply for a SUSI* [Student Universal Support Ireland] *grant. Trying to heavily support those students, you can't rely on those at home to have those skills and knowledge.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *When you're in a higher needs school, it pushes you, challenges you. Makes you think outside the box, makes you work harder to engage those people who aren't engaging. … I've worked in non-DEIS and DEIS and working in a DEIS school has made me work harder as a teacher. …. For me it wouldn't be a discouraging aspect of applying for a job. I think it gets a bad rep sometimes. For me, DEIS means opportunity. That mindset of, 'oh God, wouldn't want to work in a DEIS school', some people have that and I don't understand it. I certainly wouldn't have that. I think there's a great sense of community.'* (HSCL officer, DEIS school)

The role of DEIS resources in enabling schools to meaningfully support students was highlighted as crucial:

> *Inside in the school now we have home–school liaison. We have school completion. We have a behaviour for learning teacher. … For some students, we know realistically it's just getting them through school and getting on to the next part of their life. And I think that we're very good at that.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

> *We've had the DEIS designation since September, the supports are noticeable. The biggest single thing we had was the introduction of home–school liaison. We now have the School Completion Programme in the school. … We're going to get another post – something like attendance officer. We're starting to be able to plan, we weren't before … It's going to make a big difference to our attendance and completion rates*. (Principal, DEIS school)

> *The great thing about getting the DEIS status now this year we have a breakfast club in the morning. We have everything at the 11.00 am break is free. And you can see the students that need it the most. And they're in here at 8.15 am in the morning, they're getting their bowl of cereal or a couple of slices of toast. And it just, it does wonders for them in the classroom as well.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

The binary nature of DEIS designation, however, was seen as problematic by staff in several of the non-DEIS schools, who saw significant needs among their students without having any resources to meet these needs.

> *We have children coming from the same families who are attending DEIS schools and one of them is receiving home–school liaison and the other is here and is not and they are having the exact same issues.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)
>
> *We work with* [local education body], *we have a home–school support person one day a week to try and keep those students for whom school is a challenge – academic, attendance, parents who don't value education, to keep those in school. It's worked to our benefit in one way, school retention levels are high, but it has been a disadvantage in another way because we're not eligible for DEIS status – our two main feeder schools have DEIS status. That's an issue because those students are used to a lot more support.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)
>
> *To me, there's a nonsense across the country about having a DEIS category. There are schools in Ireland that are non-DEIS, they're fee paying. All other areas of the country have the same socioeconomic problems. Just because, for example, we're non-DEIS, we're penalised by the resources that the Department give to us in order to serve the needs of our community … But it should be equally funded and the resources should be equal to all schools. Home–school–community liaison officers shouldn't be whether you're DEIS or non-DEIS.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

While most of the schools in the sample did not conceptualise themselves as 'academic schools' in the narrow sense, there was an element of the academic/practical divide, as described in Section 3.2 in terms of how some respondents described their school. The divide manifested particularly in how they talked about discipline and behaviour in the school and in the subjects on offer in the school:

> *… I was in community school for long number of years … There's a world of a difference between the two schools. The first school was very challenging – it was a big school then, it's bigger now. It was a town with huge social issues, not a lot of major employers. A lot of students were bussed in. We had huge discipline issues, social issues, emotional issues. Whereas here there are no discipline issues. … The girls here are academic and even for the weaker ones, the stronger ones pull them up, they help them.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *We do have a good range of subjects. There's a couple missing, all the practical subjects. I think it's quite academically focused, academically sexist because we can't do metalwork or woodwork. We have music, art, home economics etc – I just instantly think of the female role is in the kitchen. They could offer more diverse subjects.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

3.3.2 School size

School sizes were categorised as follows: schools with less than 420 students were defined as 'small', those with 420 to 599 students were classified as 'medium-sized', and those with more than 600 students were designated 'large'. Approximately 47.3% of students attended large schools, 41.1% attended medium-sized schools, and 11.6% attended small schools.

When school staff talked about their school size, they discussed a balance between the level of community available in a smaller school and the ability to do more in terms of activities and subjects in a larger school (an issue highlighted earlier by McCoy et al., 2019).

> *You start to lose that element of personability. I won't know 750 kids, but the year head has a chance with 120. At 1,000 you're dealing with 180, that's untenable. Even going from 450 to 600 it's getting harder. But we also have more staff. We've never had tutor groups here, now we have one for all year groups. The year head has a structured system in place to keep track of everyone.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *We probably would have less* [choice of subjects] *than other schools because we're small.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

Most school personnel were happy that their school was at the right size, though some would have liked to take more students but lacked the physical space, had exhausted their catchment area or were 'losing' students to other schools (we will return to the subject of competition for enrolment later in this chapter).

> *The bigger school gives benefits. Where we lose out here is space – we don't have enough. There's building on at the moment, but will it be ready in September? There's not enough classrooms to move things around, we're a bit congested. We're a growing school so even when those ten classrooms are done. I don't think it's going to be enough. They'll be filled straight away.* (Special educational needs organiser (SENCO), non-DEIS school)

> *Some people will say that optimum size financially is 500, we've 350. It's a byproduct of where we are, we're getting almost everyone from*

> *our feeder schools. 450 would be easier financially.* (Principal, DEIS school)

3.3.3 School location

In terms of geographic area, a majority of the students were attending schools based in city (35%) and independent urban areas (41%), rather than satellite urban areas or rural areas.

Commuting was hailed as an issue by students across the different areas, albeit for different reasons – dense traffic in urban schools and large distances in rural schools. Urban areas specifically highlighted the impact of the housing crisis on staff and students.

> *We've two teachers coming from Cavan, one from Longford, one from Athlone. I can see the day when they say I can't do this anymore. I live in fear of the day when they hand in notice – why wouldn't you move closer? It's mostly to do with accommodation issues in Dublin – they can't afford to live here.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *I'm spending a huge amount of time writing letters of support for parents who are getting eviction notices or want to skip a queue because of a mental health issue. They're desperate and they're coming to the school – I can't help but can write a letter of support. It's an issue across schools, especially DEIS schools. We have a large rental population in a more volatile situation. I'm seeing a lot of parents wanting to keep child in the school but not sure they'll still be there. I have all that kids paperwork. I have one child commuting from* [1.5 hours away]. *They had to move, but the parents still work in Dublin so the child has to leave with them at am. They don't want to lose friends, but they're not going to make any down there either.* (Principal, DEIS school)

In rural areas, the lack of economic prospects in the school catchment area was flagged as a particular concern, with the school thus assuming an especially important role in the local community:

> *But so many young people from this area are no longer here because there's nothing for them. They have to move abroad, or they have to move to Dublin, they have to move to the big cities. That's probably the biggest problem, as a school, that we have. You get to a certain point in terms of numbers, but you can't push on because the numbers aren't there. And the numbers aren't there because the young families*

> *are not going to be there because there's nothing in the area for them.* (Teacher, DEIS school)
>
> *People are leaving and not coming back: it's a very big challenge. The green fields far away are very inviting. We are seeing a shift back lately – the primary school is seeing a pickup in numbers. People who are working from home – it's cheaper to live in* [town]*, better lifestyle, better access to everything. The most encouraging part to get them back is to have a vibrant school that'll set their kids up to do well in the future. But it's hard to encourage people back to a town like* [town name]*. I think the school is the most important part of it.'* (Board of management member, DEIS school)

3.3.4 Additional/special educational needs (SEN)

Regarding the percentage of students identified with SEN or disability, our results show wide diversity both across the voluntary secondary sector and within different school types. In DEIS schools, the average percentage of students self-reporting as having SEN stands at 17.7%, compared to 12.5% in non-DEIS schools and 16.3% in fee-charging schools. Among the DEIS schools surveyed, the percentage of students indicating SEN ranges from 9 to 40%. Notable variation is also found within the fee-charging school sector, with one school having twice as many students categorised as having SEN compared to another school in the same sector.

Staff across all school types reported increased numbers of students identified (officially or not) as having a SEN and given support. Media reports also point to a 'surge' in the number of Irish exemptions in recent years.[21]

> *I've nearly five years done here, and I was the SENCO in my previous school as well. There's been huge changes over that time in the number of students transferring into me, the number coming in with diagnosis, the number in need of learning support and the number of students accessing Irish exemptions.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)
>
> *I'm nearly afraid to say I know what I'm at, it's constantly changing and the level of need inside in the school is skyrocketing. There's more students with needs. The intense needs you'll always have, and they'll always be diagnosed before they get to us. But there's more kids with more needs out there.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

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21 Carl O'Brien (2023). 'Surge in number of exemptions for study of Irish at second level', *Irish Times*, 29 December, https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2023/12/29/surge-in-number-of-exemptions-for-study-of-irish-at-second-level/.

Of particular interest, in terms of a school's profile and its commitment to inclusion, was the way special classes were introduced and incorporated into the fabric of school life. Generally, for many schools, there is increasing pressure to provide for all students within their specified local geographical area.[22] Some principals described being proactive rather than reactive on this front, actively looking to set up a special class rather than waiting to be asked to do so:

> *We're unusual in having four special classes – two ASD* [autistic spectrum disorder]*, one mild, one moderate. We're a bit ahead in terms of the EPSEN Act.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *Our catchphrase is to respond to the needs of the community, whatever they are. When we opened the ASD unit, we had the students, we were asked would we like a build. … It didn't even enter our heads not to do it. You just do it because these are the students that we have and you respond to the needs that are there.* (Board of management member, non-DEIS school)

One school had the students but not the class due to infrastructure limitations:

> *We have nine students who meet the criteria for a special school, but we have no special class, no resources. We meet the number to get one and a half classrooms, but we can't get supports. The students can't get into special schools and we don't have space for a special class.* (Principal, DEIS school)

While schools were moving at different paces in terms of opening special classes, most schools in the sample either had such a class or a plan to open one.

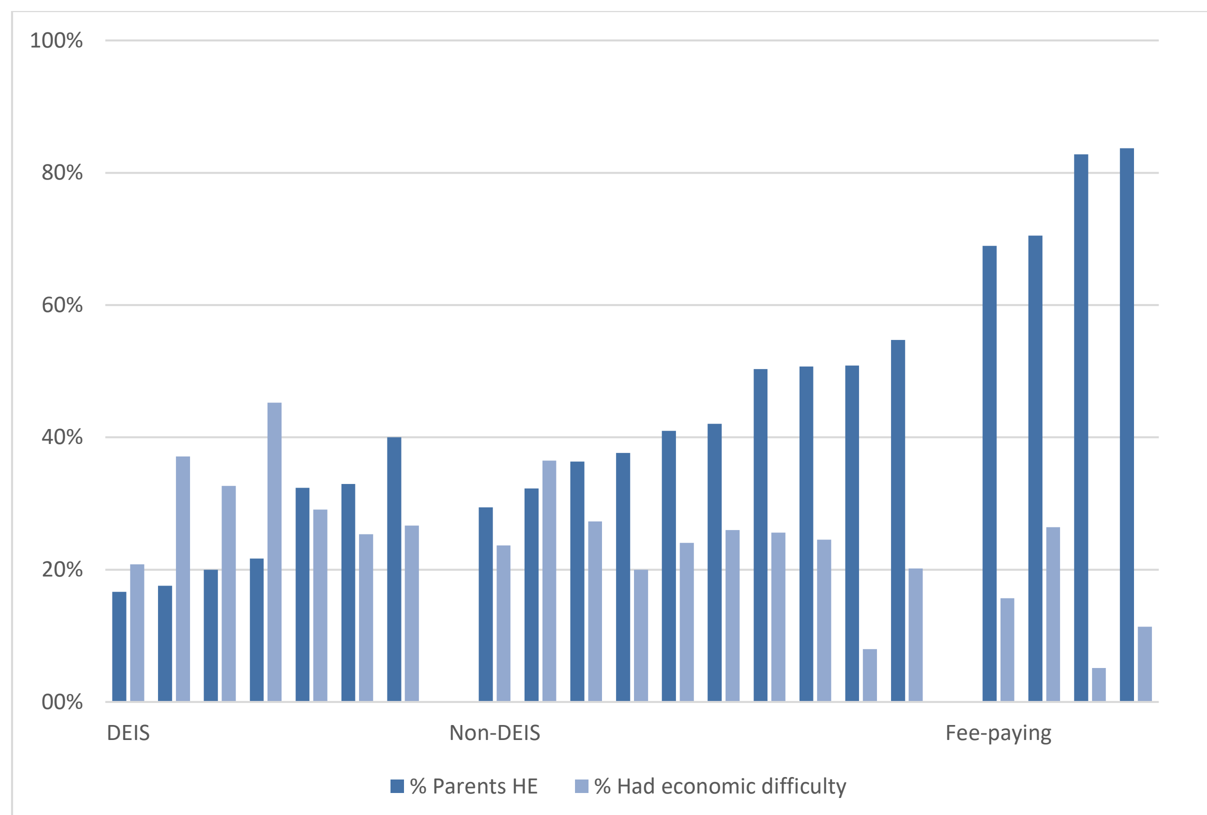
3.3.5 Parental education and economic difficulty

At the individual level, we used student reported data on parental education and household economic difficulty to explore the socioeconomic profile of individual schools. Overall, 45.2% students reported both parents had a third-level degree, 23.2% reported one parent with a third-level degree, 10.7% reported neither parent had a degree, and 21% reported that they did not know. Approximately 22.3% of students reported experiencing economic vulnerabilities in their household, related to difficulty in paying bills and access to certain material goods (e.g., the right kind of clothes to fit in, the right kind of electronic devices to use, age-appropriate books at home, or a suitable place at home to study or do homework). Figure 3.4 below shows the variation in parental education and

[22] Department of Education (2023). 'Ministers Foley and Madigan announce two special schools as part of forward planning for 2023/24', https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f1b17-ministers-foley-and-madigan-announce-two-new-special-schools-as-part-of-forward-planning-for-202324/.

economic difficulty across each of the individual schools in the sample. There is clear clustering at either end, with DEIS schools and fee-charging schools; the variation across the fee-charging and non-DEIS schools is substantial, ranging from under 30% of parents with degree-level education to over 50%. The prevalence of economic difficulties clearly shows a different pattern, with much less variation across school types, perhaps signalling the economic pressures families incur in making particular school choices.

FIGURE 3.4 EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC PROFILE OF CASE STUDY SCHOOLS (%)



Note: HE=Higher education.

Compared with 13 year olds in the GUI study, significant differences emerged across parental education levels, with a disproportionately higher percentage of students in our sample reporting having university-educated parents (45% vs 21%). Notably, even within the fee-charging sector, our sample's students were more likely to have degree-educated parents compared to the 13 year olds in the GUI study (76% vs 54%).[23] Additionally, in fee-charging schools in our sample, a lower

[23] Parental education level in the GUI data refers to the education level of the primary giver, which in the vast majority of cases was the mother.

proportion reported experiencing economic difficulties (15% vs 23%), a pattern also observed in non-fee-charging voluntary secondary schools (24% vs 39%).[24]

The challenges In supporting socioeconomically disadvantaged students without access to DEIS supports were discussed above, but it is important to note that having a mixed cohort in terms of socioeconomic background was highlighted as a strength by many stakeholders.

> [The school social mix] *is broad, fully across the spectrum. It's a huge thing – my nephews are in their thirties now and they always say* [this school] *prepared them for everything they were going to meet outside.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *The most obvious strength is just that you leave school and you're not suddenly in a completely different social environment. Your school is in some way a reflection of what is out there in the world*. (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

Within the qualitative data, there was a lack of awareness of the school's relative profile compared to other schools, particularly among non-DEIS schools with regard to DEIS schools, and among fee-charging schools with regard to non-fee-charging schools.

> *It would be, it's become more diverse within the school, you can definitely see that. There would have been, I suppose, in the past, a slight elitism to coming to* [name of school], *but that would have come from it being a boarding school in the past. But that has definitely gone.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *Funnily enough, I think our* [social] *mix is actually quite standard in terms of other schools. Although we're a fee-paying school in a salubrious suburb of Dublin, a significant proportion of our students are from outside of Dublin. … So we'd have a lot of students whose parents are working middle class, who are taking out loans to send their kids to private education. … I don't think there would be very much difference between, say ourselves and* [the name of another school in the same area] *in terms of the makeup of the male population.* (Principal, fee-charging school)

24 The gap in economic difficulty might be partly attributed to the slightly different measures used to capture household economic difficulty and should therefore be interpreted with caution. In our survey data, we use students' reports on the perceived difficulty of paying bills and access to certain material goods. For the GUI '08 Cohort data, we rely on parent-reported measures of the perceived difficulty in paying bills.

3.3.6 Home language, nationality/ethnic background

Irish schools, like Irish society more widely, have become significantly more ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse over the last two decades. Nationalities reported in our survey covered 60 different countries.

English was the predominant home language for 87% of students, with the remaining 13% speaking 53 different languages in addition to English. Eighty-nine per cent of surveyed students identified as White, 4.4% as Asian or Asian Irish, and 2.7% as Black or Black Irish, with the remaining categorised as 'other'. Approximately 88% held Irish citizenship, including 5% with dual citizenship. Wide variations across the 21 case study schools in student nationality and ethnicity were observed, with the largest variation found in DEIS schools.[25] The percentage of students from a White background ranged from as low of 60% to a high of 100%, and the percentage of students with an Irish citizenship ranged from a low of 68% to a high of 93%.

In terms of the ethnicity of young peoples' friends, 62% of students in our sample reported that most or all their friends had the same ethnicity as them. A further quarter stated that some of their friends shared the same ethnicity, and less than 7% indicated they did not have any friends from the same ethnicity. The fifth year group, as well as the students from non-urban areas (i.e., from town and rural areas), were slightly more likely to state that they had friends from the same ethnic background. Variations were also observed across case study schools, with the number of students reporting that 'most or all of their friends' were from the same ethnic group ranging from 23% to 82%.

The increased diversity of voluntary secondary schools over time was remarked on by many stakeholders and was only discussed in positive terms.

> *We do loads of events on celebrating other people's cultures. I remember just a few weeks ago we had a food festival to celebrate food from lots of different cultures. So it feels the school is putting in lots of effort to make sure that everyone feels they belong here.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

> *There's a good mix of people. Lots of religions, lots of different countries. It adds a lot. You get to learn about things like Ramadan. We have a culture day where everyone brings in food and things. My older sister is 23, when she went to school you didn't have that and it was only ten years ago.* (Second year focus group, DEIS school)

25 Note that this discussion excludes Educate Together schools in 'non-DEIS', given their distinctively diverse student background and because they are over-sampled.

> *I notice it from the primary school – the girls who are coming with Lithuanian names are Irish, they were born in Ireland, they're doing Irish. It is changing. We would have a number of international students every year… It's become more multicultural.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

3.3.7 Religious belief

Most students reported that they had a religious belief (82%), with nearly eight in ten identifying as Roman Catholic. Among the 1,659 students who identified as religious, 49% participated in religious activities on special occasions, 33% attended them at least monthly and 16% rarely or never attended. The proportion of students attending religious activities at least monthly ranged from 7% to 62% across our case study schools.

A little more than half of the students attending an Educate Together school reported that they were religious, with only 9% identifying as Roman Catholic. The remaining students either identified as 'non-Roman-Catholic Christian' (36%) or 'other' (11%). Meanwhile, more than eight in ten across all the students surveyed reported that some or most or all of their friends shared the same religion or belief system.

Shared religious belief therefore remains strong in many voluntary secondary schools. The latest Census data (CSO, 2023), recorded in 2022, show that 69% of Irish people identified as Roman Catholic (down from 79% in 2016), a figure substantially lower than our survey. Unfortunately, the breakdown by age is not yet available for 2022 but in 2016, 83% of 10–14 year olds and 79% of 15–19 year olds identified (or were identified by parents) as Roman Catholic (CSO, 2016).[26] Given the overall decline in the number identifying as Roman Catholic in the 2022 Census, it seems likely that the current population figure for these age groups is also lower now, and that students in our sample are more likely to identify as religious, and specifically as Roman Catholic, than the overall population. Given the nature of these schools, this is unsurprising. The place of religion(s) in the schools in this sample will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.

3.3.8 School profile summary

Our sample of 21 schools shows huge variation within the voluntary secondary sector in terms of where the schools are located, how many students attend and who these students are. The experiences of key groups of students, particularly SEN students and students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds,

[26] See Figure 4.3 at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rrc/.

will be further unpacked over the rest of the report. First though, we will turn to the role of school choice in determining the profile of our sample schools.

3.4 SCHOOL CHOICE

The concept of school choice is long established in Ireland, firmly embedded since the establishment of the Irish State and protected by the Constitution (Lynch and Moran, 2006). Earlier research in the Irish context has highlighted a high degree of active school choice, with half of children not attending their closest second level school (Byrne and Smyth, 2011). However, these decisions are socially structured, and not all parents can participate in the process of 'choice', with social class differences impacting on individual capacity in this regard (Lynch and Moran 2006; McCormack et al., 2020).

In a European context, Agasisti et al. (2022) note that across many European countries, including Ireland, governments fund and regulate a diversity of school types, including private schools. Parents can choose among a rich array of options, often provided by a range of religious congregations. Of the 27 countries belonging to the EU, they note, 16 have state-funded privately operated schools. Taken together, in these 16 countries 20% of kindergarten to 12th grade students are in private schools funded by the government (citing Melo, 2022). OIDEL (2018) reports that 81% of European countries provide some funding to non-government schools, with 21% classified as providing low/poorly defined aid, 10% subsidising teacher salaries only, 33% providing operating costs only, and 17% covering nearly all costs (including Ireland, but also Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia and the UK). They also note that in many European countries, governments fund schools that have a distinctive religious character and mission. They note that while most Catholic schools in Ireland are funded by the State, this is also the case in France, and an interesting example of government funding of faith schools can be found in Portugal.

Earlier research in the Irish context (Genesis, 2023) examined parental attitudes and perceptions towards education in schools with a Catholic ethos, [27] to understand the desire for and perceived value of such an education, and to identify any key changes in attitudes and behaviours around school choice and provision. Almost half of respondents would like a greater choice of school patronage. Among these respondents, when asked what choice they would make if more types of schools were available, over one-third stated a preference for a school with some kind of religious ethos, one-fifth said they would choose a multi-denominational patron and 22% a 'non-denominational school'. Our results echo the findings from the Genesis study, based on parent reports (2023), which find a similar proportion stating a preference for a school with some kind of religious ethos – either a sole

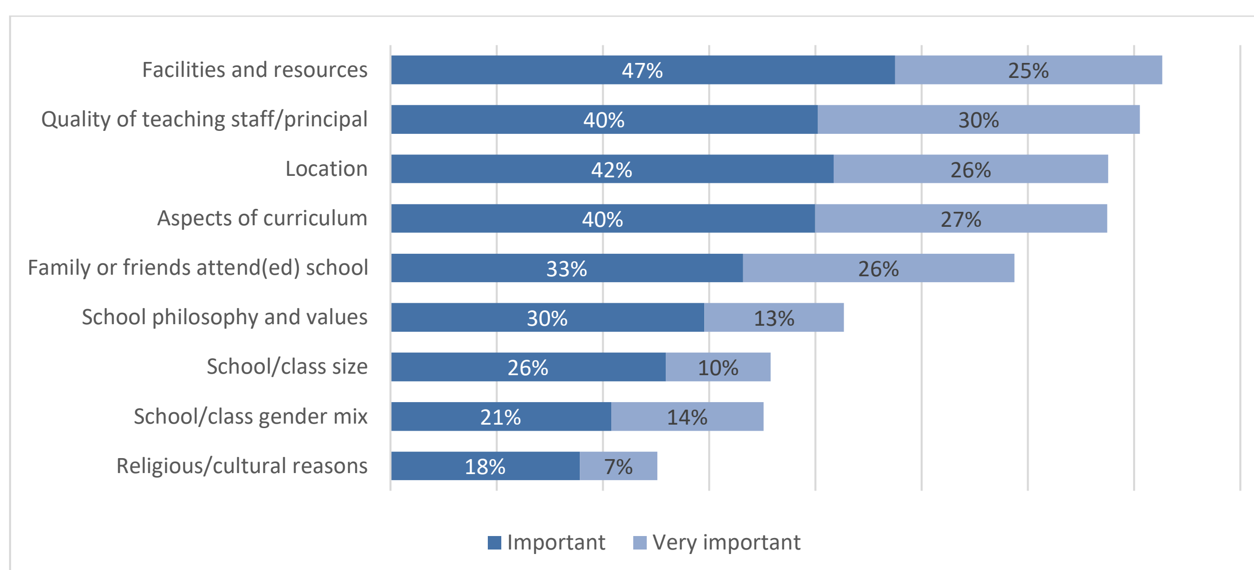
[27] Genesis research data collection was with parents and guardians.

'religious or faith-based ethos and patron', or a 'state-run school with joint patronage with a religious or faith-based body'. In terms of the factors influencing choice of school, the child's own preference, location, academic reputation, range of subject and being a coeducational school were prominent in responses to the Genesis survey.

3.4.1 Students

In our survey of voluntary secondary schools, students were asked about the reasons for choosing their school and the importance of different factors in making their decision. A majority considered 'facilities and resources' (73%), 'quality of teaching staff or principal' (71%), 'school location' (68%), and 'aspects of the curriculum' (67%) to be either important or very important. 'Family or friends attending the school' also held significant importance for 59% of students. On the other hand, factors such as 'religious or cultural reasons' (25%), 'school gender mix' (35%), 'school/class size' (36%) and 'school philosophy/values' (43%) were considered less important.

FIGURE 3.5 FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS' SCHOOL CHOICE (%)



Notably, students from more advantaged backgrounds (those with degree-educated parents and without economic difficulties) tended to place a higher value on school facilities and resources (75% vs 63%), curriculum (70% vs 56%), and teaching quality (72% vs 66%). DEIS students attached slightly higher importance to location and school/class gender mix, compared to their peers attending non-DEIS schools (71% vs 67%, 42% vs 33%, respectively).

Conversely, students with SEN placed greater importance on school/class size and gender mix, with 41% of students with SEN considering school/class size (very) important compared to 34.4% of students without SEN, and 49% of students with SEN finding school/class gender mix (very) important, compared to 33% of students without SEN. No significant differences were found in relation to gender, except for a slightly higher proportion of boys considering 'location' important when making their school choices, compared to girls (70% vs 65%).

In the qualitative material, students in the focus groups mainly reported choosing their school either because family members already attended, it was the nearest school or their friends were attending. Interestingly, in the first two, the students were not exercising much choice while in the latter they did not choose the school per se, just the other students they would like to be with. Other students said that their parents did most of the choosing for them, either selecting the school or pushing them towards it. Some students were not in their first-choice school and were settling for a second or third choice. Where students did discuss actively choosing schools, they focused on the school's ethos (in both Catholic and Educate Together schools), reputation, sports and specific subjects available in the school.

3.4.2 Parents

Parents reported a similar range of reasons for their choice of school, with location, family history of attending the school and where their children's friends were going featuring prominently. However, they also mentioned the facilities the school had to offer and focused more than the students did on the overall reputation of the school.

> *The school was our first choice. Because we knew it was a good school and they had a very good building and good resources and good teachers. And they had a good reputation.* (Parent, non-DEIS school)

School ethos, particularly for those attending a faith-based school, was also important for several of the parents:

> *I have three guys, in first, third and sixth year. It was our first choice. The Catholic ethos is important to us.* (Parent, fee-charging school)

> *It is a Catholic school in essence, I think that's less important now, but there is definitely a Catholic ethos throughout the school. From a value perspective there is a strong sense of our girls' development, bringing out your best self.* (Parent, non-DEIS school)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, parents took a longer-term view of the school's offering than their children, with one in particular noting the school's emphasis on Leaving Certificate Applied and practical learning from the start.

> *When we went to the open day, probably one of the areas that we were most impressed with was the Applied Leaving Cert students and the way they were communicating with us and presenting the work they had done on work experience. That is a very strong part of the offering at this school.* (Parent, non-DEIS school)

Attendance at a fee-charging school, unlike with other schools, involves a financial outlay. The emphasis was on the quality of the overall school experience they saw these schools as offering, with the fees seen as a worthwhile cost or investment.

> *The broad range of subjects and the extracurricular activities, such as very strong music and sport and that whole kind of all-round development. We felt they were very important. So it was our first choice and an important choice.* (Parent, fee-charging school)

Where parents who had chosen fee-charging schools mentioned the school's social mix they tended to present it as a challenge rather than a strength, and to emphasise that it was not that different from non-fee-charging schools:

> *Maybe a little bit of snobbery from some people, you might be open to witnessing that. And then your daughter comparing, oh she has this and I don't. Maybe you're not getting as balanced a view of society perhaps as you would in a non-fee-paying school. But we're very conscious of that and we always try and make sure that she mixes with people, sports, outside of school just to dilute any of that down. Snobbery can be at the parent and student level. But for the most part very nice normal families and people, I think it's a good mix.* (Parent, fee-charging school)

Of course, when choosing a school the choices are not endless, and several parents reported compromising on one aspect of the school because they liked the rest. This particularly applied to school ethos and school gender mix:

> *It is a single-sex school and its actually something I don't agree with … I know there is a lot of talk at the moment around abolishing single-sex schools and I would be very much in favour of that … If there was a referendum in the morning, I would be voting to remove all single-sex schools.* (Parent, non-DEIS school)

> *I very much respect the values, Catholic stuff aside, if you get what I mean. No it doesn't get in the way but it is quite strong. Just a part that I don't necessarily like, but it doesn't undermine the other stuff that's going on. It's just the messaging is quite strong on the Catholic front. But I knew that, it's a Catholic school and I went into it with my eyes open so you know.* (Parent, fee-charging school)

3.4.3 School staff

The above views are particularly interesting in the context of how school staff discussed school choice, best characterised as a discourse of competition. On the one hand, many felt that schools had to compete to give the best possible 'product' to achieve healthy enrolment, which was necessary to keep the school running:

> *Strategically, and maybe I shouldn't say this, but strategically the best school in the region will take from lesser schools in the region, because if I'm a parent, I don't want to hear you have a brilliant plan in four years' time, I want it next year, because my kids are in your school next year and the year after, and then they're gone.* (Board of management member, Non-DEIS school)

> *So, we're very much in competition in the local area here with other second-level schools where we're all fighting for the same students, if you like. So we have capacity in all year groups. It's a real challenge. We've about 420 students here. At one stage we had 1,080.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *You would like to try and attract as many students as possible into the school. Staff work extremely hard on open days. But at the end of the day, it's parental choice as to where kids are going and I think now kids are picking. I think it's the biggest pressure because it impacts capital funding as well. Oh we work so hard, don't we. Jumping on social media too, all our interactions with the community. But there are a lot of secondary schools in* [town]. (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

The sense of competitive pressure gave rise to an almost evolutionary understanding of school development over time:

> *There's a need for co-ed schools. There are more mixed Christian Brothers than you'd think. There are also private schools who are starting to take in a mixed cohort. People will vote with their feet. If numbers are going down, why?* (Principal, DEIS school)

While this dynamic is visible in the many schools out there that have transitioned from single-sex to coeducational, the parent perspectives above suggest that a

binary measure of enrolment/non-enrolment is far from being the most effective measure of student and parent views of specific aspects of a school.

3.5 SUMMARY

The data collected for this study, alongside nationally representative secondary data, highlight the variation in school profile across the three sectors and within the voluntary secondary sector. The differences between the three sectors in intake and outcome have narrowed over the last few decades, though some remain. The diversity within the voluntary secondary sector remains pronounced, with different voluntary secondary schools serving different populations in a variety of ways. The findings show diversity that was first highlighted by Hannan and Boyle's (1987) analysis of the way in which certain religious orders had distinctive orientations in terms of social class groups, genders and curriculum. Earlier research has also highlighted the role of school context and composition on a range of student experiences and outcomes, both in the Irish context (McCoy et al., 2014b; McCoy et al., 2012) and internationally (Prior and Leckie, 2023). The following chapters will explore the experiences of students and the perspectives of other key stakeholders across a range of themes, highlighting where relevant the particular experiences of some of the key groups discussed in this chapter.

CHAPTER 4

School ethos and culture

4.1 INTRODUCTION

School ethos, or characteristic spirit, is one of the key areas where the voluntary secondary sector is distinct, with almost all of Ireland's schools that have an explicit religious ethos located within the sector. There is a complex relationship between a school's ethos (denominational or inter-denominational), its role in students' faith formation and its classroom-based religious education or ethical education curriculum. This chapter explores the different articulations of the role of the school in students' religious development among our study participants, across each of these three areas. Especially notable from the data was the widespread perception that this role had shifted significantly over time, as well as the more contested question of how it should develop in the future.

There is some evidence regarding what school ethos means for Catholic and non-Catholic students attending the sector. Drawing on the voice of minority faith and worldview students in second-level schools with a Catholic ethos, Stapleton (2020) found inequalities exist in the facilitation for minority faith/worldview students to manifest their faith compared with Catholic students.[28] However, students also expressed positivity about their schools' ethos. Regardless of students' individual worldviews, acquiescence, compliance and some support for the Catholic-centric practices were evident. While counter-hegemony was apparent, there was also positivity toward their school experience and a wish to be educated together rather than segregated due to their faith or worldview.

There is also evidence to suggest that religious education can be important for wellbeing. Meehan (2019) reviews evidence from international longitudinal studies to demonstrate a strong positive correlation between religious education and wellbeing. She concludes that as a legitimate source of wellbeing, religious education with sound content and pedagogy, well taught by qualified and supported teachers, can be an integral part of a Junior Cycle programme.

School ethos extends far beyond the religious dimension, however: Irish second-level schools have both an explicit ethos and an implicit understanding of what the

[28] The concept of 'worldview', generally defined as a view on life, the world, and humanity, is regularly used in religious education. This is to refer to a more personal and broader (i.e., secular) interpretation of views on life than 'religion'. The need for a more encompassing concept than religion stems from a growing part of the European population ceasing to participate in traditional, institutionalised religious practices on a regular basis, while still maintaining a relatively high level of private individual belief (van der Kooij et al., 2017). According to the Commission on Religious Education in the UK, a worldview is defined as: 'a person's way of understanding, experiencing and responding to the world' (Commission on Religious Education).

school is driven by and to across all sectors. As we only looked at voluntary secondary schools for this study, we cannot pin down what is distinct about the sector in this dimension of school ethos.

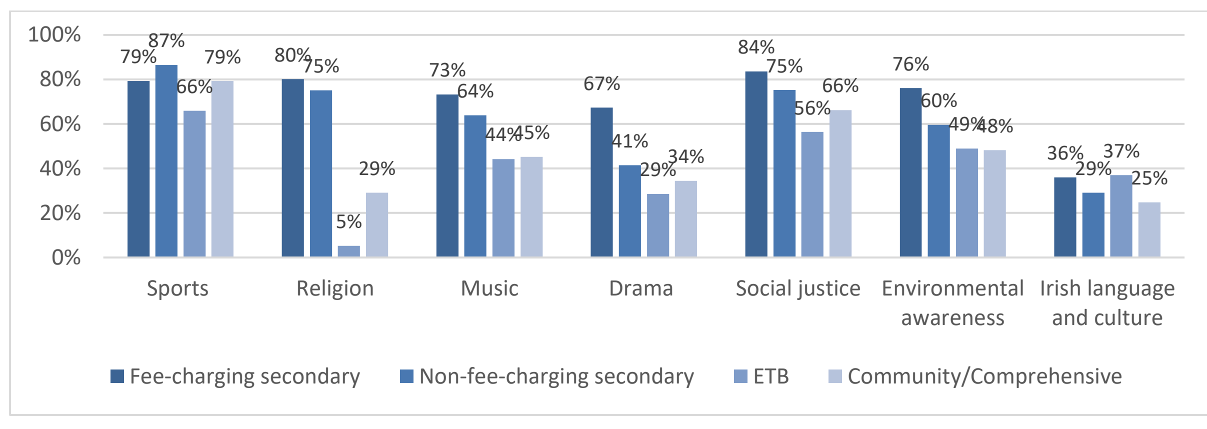
Figure 4.1 shows factors indicated by school principals as being 'very important' to their ethos, by school sector and the proportion of students within them. 'Social justice' and 'sports' were consistently viewed as very important to school ethos across all four school sectors. However, notable differences were observed regarding 'religion'; this is identified as 'very important' for a disproportionately higher percentage of students in voluntary secondary schools, regardless of the school's fee-charging status.

This chapter will explore school ethos as perceived by students, parents and school staff across our 21 schools, in an attempt to draw out the different ways the school ethos influences life in voluntary secondary schools. In the context of their school's unwritten policies around discreetly supporting low-income students with food, uniforms and books when needed, a board of management chair articulated the nebulous but vital nature of a school's ethos particularly well:

> *Ethos is a very strange thing, very fluid, very hard to put your finger on it. Yet you know if you go against it what happens. We would know here if somebody went against our ethos but it's difficult to pin it down.* (Board of management member, Non-DEIS school)

As well as an ethos, schools have a culture: a distinctive way of relating across the school community and within the school as an institution. Of course, there is no hard and fast distinction between school culture and school ethos, as they reflect and even drive each other. In this study we report on them separately but the constant cross-referencing between the two in the qualitative material shows that they are in many ways two sides of the same coin. School culture across our 21 schools will also be considered in this chapter. Next, we will turn to the student voice within schools, an aspect of school life linked to school ethos and school culture but increasingly seen as important in its own right. Finally, we will ask a basic but fundamental question about the experiences of students in this study, one we see as strongly linked to these three aspects of school life: do they like school?

FIGURE 4.1 FACTORS RATED IMPORTANT IN SCHOOL ETHOS BY SCHOOL SECTOR



Source: GUI '08 Cohort, Wave 6.
Note: The figures represent the percentage of students within each sector attending a school in which each of these factors was described by its principal as being important to the school ethos.

4.2 SCHOOL ETHOS

Of our 21 schools, 18 had a Catholic ethos, 2 were Educate Together schools with a multi-denominational ethos and 1 had a Church of Ireland ethos. While the role of this religious aspect may be the first thing that comes to mind when discussing school ethos, it was often not the primary concern of our study participants when discussing school ethos. It is also noteworthy that the perceived importance of the school ethos tended to be higher among staff than among students.

We will use student responses to a broad, open question about school ethos, displayed in Table 4.1 below, to guide our analysis,[29] in dialogue with the views of other school stakeholders. At the end of the section, we will return to the survey and look at how student perceptions of the importance of school ethos was shaped by their school experiences and personal characteristics.

29 'What does your school's "characteristic spirit" or ethos mean to you? In other words, what do you think your school really values? What sort of community is the school?' (963 responses). The responses were coded using inductive codes generated from the responses. Due to the number and breadth of codes generated, not all are reported on in detail in this piece.

TABLE 4.1 STUDENT RESPONSES TO AN OPEN COMMENT BOX QUESTION ON SCHOOL ETHOS

Category	Responses		
School environment	Community (229)	Behaviour (32)	Gender specific (21)
	Relationships with staff (19)	Safe environment (14)	Community (failing) (2)
Values	Respect (177)	Kindness (92)	Giving back (13)
	Responsibility (11)	Fairness (11)	Fairness (failing) (1)
Academics	Academics (176)	Intelligence (10)	Further/higher education (8)
	Academics (failing) (5)		
Equality, diversity and inclusion	Inclusion (138)	Diversity (50)	Equality (36)
	Diversity (failing) (9)	Inclusion (failing) (5)	
Sports	Sports (126)	Sports- excessive (20)	Sports – insufficient (7)
	Sports – gendered (3)		
Negative	Doesn't know/care (95)	Disagrees with ethos (73)	Doesn't mean much (56)
	Not upholding ethos (14)		
Student centred	Values students (79)	Wellbeing (28)	Wellbeing (failing) (20)
	Enjoyment (19)	Support (7)	Student voice (6)
Generic	Education (73)	Generic positive (30)	Education (failing) (4)
Student development	Personal development (73)	Social development (9)	Career (4)
	Social engagement (4)		
Religion	Religion – neutral (70)	Religion – negative (31)	Specific ethos (30)
	Religion – positive (20)	Religion – insufficient (1)	
Other extracurricular	Student interests (56)	Music (10)	Student interests (failing) (7)
	Music (failing) (1)		
Wrong reasons	Image conscious (45)	Conformity (24)	Appearance (20)
	Money (5)		
Effort and pressure	Values work (45)	Achievements (41)	Competition (3)
Positive	Quote from crest (29)	Tradition (6)	School spirit (5)
Social side	Friendship (26)	Bullying (14)	Friendship (failing) (1)
Ambivalent	Complex (25)	Not all students (10)	Inconsistent (4)
Characteristics	Creativity (5)	Empowerment (2)	Leadership (1)
	Freedom (1)		
Other	Other (9)	Wider system (3)	N =963

Perhaps the most striking thing about the open-ended survey responses is the sheer breadth of factors that students see their schools as valuing and promoting. In total, the responses are recorded under 73 codes across 18 themes, with the frequency of responses within each code ranging from 1 to 229. It is clear in the survey responses, and in the qualitative material more widely, that schools offer different things to different students, or at least that the value placed on different

aspects of the school varies among students. As well as the breadth of the responses, the material also stands out in the extent to which the different codes are interwoven in how respondents conceptualise their school ethos. For example, one student described their school ethos as follows:

> *I think the school community is very good. It includes everyone and the staff are always up for a laugh with the students which also helps.* (Survey response)

In other words, the community is created through and valued because of the inclusion of all students and the relationships between staff and students. Another student gave the following answer:

> *Respect for everyone is very important to the school, accepting everyone for who they are. And treating everyone there fairly. Each student giving their best to life in the school.* (Survey response)

Here we see respect being the driving force of the ethos, linked to valuing students for who they are and also to students reciprocating this respect and engagement. While we do not go through the aspects of ethos highlighted by our participants one by one, there are strong links across the aspects. However, there is no discernible pattern in the links – respondents are piecing together the workings and importance of ethos in their own varied ways.

The most frequent code was Community, which may reflect the wording of the open-ended question in the survey. The school community was treasured by many students as well as by interview respondents:

> *We're all one community. It doesn't matter which race* [you are]. (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

> *I think the school values that it is a tight knit community, and that we are all part of a community, a place where we can all belong.* (Survey response)

> *There's a nice community cohesion, I think the kids see that. You know, you're having a chat with cleaning staff one minute, the principal the next. I don't feel there's any hierarchies in the school. It's a big community but there's a nice sense of community with it. The past pupils as well you'd see them around. Nine times out of ten they want to come up and have a chat.* (Teacher, fee-charging school)

The school was also seen by some respondents as a key part in a wider community, something which schools worked hard to sustain:

> *The* [school community] *is not like any other experience – it plays such a big role and it's only increasing. We have parent education on pretty much every evening – we've had language classes, Census classes, you name it. We're really looking to engage the wider school community. We do lots of work with the county council planting trees, we do the green mile where TY* [Transition Year] *students litter pick 1 km each side of school. We're pretty far reaching into the local community.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

> *A lot of older people in town would have gone to the tech or the school, know it and attended. We're still in the old building, so it's familiar to them. … The school does Tidy Towns as well. We do Masses in the church too. Young Environmentalists too. It teaches you about life. And it's good as well for the school, you have people going around town who see what the school is doing for the town or when they see you behaving well around the town, people who are sending their kids to school are going to think well of this place.* (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

There were also respondents who felt that the school was not succeeding in creating a community, or at least that they were not part of a school community:

> *It's quite unwelcoming to us people as students.* (Survey response)

> *I think my schools values are Christian based and morally correct in every way. I don't know what sort of community my school is because I am not a part of it.* (Survey response)

That these schools were communities was evident to us across our data and in our visits to each school. The relationships among students, among staff and between students and staff drive much of what schools do and why they do it, in concert with the school's ethos. Clearly there is more work to be done in making all students feel part of this community, especially in light of the knock-on effects this could have on student engagement and wellbeing.

In terms of the moral and personal characteristics schools were trying to instil in students, and model in their day-to-day practice, there is an interesting contrast between the relatively high number of students who saw schools as living by moral values, particularly respect, kindness and 'giving back' and promoting personal and social development, and the much lower number who saw schools as valuing particular personal characteristics like creativity, freedom and leadership. When interviewees stressed an emphasis on holistic development in their school, they tended to see it as comprising both moral and personal development:

> *I think it's very much about the holistic development of each pupil, not just the educational development but the virtue, such as how to interact with people. It's very much about volunteering or being empathetic, not just to the peers but to the teaching staff and everybody. It is very much about trying to develop each pupil as a whole person, considering the ethical and cultural differences of each and every people.* (Board of management member, fee-charging school)

> *I'm always struck by a quote from St. Irenaeus – the glory of God is the human person fully alive. I also like Maslow's idea of self-actualisation. I like the idea of young people optimising what they can achieve. Leadership's job is to take the barriers out of the way and free them to be who they can be.* (Principal, DEIS school)

Key to this holistic development is the role of extracurricular activities in the schools, particularly sport. Sport and other extracurricular activities were seen as a significant part of a school's identity, and as part of what made school enjoyable. This is further supported in Chapter 9, where we note that the majority of students engage in extracurricular activities, as also noted by the Department of Education (2021). They played a significant role in engaging students, particularly students who were less engaged academically or even students who might otherwise not have engaged at all:

> *In DEIS schools particularly there are people who only come in when there's athletics or basketball. Then you've got that in your life, you know how it is to be committed to running so how do you commit to yourself, how do you say I'm worth it. So you can use them sort of things.* (Home–school–community liaison (HSCL) officer, DEIS school)

We will return to the role of sports and other extracurricular activities in Chapter 9, but it is important to note here the respondents who felt that sport (or a particular sport) was overemphasised in their school ethos or overvalued by the school:

> *There's, a stigma if you don't play hockey – you're seen as not athletic at all. They don't take into account any other sports. There's a certain type of people – we all fit into that mould in some way but not everybody fully. For sports like basketball, they're really good and they got no recognition. If you don't play hockey you're irrelevant. The whole school goes to hockey matches – there are buses booked, classes are cancelled.'* (Fifth year focus group, fee-charging school)

Many students and staff highlighted the place of academic instruction in the school's ethos, often as part of what the school did rather than the entire purpose, and stressed many active efforts made by school to achieve a balance between encouraging academic and holistic development.

> *In my opinion, my school values academic success as well as our personal ambitions and interests. The school has put in place many different extracurricular activities that students can get involved in if they wish while also ensuring that we have the best opportunity to excel academically.* (Survey response)
>
> *I think the school really values sports. Academically it's massive as well. We have a 600 pointer every year. I suppose it's balanced, you do the best you can do, whatever it is.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)
>
> *I think there's a good balance between education … like, it's not the end of the world if you do badly in one test. Yeah, it's important to do well but don't stress too much. There's a good balance between sports and music and academics.* (Second year group, fee-charging school)

However, a significant number of students felt that the school only or overly focused on academics, sometimes linked with a perception that the school cared more about its reputation than its students:

> *The school values academic achievement and image above everything else.* (Survey response)
>
> *Values results. Students' wellbeing and mental health is irrelevant in the current school system.* (Survey response)
>
> *I think our school is very academic focused which is a very good thing to have but I do believe that there needs to be more focus on other opportunities that should be encouraged.* (Survey response)

The extent to which schools managed to strike a balance between valuing academic development and encouraging students to work hard without creating an excessively competitive or pressurised environment is a core concern of Chapter 6.

In contrast to those who thought there was an overfocus on academic achievement, many students and school staff felt that their school did genuinely value students and the relationship between students and staff, and that their school was above all a caring place:

> *My school really does value everyone's best interest. They put their students first, they accept everyone for who they are and do not shame people.* (Survey response)

> *It values us as individuals for who we are and what we have interests in. The school values also that we are happy and feel safe here meeting with friends and taking part in activities that we have a joy in participating. The community within this school is quite a happy place which we don't dread coming into every day.* (Survey response)

The positive sentiment towards teachers was consistently reflected in the interviews with students. One student highlighted, 'I think most of the teachers here are phenomenal anyway' (Fifth year focus group, Educate Together school), underscoring the high regard students held for their educators. Another student from the same focus group emphasised the supportive nature of teachers, noting that 'They [teachers] are always very supportive,' indicating a nurturing environment within the school. Additionally, a student expressed profound admiration for the understanding and caring attitude of the teachers:

> *… I think they* [teachers] *are the most understanding and caring and they have such a good they have an extreme amount of empathy towards teenagers specifically. Because I wouldn't find that support anywhere else.'* (Fifth year focus group, Educate Together school)

The quote above underscores the deep sense of trust and connection students feel with their teachers, highlighting the pivotal role teachers play not only in academic instruction but also in providing emotional support and guidance. Such views are shared in the wider school community among teachers and school board members.

> *We have a particularly strong pastoral care system – tutor, year head, chairde, choiste, guidance counsellors, a counsellor, care team meeting. That demonstrates our ethos in action.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *People go above and beyond, that's a culture in the leadership in the school. They can see, dealing with kids coming in in the morning, who is struggling and who needs help. And from what I can see that help is provided without anybody knowing about it. It's not publicised. And that's the way it should be.* (Board of management member, DEIS school)

As the last quote shows, ethos was often about who schools were engaging with, as well as how they were engaging with them. In particular, diversity and inclusion were pointed to as fundamental to the mission of the school by participants across the school community.

Diversity was highlighted as a growing strength of the school over the last few decades, especially by staff who had been involved for long periods of time:

> *You'll have seen the flags flying out the front – we have BLM* [Black Lives Matter],[30] *Pride, active schools, green schools, a few other flags as well. Over time things have changed and evolved and gotten better for staff and students. We always have new ideas coming in. The flags are student-led and very staff led – we've seen over the last seven-ish years, you see people becoming more comfortable being who they are, and this school is very accepting of that. Even today, we would still have Stand Up Week, this idea that we're all one, all the same, yet we're respectful of others. That'd be LGBTQ+, we've also had a week about the BLM, assemblies, activities, kids running around doing all these mad things. Raising awareness is huge. But it's not just awareness, it's putting it into practice as well. It links back to our ethos, but also the driving force of our school: that everyone is welcome.* (Teacher, fee-charging school)

Perceptions of diversity among students incorporated their different religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as membership of the LGBTQ+ community:

> *Children of all faiths and none are here and welcome. And some of them sing in the folk group, many of them attend school Masses, and they're not asked to pray, but some of them just come and sit there. And they're not obliged to come now. They're not asked to participate or anything like that. The ethos award winner this year is an African student who's a Muslim, but she came with her family -- because we mark the feast of* [school's patron] *with Mass. Now, had they decided to come after Mass, that would have been fine. But they didn't. Her sister was head girl of the school, and you know, it seemed to present no difficulty for them.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *We also have a massive LGBT community – we have an acceptance club for LGBT people and allies, it's very open and there's no issue with it … It was started by students who asked an LGBT teacher to run it. Well, the teacher chairs it, it's the kids who run it. Because the teacher lives quite close to school, it's common knowledge that they're out. For staff as well, I suppose, it's an inclusive place.* (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

Not all students felt that schools were actually succeeding on the diversity front. Some mentioned specific incidents which they felt the school had not dealt with

[30] Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a social movement that seeks to highlight racism, discrimination and racial inequality experienced by Black people, and to promote anti-racism.

adequately, whereas others saw the overall approach as tokenistic rather than meaningful:

> *… There's a wall just as you come up the stairs that's, like, a plain wall where, every week, they'll put up a different thing or something like that. And they'll have a week dedicated to the Black community or Asian community or, you know, LGBTQ. And it's, like, Okay, great, but what are you actually doing other than decorating this wall?'* (Fifth year focus group, fee-charging school)

The word inclusion was used expansively, covering the school's inclusion of the overall population of students as well as the inclusion of particular groups of students who have historically faced educational exclusion, specifically those with SEN and disabilities and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds:

> *I think that my school values inclusion and acceptance of everyone, with kindness at its core.* (Survey response)

> *And it's care and respect for everyone, everyone is included. I've often heard Sister* [name of board of management member chair] *say, as long as every child gets the best chance of education that they can get, so that they're able to read and write and understand, no child should leave our school not being able to read and write and understand a basic, no matter what level they're coming in at. And that's not talking about the students that will leave with the 625 points. It's so inclusive.* (Teacher focus group, non-DEIS school)

> *Those kids will actually get more of our time and more of our teaching and more of our care because they need it more. And you'll have kids who will come into you who can't read and write, they've somehow got through the primary system, because of COVID maybe. They're sitting in front of you and you're realising this kid is not coping. And then they get that care.* (Teacher focus group, non-DEIS school)

> *For those then that are coming from homes where there's issues with money or something like that, the kids are really well minded. That's probably one of the things that stood out to me most when I started – the kid who's signing their name up for lunch and there's no money, I don't know where the money comes from but the money is there for them and it's done so discreetly. And that's a value that comes from our sisters.'* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

While the respondents were generally positive about inclusion in the school, there were some who felt that the school was not actually achieving this:

> *I see that this school mostly cares for their wealthy, popular and smart students and they ignored the other problems that are happening with the students that are struggling.* (Survey response)

School inclusivity was an issue for the fee-paying sector. Staff, parents and students highlighted the paradox of commitment to inclusion within an exclusive setting:

> *Then I think, from the school's point of view, our ethos is that it's for the sake of one child. If you've got six or seven, grand. That's the fundamental … the idea of having this true Christian ethos, and it being really true Christian ethos … put a question mark over that one.* (Teacher, fee-charging school)

Across all schools there were, of course, respondents who felt the school was not living up to its professed ethos on various fronts. Ten per cent of responses to the open-ended question were from students who said they did not know or did not care what the school's ethos was. About 5% were from students who felt that the ethos did not mean much in the school. A smaller number felt that there was a clear ethos the school was aiming for but that it was not actually achieving it. These students' responses ranged from being scathing of their school's lack of effort to understanding, if still critical, of the scale of the challenge:

> *The school believes in inclusion and community although it isn't evident in the school.* (Survey response)

> *The school is supposed to be* [a] *safe, respectful, enjoyable learning environment where the students are encouraged to be themselves and learn and develop. But in* [my school]*, I don't think a lot of these things are worked on or put into practice. (Survey response)*

> *My school prides itself on its diversity and inclusiveness. Although, I believe there is a lot more to be done in terms of ACTUALLY carrying them out. The school shows its support in many ways but it is clear when it comes down to it, the school does not do much to condemn prejudice. When I see this happen, to my friends or myself, it is greatly upsetting. That being said, I do believe my school is trying to make a change and is doing better than most schools, but they have not addressed the root of the problems.* (Survey response)

There was also a small number of students who disagreed with the specific ethos of their school, many on the grounds of the school's religious ethos.

> *My school is very much built upon the foundation of Christian beliefs and doesn't allow those who do not follow these beliefs to not*

> *participate in such activities e.g. Mass or any other religious gathering relating to Christianity.* (Survey response)

In general, there was a mixed response to the inclusion of religious activities like Mass attendance or prayers in daily school life. Some students, like the one quoted above, felt that they were forced to attend something they did not want to take part in, while others valued the religious and/or social components of such collective activities. Many students simply noted that it was part of their school experience without positive or negative sentiment, seeing it as simply one more thing happening in their school. Navigating this ambiguity in the student body by effectively promoting faith formation in line with the school ethos, without compelling students to participate, is clearly a key challenge for the voluntary sector going forward.

Indeed, the question of how a religious ethos fits into an increasingly secular society is one which raised strong opinions on both sides; there was also a sizeable contingent of people who did not feel strongly about it one way or the other. Digging into the religion theme in survey responses, the largest category was 'Religion – neutral', which was used to describe responses which identified religion as a key part of the school's ethos without saying anything to indicate what they thought of this. After this was 'Religion – negative', which included students who were not happy with the school's religious ethos:

> *Much too Catholic.* (Survey response)

> *It is a Catholic school but not shoving it down students' throat, some teachers try but fail as that simply does not work. … Personally, I feel all religion and belief systems should be completely separate from school as it isn't useful to students or needed.* (Survey response)

Even within this code there were students who liked the overall ethos despite disagreeing with the Catholic elements:

> *Too much focus on Catholicism/religious ethos: discourages diversity in my opinion. Those of different backgrounds may feel discouraged to attend schools with this type of belief system. There is a high value placed on academics, which I believe is positive. All in all, characteristic spirit is good outside of religious aspect but bad within it.* (Survey response)

> *I don't agree with the spiritual values but the academic where you try your best and put your heart into it I strongly agree with those values.* (Survey response)

Some staff echoed this ambiguity, not necessarily agreeing with the religious part of the ethos but valuing the overall ethos and even perceiving religion, and the school's patron, as underpinning that ethos.

> *The Catholic school isn't important to me, I'm not practising. I'm well aware it's a Catholic school at all times, but it's not really too much. Some teachers take* [the ethos] *more seriously than I do. That determines the moral compass and how students behave with each other. The school rules are based on* [name of order] *guidelines, that's not a bad thing. The ethos is a lovely way to live, be inclusive … But overall no, it's not outrageously Catholic.* (Guidance counsellor, fee-charging school)

Some also saw the ethos as having developed significantly over time, softening and opening up to more religious diversity among the student population.

> *The* [school's religious patron] *ethos, I suppose we're very conscious of it fading into the background of our ethos. We took a bit of a self-conscious step back from it about two decades ago.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *Yes, we are a Catholic voluntary secondary school but we don't push Catholicism down everybody's throat. It's how we treat people and that's the most important thing, that everybody does feel that they belong in this school community and we go out of our way to make sure they do belong.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

Against this softening and the general sense that schools were no longer 'pushing' faith, one student felt that their school was insufficiently religious:

> *I am a Christian and I do not think that the school is very good on teaching the school on how to get closer with God*. (Survey response)

Twenty responses were positive about the religious component of the school, and this positivity was also voiced by interviewees across the school community. There were two ways that it was generally approached. For some, religious instruction and the cultivation of student's spiritual identity was an important piece of the school's overall mission in its own right:

> *The ethos in* [school's name] *is very important to me. I wouldn't say that I am a devoted Catholic, but I do have strong faith and the school does encourage it but for people who do not have as strong of a faith they are not pushed into it.* (Survey response)

> *I like that we're a faith-based school, I think that's important. It's not driven too hard. Through faith you can instil those morals and values into the lads on a daily basis, not just inside in the religion classroom but through extracurricular activities or through whatever classes are going on or even just in and around the corridors.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

For others, religion and faith were celebrated for how they drove the school's overall ethos, particularly in regard to centring students and creating a nurturing environment for all students:

> *My school has a Catholic ethos so they value kindness and respect above anything.* (Survey response)

> *Our mission statement says it all – we are a Christian community. A Catholic voluntary secondary school has to have a Christian way about them. If that's the case then you don't see colour, class, creed, religion, shape, disability, you see the person, you work with the person. That's a Christian way about it. If you lose that you've lost your ethos, there's no link. So you can't call yourself a Catholic school if you don't have a Christian approach. No matter how difficult that might prove in practice you have to maintain that part.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

Beyond the overall religious ethos, the importance of the school's specific patron was mentioned 30 times in the survey responses and across the school community in the interviews:

> *It has the characteristics of* [school's religious patron] *and promotes them well throughout the school which are peace joy freedom justice and sincerity.* (Survey response)

> *The* [order that founded the school] *have a huge influence – one is still on the board of management. Another is the chairperson. The values that they have brought to education remain very strong. Education is very valued. Respect is core – it always has been and continues to be. The influence, ethos and message of sisters remains very strong.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

The importance of tradition in guiding the school was also a key part of the ethos for some participants. This was often linked to the religious order who founded the school in question, and the mission and values they enshrined in its ethos:

> *We're very much aware of responding to the needs of our community … Their role in the community would have been in responding to the*

> *needs of community in setting up the school originally. That is part of our ethos. We try to not take it for granted and always build on it as best we can.'* (Deputy principal, non-DEIS school)

> *I think it's really important that we – there is a value placed on what goes on in our schools. It might not be popular at present or the way that the media is going. But we owe a huge debt of gratitude to our founding group … And to look at the quality of education they've given over the years, I think is just phenomenal. A lot of our decisions are based on our values. … I would hate to see public policy go such a way that, 'No, we don't want voluntary secondary schools', and that they just become private or elitist. Because I do think they are a value in the community.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

As well as the importance of tradition, however, a number of answers saw the slightly non-traditional way religion was lived in the school as a strength of its ethos:

> *Our school technically has a Catholic ethos but in practise it is much more accepting than the Catholic Church. The school welcomes and accepts people of all sexual orientations and ethnicities with specific clubs such as a multicultural society, a gender and sexuality alliance and a neurodiversity club. Our school reflects its Christian ethos in its charitable endeavours more so than everyday teaching.* (Survey response)

> *We are a religious school … a Catholic school. But we have transgender children here. As in, it's the typical Irish thing … It's never just one rigid thing. So you can be Catholic and you can still be totally fine with having transgender people.* (Special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), DEIS school)

Religion was also highlighted for its important role in promoting awareness, tolerance and respect:

> *I think as I say as we become more and more multicultural somebody has to deal with respect and tolerance … Part of that would be respecting other people's faith and having an understanding of it. Certainly not ignoring it or pretending that it's not part of society … I definitely think the jury is out on trying to remove it* [religion]*. I don't particularly think that that's a good thing.* (SENCO, DEIS school)

In some schools, students were vocal in their support of ethical and religious education:

> *Recently we did a class on values and dilemmas, which was really interesting. We had to give our own response to an ethical dilemma. We were also introduced to the idea of equity versus equality, and I feel the school makes sure that we were aware of what's happening in the world … the values that that world holds. And it gives us an opportunity to talk to other people about more moral and ethical things. To get other people's perspectives on situations that you wouldn't have received before. Which make it easier to understand other people's issues and try to come to conclusions that would benefit everyone.* (Fifth year focus group, Educate Together school)

In some schools, students highlighted the diversity of topics covered (in this case across the three religion classes taken weekly):

> *The different types of religions in the world. And we'd learn about them … We do, morality and climate change and how it affects people and stuff. And they put on music for us and she just makes sure that everyone's, like, okay and that everyone's having a good day. And if not, then if you want to talk you can. If not, then that's fine.* (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

In other schools, teachers highlighted the evolving role of religious education:

> *There is a value in keeping it* [religion] *as a non-exam subject, in a pastoral way. Lads open up and we can get guest speakers in to cover topics teachers aren't trained in – important topics like consent. They have to learn things from a social perspective as well. There is a negative connotation with religion, but that's not really what you're doing. We are bringing in all different aspects, making it multi-purpose.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

Although the religious ethos of most of the schools included in this study was Roman Catholic, the sample also included one Church of Ireland school and two Educate Together schools. As a minority faith school, our Church of Ireland school was mainly attended by students who did not share its faith. Participants from this school therefore described finding a balance between nurturing the religious identity of those who were attending it specifically for its religious ethos and ensuring the school was welcoming and inclusive to students who did not have that religious identity:

> *I feel like the ethos of CoI* [Church of Ireland] *kind of doesn't matter anymore because there's so many different faiths here. I'm not saying religion doesn't matter but nobody cares what religion you are and what are your beliefs, they just kind of respect it.* (Fifth year focus group, fee-charging school)

> *The school values … Community is a big one. Inclusion, inclusion, inclusion. Diversity, diversity, diversity. We're open to students from all sorts of backgrounds, socioeconomic backgrounds, religious backgrounds. It's a Protestant ethos under Protestant management but it's a really diverse school, intentionally and deliberately diverse.* (Principal, fee-charging school)

> *The connection with the CoI ethos is gently done and in a way that acknowledges the majority of staff are not CoI, the majority of students are not. It's acknowledged and made central at key events but not saying prayers at start of class which you might see in some other voluntary secondary schools.* (Teacher, fee-charging school)

It is notable the extent to which majority and minority faith schools spoke about religion, inclusion and diversity in similar ways. If religious diversity continues to grow across all Irish schools, as seems likely, there may be further convergence still.

Finally, the two Educate Together schools had an explicitly inter-denominational ethos. Again, however, they were more similar to the other schools than they were distinct, apart from the lack of a religious component:

> *The ethos of this school is … well, the foundation is on the values of kindness and respect. So that's something that is drummed into them from day one, that one thing we won't tolerate is people being unkind or disrespectful. Then the Educate Together ethos is really that anybody should be able to come here and thrive in their own way. That's hard to do, but we have an ethos that you don't turn anyone away at the door because of their anything. … Whether it be that they have any particular needs or that they're from a particular background or … so embracing diversity in all its forms is definitely part of the ethos here.* (Teacher, Educate Together school)

The overall language used around ethos was similar across schools, emphasising the importance of centring and caring for students, embracing diversity and inclusion and building a community. The next section will tease this out, using the closed-ended questions about school ethos to explore differences across and within schools.

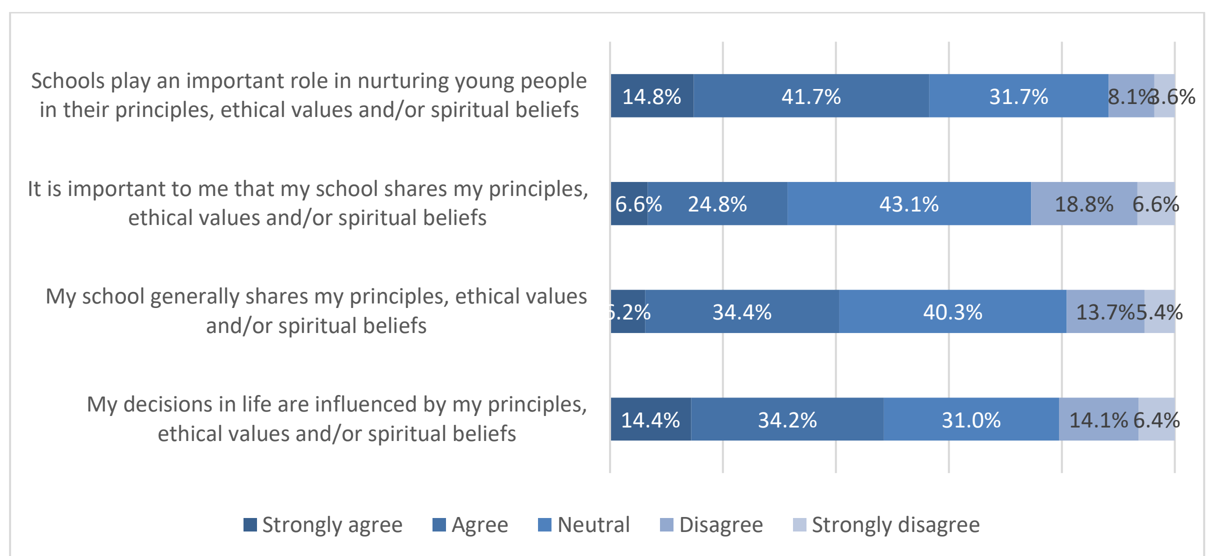
4.2.1 Quantitative material

Ethics and values are central to students' social and personal development. Students were asked about the significance of their school's role in nurturing principles, ethical values and spiritual beliefs (Figure 4.2). Around 56% of students strongly agreed or agreed that their school plays an important part in this respect. Additionally, 48.5% acknowledged that their own decisions in life are influenced by their personal values, while 40.6% believed that their school generally shares their principles. However, less than one-third of students felt it was important that their school shared their values (31%), with a majority remaining neutral on the matter (43%).

For example, those with parents educated to degree level are slightly more likely to agree that their decisions are influenced by their principles and values (52% vs 46%). Additionally, regarding the perceived significance of schools in fostering the values of young people, more positive responses are found among the fifth year group (61% vs 54%), students with degree-educated parents (58.6% vs 55%), and those attending non-DEIS schools (58% vs 53%), particularly fee-charging schools (64% vs 55%). These students were also more likely to report that their school values aligned with their own personal values.

On the other hand, no significant differences were observed in terms of whether students felt it was important that their school shares their personal values.

FIGURE 4.2 STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON THE VALUES AND BELIEFS PROMOTED BY THEIR SCHOOL



Students were also asked a series of questions designed to measure how school ethos is promoted at their school. Overall, students showed very positive views towards their schools' encouragement of different types of achievements, with

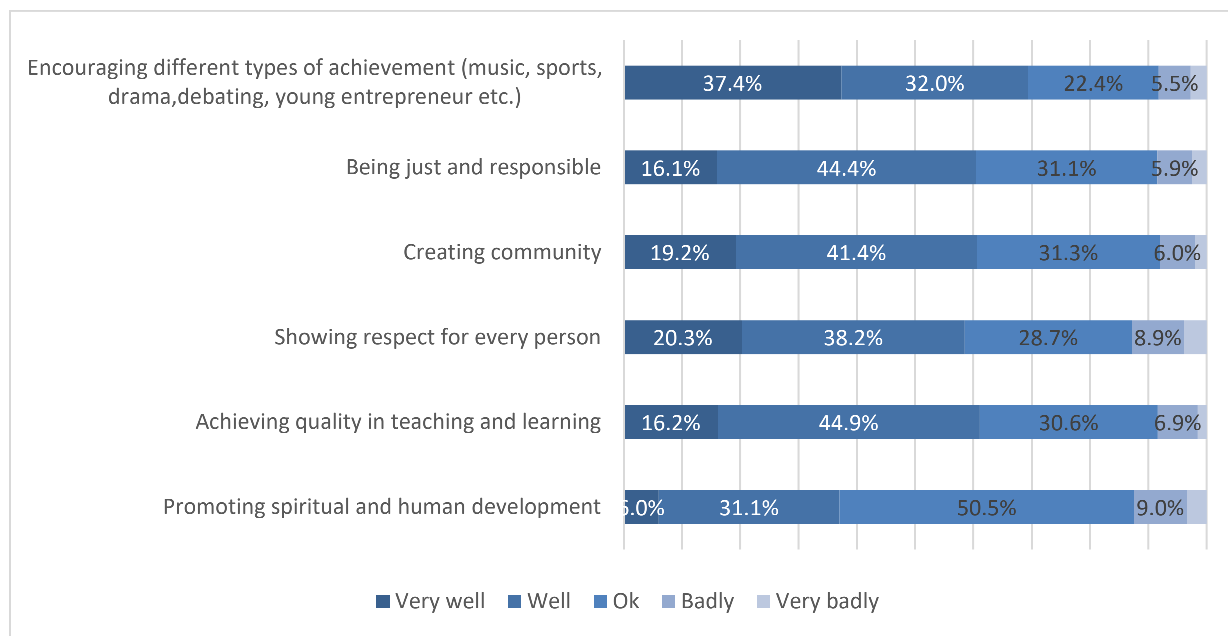
nearly seven out of ten students rating their school positively in this regard. Similarly, students were positive about their school achieving quality in teaching and learning (61%), creating a community (61%), being just and responsible (61%), or showing respect for every person (59%). However, when it came to the promotion of spiritual and human development, only 37% of students considered their schools to be doing well in this area.

Consistent with previous findings, more positive responses are reported by students from more affluent family backgrounds (e.g., those with degree-educated parents, without economic difficulty, attending non-DEIS schools, with particularly positive views among students attending fee-charging schools) and students without special educational needs (SEN). For instance, 50.5% of students in fee-charging schools, compared to 34% of students in non-fee-charging schools, and 42% of students whose parents completed degree-level education compared to 33% of those whose parents did not have a degree, indicated their school was doing well in promoting spiritual and human development. The same was true with regard to students feeling that their school was doing well in achieving quality teaching and learning, with 72% of fee-charging school students, compared to 59% of non-fee-charging school students, 63% of non-DEIS school students, compared to 54% of DEIS school students, 68% of students with degree-educated parents, compared to 56% of students whose parents did not have a degree, and 64% of those without economic difficulty, compared to 51% of those with economic difficulty, indicating that they felt this to be the case.

Gender differences were also observed, with girls being slightly more positive about their school encouraging different types of achievement (74% vs 65%) and being 'just and responsible' (62% vs 58%).

Additionally, students in single-sex schools displayed slightly more positive views about their school's promotion of various values (Figure 4.3). For example, 61% of students in single-sex schools, compared to 53% of students in coeducational schools, indicated their schools was effective in encouraging students to show respect for everyone. However, it is important to interpret these findings with caution, since a higher proportion of students attending coeducational schools are from less affluent socioeconomic backgrounds.

FIGURE 4.3 STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON HOW WELL VARIOUS VALUES ARE PROMOTED AT SCHOOL



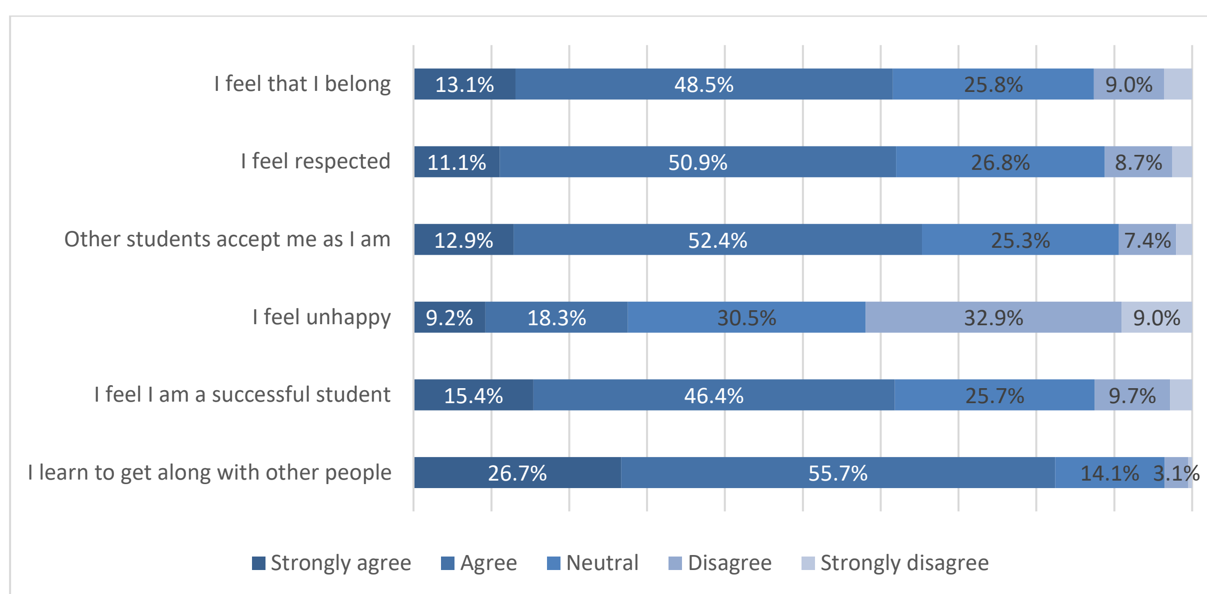
4.3 SCHOOL CLIMATE

The distinction between ethos and climate is a fine one. We asked a series of questions in the survey to examine students' attitudes toward their school interactions and ethos, including dimensions such as getting along with others, feeling accepted and respected, and their sense of belonging (Figure 4.4). Overall, students hold a positive view of their school interactions, with 82% (strongly) agreeing that they learned to get along with other people at school. Additionally, more than half of students feel accepted (65%), respected (62%), successful (62%), and that they belong (61.6%) at their school. Comparing this group with students across all school types in Ireland, 71% of 15 year olds in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 reported that they feel they belong at school, lower than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 75% (OECD, 2023b).[31] It is noteworthy that one-quarter of students in our study (strongly) agreed that school is a place where they feel unhappy (28%). This is consistent with the findings on school engagement in Section 4.4 below, where two-thirds of students who indicated disliking school also indicated that school is a place where they feel unhappy, leaving just under 15% of the sample that can be considered disengaged at school.

31 Caution is required when interpreting 2022 data for Ireland because one or more PISA sampling standards were not observed (OECD, 2023 – Annexes A2 and A4). In Ireland, student response rates decreased slightly between 2018 and 2022 and fell below the minimum target set by PISA technical standards. Additional analyses were conducted to investigate whether bias would result from non-response. The results of these analyses results imply that the reported mean scores (based on responding students) may be slightly higher than hypothetical mean scores that also considered all the non-respondents, by approximately eight or nine points.

It is also interesting to note that there are wide differences in student experience across the 21 case study schools. For example, the proportion indicating that they feel they belong at school ranges from 43% to 81% across schools. Moreover, the percentage of students (strongly) agreeing that they are accepted by other students ranges from 30% to 81%, while the percentage feeling respected at school varies from 35% to 83%.

FIGURE 4.4 EXTENT TO WHICH STUDENTS FEEL ACCEPTED AND RESPECTED AT SCHOOL (%)



Broadly consistent with the findings of the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study, among our survey cohort significant differences are observed in subjective experiences at school by students' family characteristics.[32] Those from more advantaged family backgrounds tend to reflect more positively on their school interactions. For instance, 84% of students without economic difficulty, compared to 76% of students with economic difficulty, (strongly) agreed that they learned to get along with others at school. There are differences by SEN status, with students without SEN reflecting more positively (84% without SEN agree vs 74% with SEN). Gender differences are also apparent, with a higher percentage of boys agreeing that they get along well at school (85% boys vs 82% girls). Notably, the differences in relation to school gender composition are even more pronounced. Students in single-sex boys' schools are the most positive (87%), followed by students in single-sex girls' schools (82%), and students in coeducational schools (78%). As discussed in Chapter 3 and again in Chapter 5, this may reflect cohort effects rather than the effect of school gender mix per se.

[32] Family characteristics in this report were captured by various measures, including the educational level of parents and whether the household experienced any economic difficulties.

To further examine the factors related to students' experience of positive social engagement, such as getting along with others, feeling accepted for who they are, experiencing respect, and having a sense of belonging, we conducted multilevel logistic regressions. The model coefficients presented in Table A1 in the appendix are reported as odds ratios. Ratios greater than one indicate a higher likelihood of experiencing positive social engagement, while ratios less than one suggest lower chances.[33] The influence of students' family characteristics, SEN condition and gender is confirmed in our model results. In Model 1, which considers student characteristics, those without economic difficulties are more likely to report positive social engagement at school (1.7 times as likely). Conversely, girls, students with SEN and those uncertain about their SEN status are less likely to report positive social engagement. Additionally, fifth year students are slightly more likely to report positive social engagement compared to second year students. In contrast to the descriptive findings mentioned above, no significant differences related to school gender mix or school types are found when school characteristics are considered in Model 2. Model 3 examines the relationship between students having positive social engagement and other aspects of school life. It shows that students attending schools with a stronger ethos are more likely to report positive social engagement – positive school engagement, positive interactions with teachers and positive teacher expectations. However, students who missed more than ten days of school over the last academic year are less likely to report the same level of positive social engagement.

Students experiencing economic difficulties and those attending DEIS schools are more likely to agree with that they feel unhappy at school (39% vs 24% and 31% vs 26%, respectively). More pronounced differences were found in relation to students' SEN status, with a higher proportion of those with SEN reporting feeling unhappy at school (41% with SEN vs 25% without SEN). Girls are more likely to report negative responses compared to boys (31% of girls vs 22% of boys). Larger differences were found in relation to school gender mix, with students attending coeducational schools more likely to report feeling unhappy (34%), followed by students in single-sex girls' schools (30%), and then single-sex boys' schools (19%).

As might be expected, students in schools considered to have a stronger ethos, as well as those who report liking their school, are also more likely to reflect positively on their interactions at school and the extent to which they feel positive affirmation.

[33] All logistic regression model results are reported as odds ratios, where a value greater than one indicates a higher likelihood of belonging to the group of interest in the outcome variable, while ratios less than one suggest lower chances. This applies to all the model results reported throughout the report and will not be repeated for ease of reading, unless otherwise specified.

4.4 STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

4.4.1 School absence

National data show that students attending voluntary secondary schools consistently exhibit much lower school absenteeism rates compared to those in Education and Training Boards (ETB) or community schools. Despite a significant increase in students' absenteeism during the 2021/2022 academic year, likely due to the impact of COVID-19, the average percentage of students in post-primary schools absent for 20 days or more was lowest in voluntary secondary schools (24%), with notable differences found between DEIS and non-DEIS schools (36.8% in DEIS schools vs 24.5% in non-DEIS schools) (DCEDIY, 2024).[34] Similar patterns were observed in our study. Out of the 2,107 students who provided information, 36% reported missing more than ten days of school in the previous year. Consistent with the findings from the GUI study on 13 year olds across all school sectors, students from less advantaged backgrounds, such as those where neither parent had a degree, those experiencing economic difficulties, and attending a DEIS school, along with those with SEN, were found to be more likely to miss more than ten days. Wide variation between the case study schools was observed, ranging from as low as 19% to as high as 53% of the students reporting that they missed more than ten school days.

To further examine the factors associated with students' school attendance among second and fifth year students, we employed multilevel logistic regression models (see Table A2 in the appendix). The impact of family background and SEN status is confirmed in our model results. In Model 1, considering student characteristics, those with degree-educated parents and those without economic difficulties are significantly less likely to miss more than 10 days of school in the previous 12 months (0.7 and 0.68 times as likely, respectively). Conversely, students with SEN are 1.7 times more likely to miss more than 10 school days.

Additionally, significant differences in relation to student gender and school gender mix are observed when taking school characteristics into account in Model 2. Students attending girls' schools, compared to those attending coeducational schools, are only 0.66 times as likely to miss more than ten school days. However, girls, compared to boys and those who identified as 'non-binary or other',[35] are 1.5 times more likely to miss more than ten days of school, suggesting that girls in coeducational schools might face some challenges in terms of school attendance. Finally, Model 3 examines the relationship between students' school absence and their experiences in other aspects of school life. Those with positive school

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[34] Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2024). *SONC Part 3: Children's outcomes*, https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/916ef-sonc-part-3-childrens-outcomes/.

[35] Students were asked to reveal their gender in the survey. The reference group here includes those who identify themselves as boys, as well as those who identified themselves as 'non-binary or other'.

engagement, higher academic self-image and no economic difficulties are significantly less likely to be absent from school. On the other hand, those who consistently struggled to engage with their studies during COVID-19 are 1.5 times more likely to be absent from school. The impact of school gender mix persists, with students in girls' schools being less likely to miss more than ten days of school. Notably, there are no significant gender differences between girls and boys once other aspects of their school experiences are taken into consideration.

4.4.2 Students' attitudes toward school

Students were asked to rate how much they liked their schools. In our sample, approximately 43% indicated they like their school ('like it a bit' or 'like it very much'). Over one-fifth (22%) reported not liking it, and the remainder indicated a neutral response.

Significant variation was observed across the 21 schools, ranging from a low of 20% to a high of 74% of students reporting that they like school. Younger students tend to be less positive about their school experiences compared to their Senior Cycle peers, with fifth year students showing a slightly more positive outlook (47% vs 40%). This aligns with the findings from the GUI study on 17/18 year olds born in 1998 and 13 year olds born in 2008, where more positive responses were found among Senior Cycle cohorts (76% of 17/18 year olds and 57% of 13 year olds indicated liking school). This trend was also noted in *Leaving school in Ireland*, the post-primary longitudinal study, which illustrated a particular dip in school engagement among second year students (McCoy et al., 2014).

Consistent with the findings from the GUI study on 13 year olds, attitudes to school varied more by family characteristics than by gender. Students from more affluent family backgrounds (i.e., those whose both parents are educated to degree level, are without economic difficulties, attending non-DEIS schools) reported much more positive attitudes to school, compared with their peers. Students attending fee-charging schools reported particularly high levels of school engagement, at least in terms of their levels of affective engagement. Interestingly, in our sample, a higher proportion of students in single-sex schools reported liking their school compared to students in coeducational schools (35% coeducational schools vs 46% single-sex school students reported liking their schools). In the next section we report on multivariate analyses, which consider the extent to which these school context differences reflect student composition factors.

Table A3 in the appendix examines the factors associated with liking school among second and fifth year students, based on multilevel logistic regression models. Consistent with descriptive findings, family characteristics rather than gender have a significant impact on students' attitude toward school. In Model 1, considering students' family characteristics, those with degree-educated parents are 1.8 times

more likely, and students without economic difficulties 1.4 times more likely, to indicate they like school. Conversely, students with SEN and those uncertain about their SEN status are substantially less likely to report positive school engagement. Gender differences do not appear to play a role here.

In Model 2, incorporating school characteristics, students attending fee-charging schools are 2.3 times more likely to express positive feelings towards their school, while the gender mix of the school does not seem to have an impact. Finally, in Model 3, examining the relationship between students' attitudes toward their school and their experiences in other aspects of school life, those who felt that they belong at school, had a higher academic self-image, encountered positive teacher expectations, had positive social engagement and frequently participated in cultural activities are more likely to report liking school.[36] Conversely, students who missed more than ten days of school are less likely to do so. The impact of family background, however, is partly mediated: the experience of economic difficulties does not appear to significantly affect students' attitude toward their school once their other school experiences are considered.

4.4.3 Student and peer motivation

Figure 4.5 below presents results on a diversity of aspects of student motivation, perceived teacher effectiveness and the nature of the classroom environment. The majority of students (strongly) agreed that schoolwork was worthwhile (69%) and that the subjects they study interested them (62%). Additionally, a significant proportion of students agreed that they worked hard at school (68%). On the other hand, only slightly over half of the students (53%) believed their peers took school seriously. Despite 42% of students finding the schoolwork difficult, over two-thirds agreed that they were encouraged by their teachers to continue their education or training when they leave school (68%). Most students (87%) said that they adhered to school rules, but concerns were raised regarding troublemakers in classes (26%), teachers' ability to maintain order (19%) and instances of bullying (21%).

Gender differences were clearly evident across student responses in this area. Girls showed more focus on academic performance, with a higher proportion of girls agreeing that schoolwork is worth doing (72% girls vs 67% boys), that they work hard at school (75% girls vs 61% boys), that they were encouraged by teachers to continue their education (71% girls vs 66% boys), and that their friends take school seriously (61% girls vs 43% boys). These differences seem to be accentuated by school gender composition, with much more positive responses found in single-sex schools, particularly in single-sex girls' schools. For example, 76% of girls in single-sex girls' schools, as opposed to 66% in single-sex boys' schools and 60% in

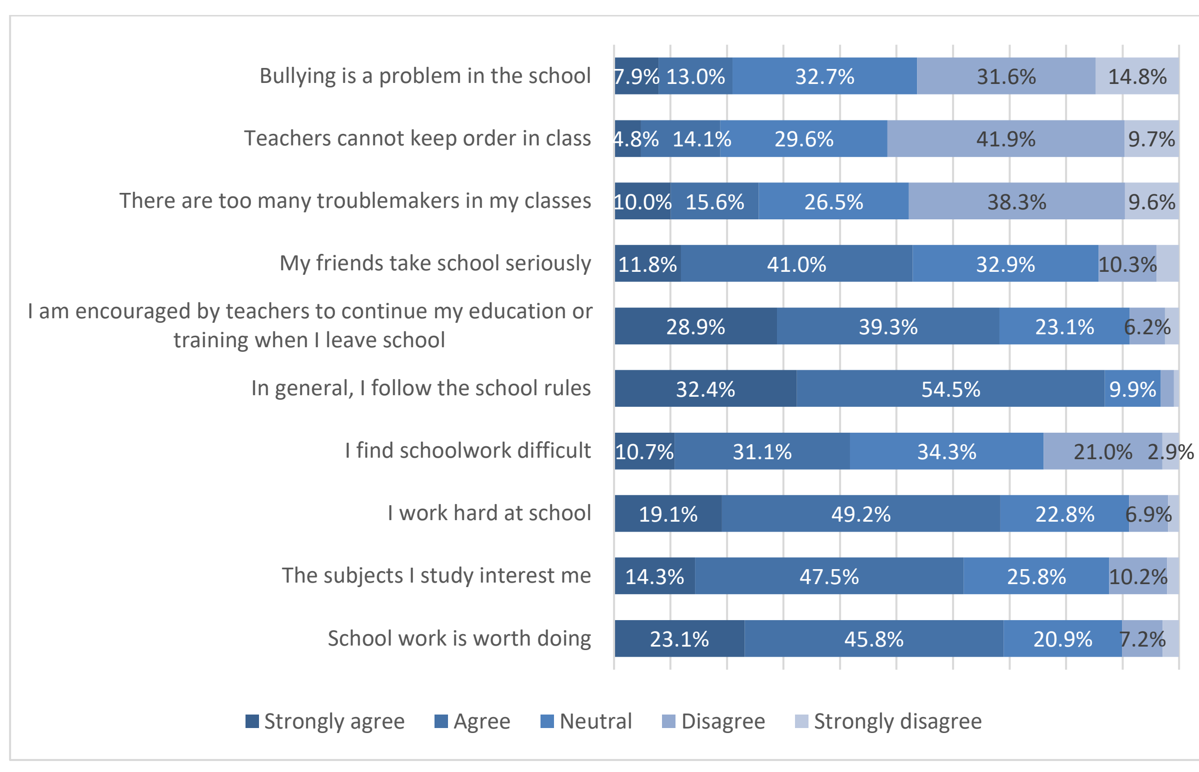
36 The category of those who frequently participated in cultural activities refers to those who participated in arts/cultural activities at least once a week.

coeducational schools, reported that they worked hard at school. Similarly, 71% of students in girls' schools, compared to 69% in single-sex boys' schools and 63% in coeducational schools, reported being encouraged to continue their education. Moreover, 65% of girls in single-sex girls' schools, in contrast to 49% in single-sex boys' schools and 39% in coeducational schools, agreed that their friends took school seriously.

Girls were also slightly more stressed about their school performance, with almost half finding schoolwork difficult compared to 35% of boys. These differences persisted across schools of different gender mix. Conversely, boys were more positive about the school cultivating their interest in learning and receiving the support they needed to learn at school. This trend was especially prominent among those in single-sex boys' schools, where 76% were positive about the support they received (compared to 63% in coeducational schools and 63% in girls' schools).

While having additional needs did not necessarily impact on students' engagement at school, those with SEN were less positive about their school experience. For example, only 60% of students with SEN agreed that they worked hard at school, compared to 71% of students without SEN. This is in line with earlier research based on GUI, where students with SEN were less positive in terms of their overall school engagement, with academic and social engagement playing a central role in understanding the broader school engagement of children with SEN (McCoy and Banks, 2012). Similar differences are also observed among those from less affluent backgrounds, including those attending a DEIS school (62% vs 70%), those with parents who did not complete a third-level degree (63% vs 75%) and those experiencing economic difficulties (60% vs 71%).

FIGURE 4.5 STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL



Students' attitude towards their schoolwork is a crucial indicator of school engagement. Therefore, we examined the factors associated with whether students find their schoolwork worth doing among second and fifth year students, based on multilevel logistic regression models (see Table A4 in the appendix for detailed model results).

In Model 1, where only student characteristics were considered, family characteristics, rather than gender, have a more prominent impact on students' attitude toward schoolwork. Those with degree-educated parents and those without economic difficulties are significantly more likely to agree that schoolwork is worth doing (both 1.5 times as likely). The impact of SEN is confirmed in the model results, with students with SEN and those uncertain about their SEN status being only half as likely to agree that schoolwork is worth doing. Additionally, fifth year students, compared to second year students, are slightly more likely to agree.

In Model 2, incorporating school characteristics, students in fee-charging schools, compared to those in non-fee-charging schools, are significantly more likely to agree that schoolwork is worth doing. While there are no significant individual gender differences, there are significant distinctions between those attending single-sex schools and coeducational schools. Boys in single-sex schools are 1.9 times as likely, and girls in single-sex schools 1.6 times as likely, to agree that schoolwork is worth doing compared to students in coeducational schools.

Finally, in Model 3, which additionally examines students' experiences in other aspects of school life, those who liked school, felt that they belong at school, had positive teacher interactions and attended a school with a student-led ethos are much more likely to agree that schoolwork is worth doing.[37] Conversely, those who experienced negative interactions with teachers (e.g., being given out to due to untidy or delayed work or misbehaving in class) are only half as likely to agree.

4.4.4 Interactions with teachers

In general, young people's perceptions of their interactions with their teachers were positive (Figure 4.6). Almost 63% reported that they were asked questions in class by the teacher. However, the interaction seems to be more teacher-centric, with just half reporting that they asked questions in class and one-third receiving praise from teachers for answering a question.

Overall, 12% of the students reported being given out to very often for misbehaving in class and 17% reported that they had been given out to by a teacher due to their untidy or late work. Second year students are more likely to report these negative interactions with teachers compared to fifth year students (15% vs 9% for misbehaving and 20% vs 14% for untidy or late work). The findings highlight the importance of praise and positive school and classroom climates in reducing the risk of deteriorating relationships between students and teachers. These differences mirror earlier differentials found over the course of the post-primary longitudinal study *Leaving school in Ireland* (McCoy et al., 2014), suggesting that substantial reform of Junior Cycle education has not removed the higher prevalence of behavioural difficulties and perceived negative interactions with teachers among Junior Cycle students.

Large disparities in relation to family characteristics and the school environment are observed, with students from more affluent backgrounds reporting more positive interactions and experiences at school. For instance, six in ten students in fee-charging schools reported that they asked questions in class compared to 44% of non-fee-charging students. The patterns are broadly similar to the GUI study on 13 year olds across different school sectors. Notably, a higher proportion of students attending DEIS schools (48%) reported being praised for good written work compared to students attending non-DEIS schools (39%), suggesting a positive and supportive ethos among DEIS schools.

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[37] The student-led school ethos measure is constructed based on three of the individual measures: 'I am encouraged to make up my own mind'; 'I am encouraged to express my opinions'; and 'I am encouraged to discuss the issues with people having different opinions'. Details of how this measure is constructed can be found in the Chapter 2 (Methodology).

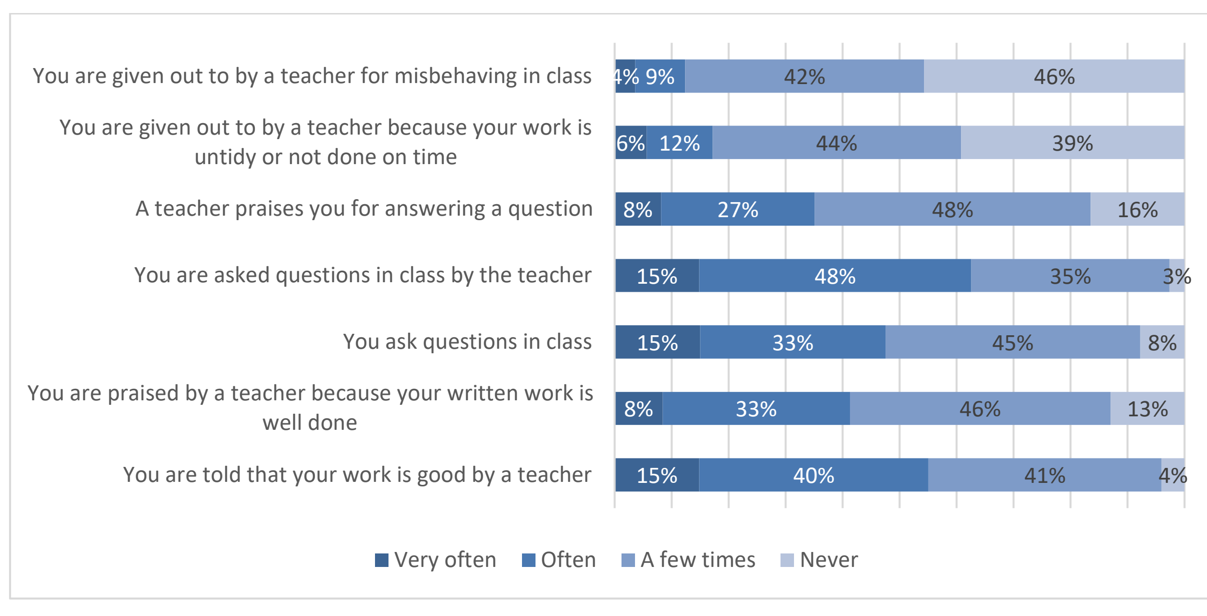
Key factors underpinning positive interactions with teachers are explored in multivariate models (see Table A5 in the appendix for detailed results).[38] Students without economic difficulties are more likely to report having positive interactions with teachers at school (1.6 times as likely). Notably, no significant differences were observed among those with SEN and those without SEN. However, students who were unsure about their SEN status were much less likely to report positive teacher interactions compared to those without SEN (0.56 times as likely). This suggests that students who are unsure about their SEN status may have needs that are less visible or not yet identified, and therefore not appropriately supported at school.

There are few significant differences in relation to school type, but students in DEIS schools report positive interactions with their teachers. Finally, Model 3 indicates that those with a high academic self-image, reporting positive teacher expectations, attending a school with a student-led ethos and a stronger ethos are more likely to report positive interactions with teachers.[39] Conversely, students who missed more than ten days of school are less likely to report positive interaction with their teachers. Interestingly, those who reported having negative interactions with teachers are also more likely to report having positive teacher interactions. This suggests that relatively negative experiences with teachers do not prevent students from approaching and positively interacting with their teachers.

38 Positive teacher interactions are measured by five individual items: 'You are told that your work is good by a teacher'; 'You ask questions in class'; 'A teacher praises you for answering a question'; 'You are asked questions in class by the teacher'; and 'You are praised by a teacher because your written work is well done'. Details of how this measure is constructed can be found in Chapter 2 (Methodology).

39 'A stronger ethos' in schools is measured by six individual items: 'Promoting spiritual and human development'; 'Achieving quality in teaching and learning'; 'Showing respect for every person'; 'Creating community'; 'Being just and responsible'; and 'Encouraging different types of achievement (music, sports, drama, debating, young entrepreneur etc.)'. Details of how this measure is constructed can be found in Chapter 2 (Methodology).

FIGURE 4.6 STUDENT REPORTS ON THE NATURE OF INTERACTION WITH TEACHERS AT SCHOOL



Focusing on the younger cohort, our second year students appeared less positive about their interactions with their teachers compared to the 13 year olds surveyed in the GUI study. In our sample, only 55% reported receiving teacher praise for good work often or very often, whereas 71% in the GUI sample reported this. Likewise, 35% in our sample reported being praised for answering questions often or very often, compared to 56% in the GUI study.

Particularly noteworthy is that, compared to the 13 year olds in the GUI study, students in our sample are more likely to report being given out to by their teachers, both due to their untidy or late work (20% vs 8%) or misbehaving in class (15% vs 6%). The findings may reflect the fact that our study is confined to second-year students, while the GUI study involves first and second years; student engagement has been found to dip in second year (McCoy et al., 2014). It may also suggest a deterioration in how students organise and/or present their work in the post-COVID era.

Overall, students have a generally positive relationship with their teachers. Three-quarters (strongly) agree that their teachers were generally fair to them, and around two-thirds (strongly) agree that their teachers had high expectations of them and helped them achieve their best (Figure 4.7).

Patterns are broadly similar between the second and fifth year groups. Boys appear slightly more positive about their relationships with teachers, with 55% of boys and 44% of girls expressing a willingness to approach their teachers when facing difficulties, and 71% of boys and 63% of girls agreeing that their teachers help them

to achieve their best. Differences in relation to socioeconomic background are again apparent, with more favourable responses from students who have not encountered economic vulnerabilities across all four questions. For example, 77% of those not experiencing any economic difficulties, compared to 64% of those who did experience them, (strongly) agreed that their teachers were fair to them.

FIGURE 4.7 STUDENTS' INTERACTION WITH THEIR TEACHERS AT SCHOOL (%)

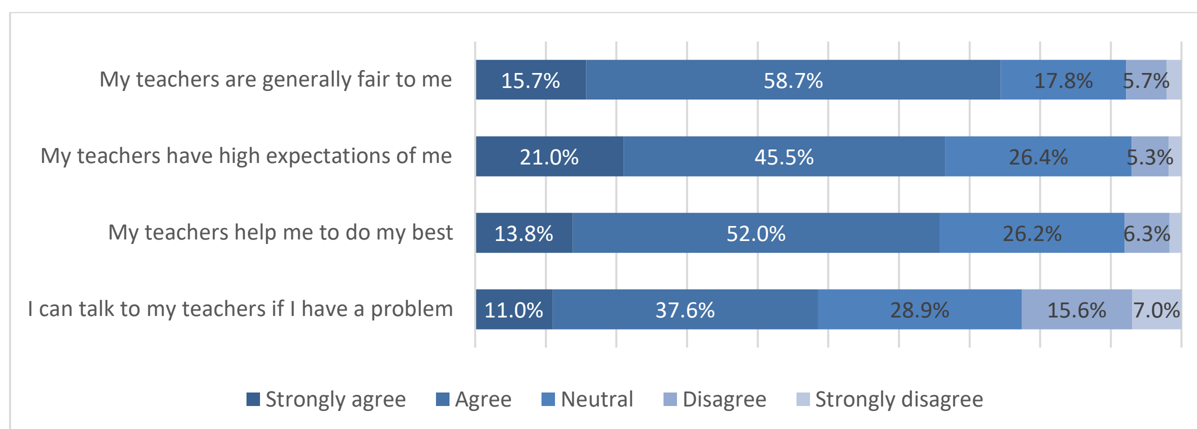


Table A6 in the appendix explores factors related to students reporting positive teacher expectations among second and fifth year students using multilevel logistic regression models.[40] The impact of socioeconomic background is again evident in the model results – students without economic difficulties are more likely to report having positive expectations from their teachers at school (1.6 times as likely). Fifth year students, compared to second year students, are slightly more likely to report positive expectations from their teachers (1.2 times as likely). However, girls, students with SEN and those who are unsure about their SEN status are only half as likely to report positive teacher expectations. Students with positive social engagement, positive teacher interactions, and those attending a school with a student-led ethos and a stronger school ethos generally are much more likely to report positive expectations from their teachers. The gender difference persists, with girls only half as likely to report having positive teacher expectations compared to boys. The enduring gender impact highlights the importance of recognising and addressing gender disparities in teacher expectations.

4.5 STUDENT VOICE

Over 80% of students reported being encouraged to make their own decisions and express their opinions in school (Figure 4.8). Additionally, nearly three-quarters indicated that their teachers present different sides of issues when explaining them

[40] The positive teacher expectation measure is constructed based on the four individual measures mentioned above. Details of how this measure is constructed can be found in Chapter 2 (Methodology).

in class. Most students also felt they were encouraged to engage in discussion with those who hold different opinions (71%) and indicated that they feel comfortable expressing different opinions in class (72%). However, when it comes to bringing up current political events for discussion in class, less than six in ten feel they do so frequently or occasionally.

Wide variations can be observed across the case study schools, with the most sizeable disparities found in the extent to which students feel: they can raise current political issues for discussion (ranging from 42% to 71%); they are encouraged to discuss these issues with people holding different opinions (ranging from 50% to 81%); and that teachers present diverse aspects of an issue when explaining in class (ranging from 61% to 90%).

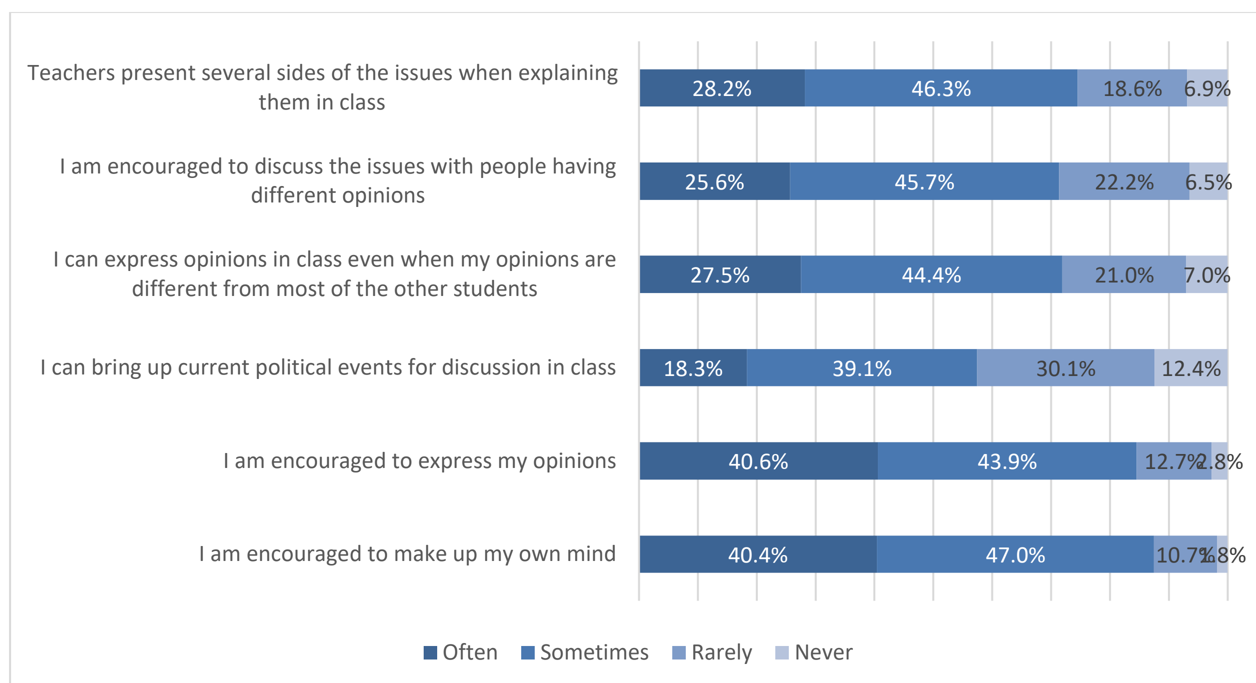
More favourable responses emerged among students without SEN and among those from less disadvantaged backgrounds (such as not experiencing any economic difficulties or attending fee-charging schools) or who are enrolled in schools identified from our results as promoting a stronger ethos. Slightly more positive responses regarding teachers presenting different aspects of the issue were reported among students attending DEIS schools (78% in DEIS schools vs 74% in non-DEIS schools). A school's gender composition seems to exert influence as well. Notably, students in single-sex boys' schools are slightly more likely to bring up current political events for discussion compared to students in single-sex girls' schools or coeducational schools.

To further unpack factors related to student voice and the extent of a student-led ethos at school, we employed multilevel logistic regression models (see Table A7 in the appendix).[41] Here students with SEN and those unsure about their SEN status are much less likely to report a student-led ethos at school (0.6 times and 0.7 times as likely). Students attending DEIS schools and fee-charging schools are much more likely to report a student-led ethos at school (1.8 times and 1.6 times as likely). Compared to students in coeducational schools, girls in single-sex girls' schools are 1.5 times as likely, and boys in single-sex boys' schools 1.6 times as likely, to report having a more student-led ethos at school. Those with a stronger sense of belonging at school, reporting positive teacher interactions and positive teacher expectations, and those attending a school with a stronger ethos, are much more likely to report having a more student-led ethos. However, those with negative teacher interactions (e.g., being given out for misbehaviour or untidy work) are less

[41] The student-led school ethos measure is constructed based on three of the individual measures: 'I am encouraged to make up my own mind'; 'I am encouraged to express my opinions'; and 'I am encouraged to discuss the issues with people having different opinions'. Details of how this measure is constructed can be found in Chapter 2 (Methodology).

likely to report it. The impact of school gender mix and school type persists when we take account of these subjective aspects of school life.

FIGURE 4.8 EXTENT TO WHICH STUDENTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO SHARE DIFFERENT OPINIONS AT SCHOOL (%)

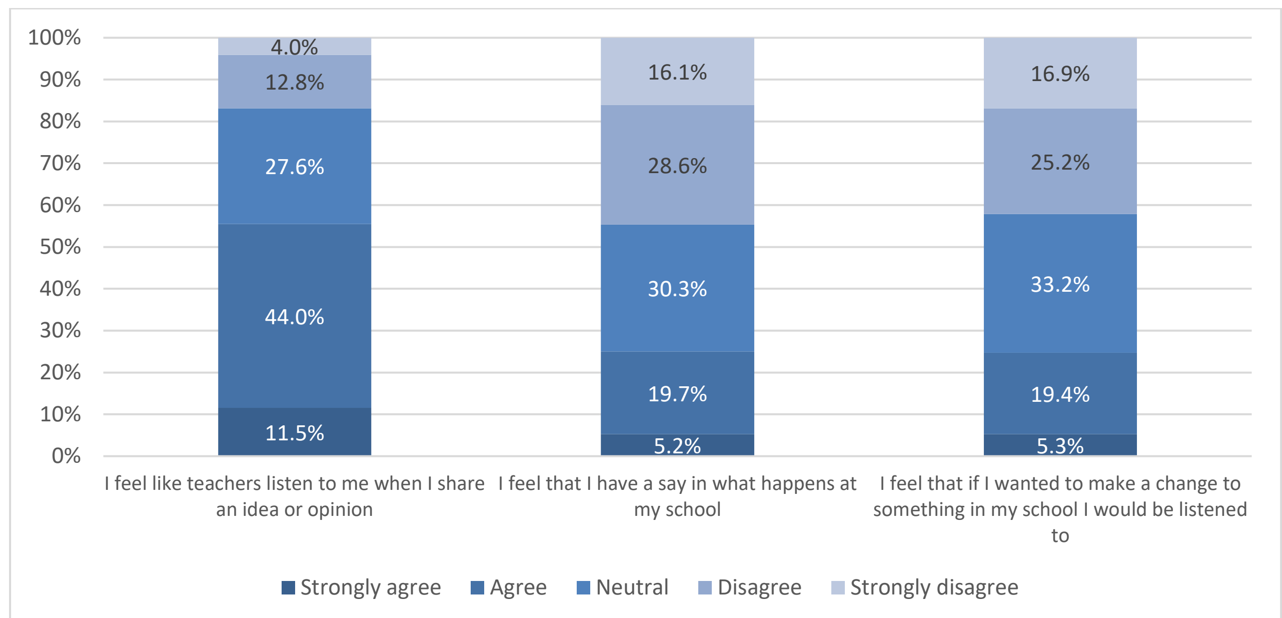


Students are less positive about their voice and involvement in school decision-making processes (Figure 4.9). While over half agree that teachers listen to their ideas or opinions, only around one-quarter believe that they have a say in what happens at school or that their views would be taken into account if they wanted to make a change to their school. Relatively more positive responses were observed among boys in fifth year, students in single-sex boys' schools, as well as schools considered to have a stronger ethos. Notably, students attending DEIS schools expressed greater positivity about their ability to have a say at school (31% of students in DEIS schools vs 23% in non-DEIS schools) and being listened to if they wished to instigate a change at school (30% in DEIS schools vs 23% in non-DEIS schools).

The findings above resonate with Skerritt et al.'s (2021) research on student voice, as assessed through classroom-level and management-level consultation. Specifically, the study identifies significant variation in the use of classroom-level consultation across diverse school sectors and contexts. Classroom consultation is more prevalent in ETB schools compared to voluntary secondary schools or

community schools. Additionally, DEIS ETB schools exhibit higher levels of classroom consultation than non-DEIS ETB schools.[42]

FIGURE 4.9 THE EXTENT TO WHICH STUDENT HAVE A VOICE AT SCHOOL (IN FULL SAMPLE, %)



In the interviews, staff across schools were generally positive about opportunities for student voice, and many emphasised that the school has devoted considerable efforts to involve students in a range of decision making across the school.

> [We] *meet* [name of committee] *twice a year, start and end. Very respectful of anything they have to say, listen and discuss it, decide whether it's a runner or not. Student council will meet the board every year at end of May. … The board hear what student council are doing, students feel affirmed … students are not cowed by going to* [a] *board of management member meeting, the board is probably more nervous of them! We listen and we take on board their requests*. [We] *can't always accede to them all but anything that makes life more bearable for them, we try and accommodate.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *…There's a student council, and they bring their suggestions to the board, and we listen to them and we see what we can do. For example, they brought up introducing trousers. … We listen to that, and we*

42 According to Skerritt et al. (2021), classroom-level consultations appeared to be less frequent in voluntary secondary schools and community schools, so they do not examine differences between DEIS schools and non-DEIS schools in this sector.

> *listen to the parents, and they're sent out a questionnaire to all the stakeholders with it.* (Board of management member, DEIS school)

This view was echoed by the principal from the same school, who spoke of the importance of student leadership opportunities:

> *… We've lots of opportunities for student leadership within the school. We do listen to them. We've a student learning team, which is made up of students from every class group. And we picked them, number* [x] *on the roll in each class. So you're getting a total mix … For many of those children, they were delighted.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> [We have a] *very active student body …* [they are] *fully supported by staff. Prefecture system, really active student council.* [For example,] *TY students run the library.* [The school] *upskill six to eight students at the start of every year.* [Students are] *fully in control of manning the library, cataloguing books, chasing up returns.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

However, students reflected on their role in school decision making somewhat differently. For some there was an appreciation of the active role of the student council, as well as their voices and needs being accommodated fairly by school management:

> *The student council meet every month … They bring up the problem.* [I] *think school would listen. Up until a few years ago, girls couldn't wear pants*. [They] *brought it up to school and* [it was] *changed.* (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

> *The student council is very active … they really have a voice.* [We] *could go through them for change and it'd be taken into consideration.* [They will] *bring complaints to deputy to bring to the principal … They're very active anyway*. (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

However, many students expressed concerns about the limited role of the student council and perceived its existence as merely a formality.

> [We] *would like to change the uniforms –but we never have a say … The school asks for our opinions but they doesn't listen. The student council does nothing.* (Second year focus group, fee-charging school)

> *There's a student council but they have no power. There is no communication with management.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

> *If you bring up a problem in the student council they'll be like, 'oh yeah, we'll look into it', but they never really do … I don't think the surveys are ever really taken into account. We've done a million surveys on mental health, COVID, everything like that … then just never heard of again. Nothing changed. … We're telling them what's wrong but that's it.* (Fifth year focus group, fee-charging school)

Students felt that their teachers 'would not listen' and that they 'just do what we are told' (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school). Similar views were expressed among students in senior groups, emphasising their concern about having open communication with their teachers at school. Many issues were raised, but there were perceived delays in addressing them.

> *It's difficult to communicate to a teacher about the way they're teaching because there's a risk of offending them. … I think teachers should take in what students are saying, I think it's just going in one ear and out the other. … It's pointless having a student council when they don't listen to it.* (Second year and fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

For many students, enhancing their voice and involvement in school decision making requires more timely and transparent communication. This includes providing students with updates on progress and the rationale behind decisions, rather than simply instructing them on what to follow at school.

> *… I understand those things are hard to implement, you can't fix anything but at least tell us what's going on. It's hard to get around to everything but more communication would be great*. (Fifth year focus group, fee-charging school)

> *They should give us the reasons why they're saying 'No' rather than just kind of* [telling what] *we should* [do] *… We are kind of senior people in the school as well, and we don't want to just* [follow] *things for the sake of it. We should be involved a lot more.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

Overall, both quantitative and qualitative evidence in our study highlight students' desire for a more active and meaningful involvement in school decision making. The delayed and sometimes 'never happened' responses, limited impact of the student council, lack of communication between the school and students, as well as the contrast between their expectations for substantial input on critical matters like assignments and tests and the reality of surveys addressing less relevant topics, all lead to a sense of unmet expectations and perhaps frustration among students.

4.6 SUMMARY

Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive exploration of school ethos and culture from the perspectives of students, parents and school staff across 21 case study schools. Qualitative analysis unveils the diverse dimensions of school ethos valued by students, highlighting themes of community-building, extracurricular engagement, the balance between academic and personal development, and a strong commitment to inclusion and diversity. Despite varying views on religious ethos, a common language emphasising student-centricity, diversity, inclusion and community-building emerges across schools. Faith formation was still seen as part of the school's role by many stakeholders, but with, in general, sensitivity to students' and their families' own beliefs and desires. This nuanced view of faith formation was widely seen as compatible with schools' ethos, with participants feeling able to draw upon the religious and non-religious aspects of their school's ethos to inform their behaviour and attitudes as they wished.

Quantitative analysis highlights the vital role schools play in shaping students' values, with notable distinctions arising from family backgrounds. In terms of school ethos promotion, students generally perceived their schools positively, acknowledging encouragement for various achievements, quality in teaching and learning, community-building, fairness and respect for all individuals. However, they expressed less positivity regarding their school's promotion of spiritual and human development. Prominent differences in relation to gender and family backgrounds were evident among students.

The examination of school climate reveals predominantly positive interactions, with most students feeling accepted, respected and successful, though disparities emerged in relation to family characteristics, SEN status, gender and school experiences. School absence is closely related to gender, SEN status and socioeconomic backgrounds, with girls, students with SEN and those from less affluent families having higher rates of absenteeism. Overall, students had positive attitudes toward school, with distinctive differences associated with family backgrounds and SEN status. Most students valued their schoolwork and found the subjects they study interested them. Many also agreed that they worked hard at school, were encouraged by teachers to continue their education after leaving school, and received all the supports needed to learn. Gender differences were evident, with girls expressing greater focus as well as a greater emphasis on school performance, while boys showed more positivity regarding the school's role in cultivating their interest in learning.

Positive teacher interactions further enhanced the school experiences, shaped by socioeconomic advantages, academic self-image, teacher expectations and the

presence of a student-led ethos.[43] These interactions also reveal the influence of school climate and student dynamics over individual or school characteristics. The chapter concludes with insights into students' positive perceptions of their voices in school but suggests opportunities for increased involvement in school decision-making processes.

[43] The student-led school ethos measure is constructed based on three of the individual measures: 'I am encouraged to make up my own mind'; 'I am encouraged to express my opinions'; and 'I am encouraged to discuss the issues with people having different opinions'. Details of how this measure is constructed can be found in Chapter 2 (Methodology).

CHAPTER 5

School gender mix

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of single-sex schools is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Irish second-level landscape in comparison to other European countries. Regarding the proportion of students attending single-sex schools in countries around the globe, Ireland's second-level schools are second only to Malta in Europe. Almost all of Ireland's single-sex schools are within the voluntary secondary sector, with the religious orders who originally founded the schools driving the decision to enrol only one sex (Hannan et al., 1996). As the religious orders have withdrawn from the direct management and day-to-day running of voluntary secondary schools, and under wider enrolment or social pressure, many schools have transitioned to coeducational, either by opening enrolment to both sexes or by amalgamating with another school. No new single-sex school has opened since 1998, and post-primary enrolment data show a steady decline in the proportion of students in single-sex schools since 1972. One narrative suggests that universal or near universal coeducational schooling is a historical inevitability (Maloney, 2024); that it is a question not of if but of when. Yet many single-sex schools in our study were confident of the benefits of single-sex education and of the continuing strength of their enrolments.

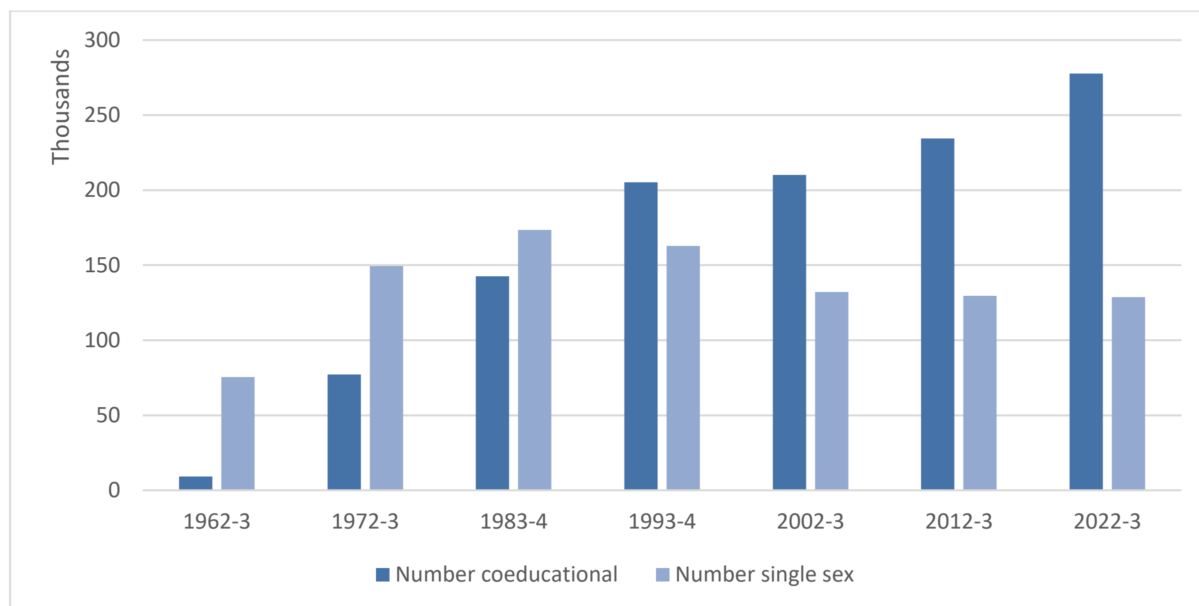
This chapter will begin by looking at the numbers attending single-sex and coeducational schools over the last seven decades and the cohorts currently attending single-sex and coeducational schools in the latest *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) data. It will then investigate student perceptions of single-sex and coeducational schooling, as recorded by our survey and focus groups. The views of parents, school staff and key stakeholders in the education system will be explored. This study did not collect outcome data and thus does not aim to highlight one school type as being better or worse than another in terms of academic results. What it does aim to do is present a record of the opinions and experiences of the key groups involved in voluntary secondary schools around school gender mix to inform policy and school-level decision making at an important point in the development of the Irish school system.

5.2 SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show the number and percentage of students in coeducational and single-sex second-level schools over the last seven decades. It is important to note that the 1962–1963 record only includes voluntary secondary schools; the vocational – Education and Training Boards (ETB) – schools were not yet recorded

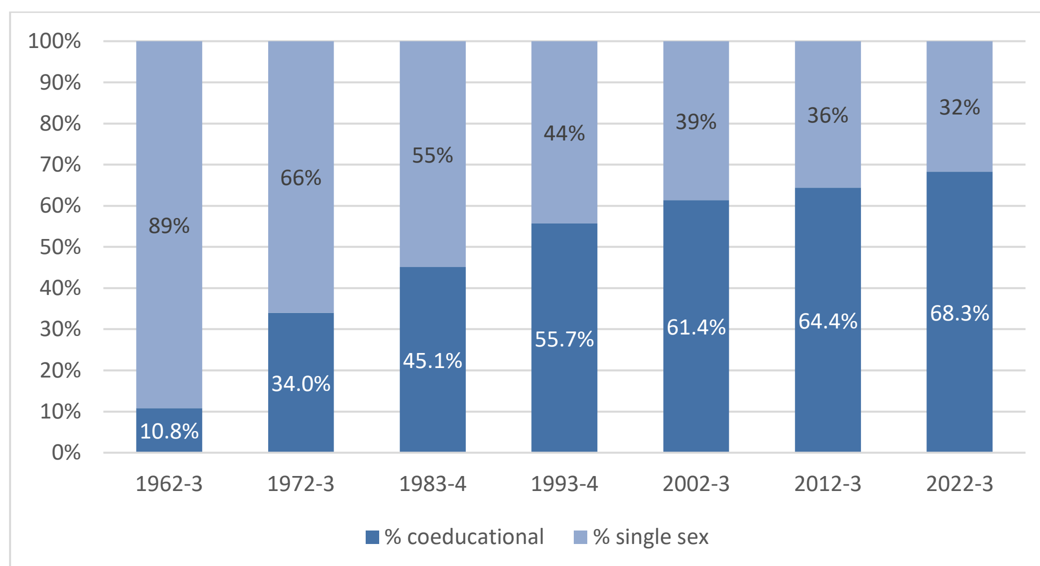
as secondary schools and the community and comprehensive (C&C) sector did not yet exist. The massive growth in coeducational schools from 1962 to 1972 is therefore partly to do with increased numbers in schools and the increase in numbers of coeducational schools and partly to do with the data including all second-level schools for the first time.

FIGURE 5.1 NUMBER OF STUDENTS BY SCHOOL GENDER MIX, 1962–2022



Source: Retrieved from Department of Education data.

FIGURE 5.2 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS BY SCHOOL GENDER MIX, 1962–2022



Source: Retrieved from Department of Education data.

The increase in the overall percentage of students attending coeducational schools is driven by both an increase in the number of students attending these schools, as part of an overall growth in second-level education, and by a decrease in the

number of students attending single-sex schools. In the context of a near doubling of overall second-level enrolment from 226,000 to 406,000 between 1972 and 2022, it is significant that enrolment in single-sex schools has fallen by 15%, or 20,000 students. This trend of a growing number of coeducational schools continues, with the decade between 2012 and 2022 seeing the proportion rise from 64% to 68%.

If the students attending single-sex schools comprise a minority (which is becoming smaller over time), it is worth considering whether they are distinct from students attending coeducational schools across the key characteristics considered in Chapter 3. The most recent GUI data suggest that there are some differences by school gender mix. Table 5.1 shows some of these key characteristics, revealing that single-sex schools are typically more socio-economically advantaged. As with the differences within and between the sectors discussed in Chapter 3, it is important to note the variation within each school gender mix, with fee-charging, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) and non-DEIS non-fee-charging schools in each.

TABLE 5.1 BREAKDOWN OF SCHOOL GENDER MIX BY SEN, PARENTAL EDUCATION AND INCOME QUINTILES IN GUI 08' COHORT, WAVE 6 DATA

	Coeducational	All girls	All boys
SEN prevalence	31%	25%	23.4%
Parent education – Third level	19%	26%	25.6%
Lowest 2 income quintiles	43%	36.2%	30.4%

Source: GUI 08' Cohort, Wave 6.
Note: SEN = Special educational need.

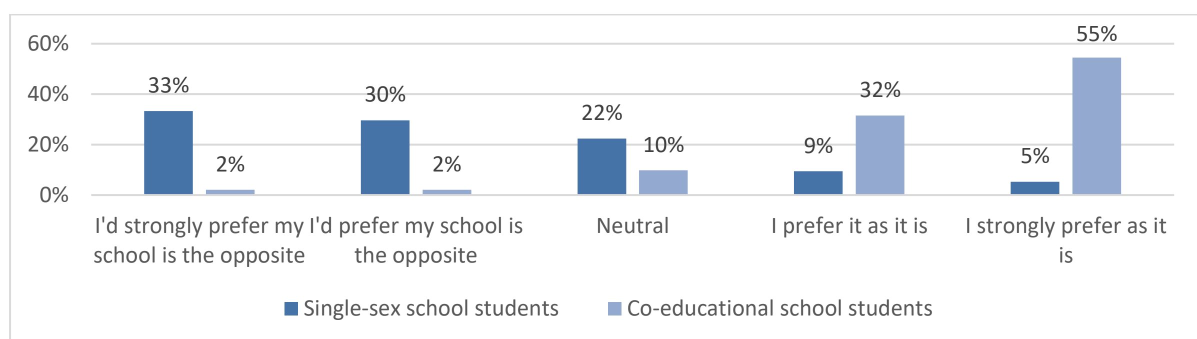
5.3 STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS

Our sample consists of 54% girls, 44% boys and 2.2% identifying as 'non-binary/other'. Regarding school gender mix, 43% of students attended girls' schools, 30% attended boys' schools, and 27% were enrolled in coeducational schools. This is compared to 33%, 26% and 41% in the overall 2022/2023 voluntary secondary school enrolment. As noted earlier, 26% attended single-sex primary schools and 74% attended coeducational primary schools.

Figure 5.3 illustrates students' preferences regarding the gender mix in their schools. Students attending single-sex schools were asked if they would prefer their school to be coeducational, and students in coeducational schools were asked if they would prefer a single-sex school. The results show that a majority of students in single-sex schools would (strongly) prefer their school to be coeducational, while students in coeducational schools (strongly) prefer their schools to remain as they are. Interestingly, despite the preference for coeducational schools, a higher proportion of students in single-sex schools

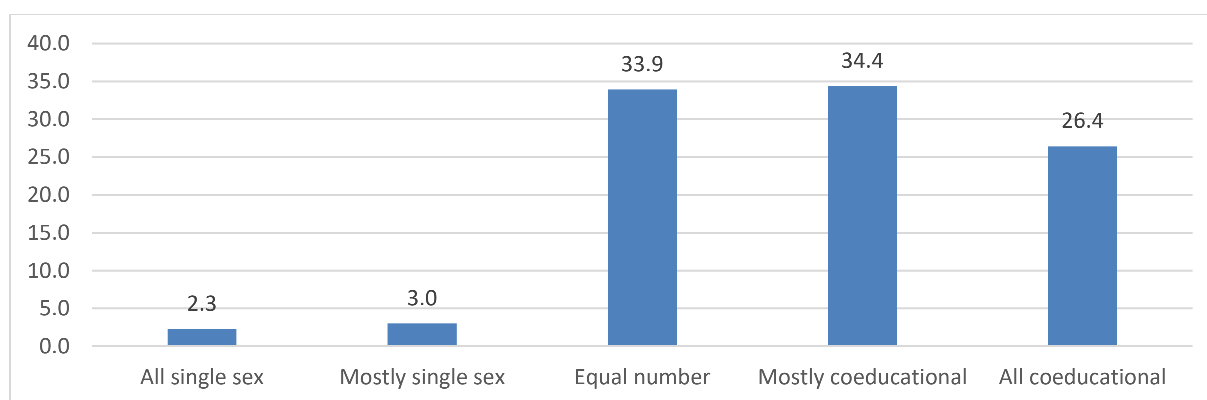
expressed a 'neutral' attitude compared to students in coeducational schools (22% vs 10%).

FIGURE 5.3 STUDENTS' PREFERRED SCHOOL GENDER MIX (%)



When asked whether they would prefer mostly or all single-sex schools or mostly or all coeducational schools across the education system as a whole, a preference for coeducational schools emerged, with 61% of students favouring mostly or all coeducational schools, and only around 5% preferring mostly or all single-sex schools. About one-third stated a preference for an 'equal number' of both types of schools.

FIGURE 5.4 STUDENT PREFERENCE FOR OVERALL SCHOOL GENDER MIX IN IRISH SYSTEM (%)



Immediately after this question, students were asked 'Why?', and given a large open comment box to answer. The 1,647 responses were coded and arranged in themes as shown in Table 5.2 below. The number in brackets refers to the number of times each code appears in the data. Due to the sheer number of codes and the fact that many speak for themselves, we will only consider some in detail here.

TABLE 5.2 STUDENT RESPONSES TO AN OPEN COMMENT BOX ASKING THE REASON FOR THEIR SCHOOL GENDER MIX PREFERENCE

Response	Reasons		
Mixed – positives	Mixed socialisation good (764)	Preparation for future (224)	Fun – mixed (45)
	Mixed better academically (26)	Mixed better socially (19)	Mixed better wellbeing (4)
Mixed – negatives	Distraction (42)		
Single-sex – positives	Single-sex better academically (74)	Single-sex better socially (50)	Fun – single-sex (4)
	Single-sex better sport (3)	Tradition (2)	
Single-sex – negatives	Single-sex socialisation bad (70)	Single-sex toxic (45)	Outdated/Unnatural (45)
	Trans exclusionary (19)	Subject choice (14)	Segregation (9)
Generic preference	Mixed better (74)	Single-sex better (18)	
System thoughts	Importance of choice (376)	No reason for single-sex (72)	School gender mix unimportant (29)
	Studies say (11)	No need for change (7)	Other systems (5)
Gendered perceptions	Girls good for boys (31)	Boys good for girls (30)	Gender differences (18)
	Girls intimidated by boys (16)	Dislike of opposite gender (4)	
Wider social issues	Gender equality (45)	Cis/heteronormativity (12)	Diversity/inclusion (26)
Logistics	Mixed more people (5)	Family (5)	Economic value (3)
Specifics	Mixed primary (21)	Particular schools (9)	
Cross-cutting issues	Religion (16)	Bullying (11)	Out of school gender mixing (7)
Other	Doesn't know/care (39)	Unclear (35)	Other (8)

Note: Students were initially asked, 'If you were in charge of the education system, would you have all single-sex schools, all coeducational schools, or a mix?' Subsequently, they were asked to provide detailed explanations for their choices. Key themes that emerged from their responses to this open-ended question are summarised in the table.

The most frequent code by a significant margin was, 'Mixed socialisation good', which captured responses referring to the benefits and importance of young people being socialised together rather than in single-sex settings. The other particularly frequently noted positive of the coeducational school was in its preparation for the gender mix young people would experience in post-school education, employment and wider life. Distraction was the only negative noted.

The most commonly voiced sentiment among those who felt some single-sex schools, or an equal number of both types, should remain available centred around perceived importance of choice for young people and their parents, rather than support for single-sex schools in and of themselves. Among reasons for support for single-sex schools, academic benefits were the most commonly noted, followed by social benefits. Negative view of single-sex schools included the perception that

such an environment had an adverse impact on young people's socialisation, that it could be toxic and that it was an outdated and/or unnatural approach to education. Several students also noted the difficulties single-sex schools posed to transgender students. A small number of respondents saw single-sex schools as a form of segregation, which might suggest stronger feelings around the issue.

Some students highlighted perceived gender differences in terms of how boys and girls behave, socialise and learn. Girls were said to benefit boys by calming them and encouraging academic engagement, while boys were said to benefit girls by creating a less pressurised environment, academically and socially. Several girls also mentioned negative interactions with boys in academic contexts and the negative impact this had on their learning and wellbeing. Other students argued that schools play an important role in tackling gender inequality and that coeducational schools were important in this process. A small number of students highlighted the role that schools, particularly single-sex ones, play in constructing and reinforcing gender norms and heteronormative behaviour.

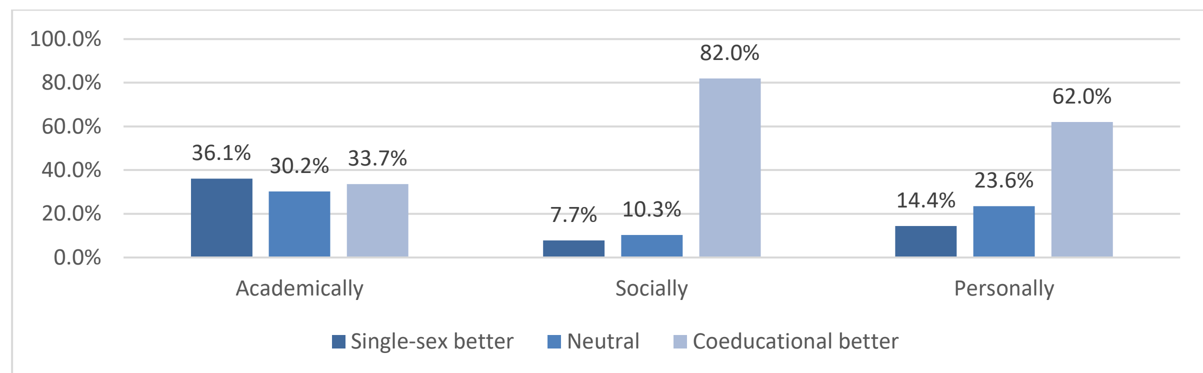
Some issues cut across student preferences for school gender mix. Religion was highlighted by some as a malign influence, instrumental in creating and maintaining single-sex schools, which were perceived negatively. For others, however, single-sex schools were positively perceived as according with students' religious beliefs. Many of these positive perspectives on the religious rationale for attending single-sex schools mentioned that Muslim students particularly benefit in this regard. Bullying was also remarked upon as happening in both single-sex and coeducational schools, highlighting the limits of the explanatory power of school gender mix.

Further closed-ended questions paint a similar picture to the open-ended question in terms of the academic, social and personal benefits of coeducational schools. Opinions regarding the impact of single-sex versus coeducational schools on students' academic development are varied, with almost equal proportions of students considering single-sex education as 'better', 'neutral' or 'preferring mixed education'. However, when it comes to social and personal development, preferences are clearer, with a majority of students believing that coeducational schools are better in terms of fostering their social development (82%) and for personal growth (62%).

Gender differences are evident in how students perceive the impact of school gender makeup on social and academic development. Girls tend to be more positive about coeducational schools' influence on their social development, with 86% of girls believing coeducational schools are better compared to 77% of boys. Conversely, a significant proportion of girls, particularly those in single-sex girls' schools, consider single-sex education to be better in terms of their academic

development (44% of girls vs 26%). Students with degree-educated parents are also more likely to view single-sex schools positively in terms of their academic development (42% vs 31%). These findings suggest that family background and gender may play a role in shaping students' perceptions of single-sex and coeducational schools, particularly concerning academic development. This may reflect and partly explain the higher proportion of parents with third level degrees among students in single-sex schools, as discussed in Section 5.2.

FIGURE 5.5 PERCEPTION OF SINGLE-SEX VERSUS COEDUCATIONAL SCHOOLS



Note: The categories 'single sex better' and 'coeducational better' include the response of being 'slightly better' and 'much better'.

5.4 QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Trends among student focus groups were similar to those in the survey data discussed above. Few students in coeducational schools said that they would rather be in a single-sex school, while students in single-sex schools were split on the question. The positives they pointed out in single-sex schools focused on academic and social benefits:

> *I think confidence is another main thing. I'm not saying that I'm not a confident person or anything like that but, if I was in a classroom with guys, if I was in first year – I'd be, like, 'Oh, I don't know what to say because it's only going to sound, like, stupid', or, like, 'They think I'm a weirdo,' you know. So, I feel, on the other hand, all-girls' schools are kind of good to show girls they can say what they want to say.* (Fifth year focus group, single-sex girls' school)[44]

> *You can have a bit more craic with boys. If anyone says anything and you get in a bit of a fight, the next day you come in and be best friends again. Whereas girls, if you said something, and you didn't mean it,*

[44] For this section, we only report school gender as the school identifier to avoid identification.

> *and it slipped by accident …* (Second year focus group, single-sex boys' school)

> *It's nice that you don't have to make big effort coming in every day – it's just girls and no one cares.* (Fifth year focus group, single-sex girls' school)

Activities were also seen as a strength of single-sex school, particularly in regard to the opportunity to participate in girls' sports:

> *In a mixed it'd, kind of, just more revolve around boys than girls. And it's like the girls are just the add-ons. And they'd be offered more opportunities than the girls would.* (Second year focus group, single-sex girls' school)

In two coeducational schools, this was perceived to be problematic for the students attending:

> *With the girls, football is happening but not much is done, not much emphasis is placed on it. There's much more for boys. The difference is that for the lads they got someone from out of the school to do it, they didn't do for the girls which I don't think is fair either. With other schools you'll hear they're training twice a week, we never train for the girls, just go to the matches and hope for the best.* (Fifth year focus group, coeducational school)

Some school staff also felt that students were more comfortable or better able to learn and develop in single-sex schools.

> *Certainly, the strengths* [of a boys' school] *are that you can engage in various activities without the fear of the students feeling embarrassed about things. For example, we have a very strong music tradition in the college, because boys feel comfortable in bringing their instruments along and playing.* (Principal, single-sex boys' school)

> *I do find though that we're blessed in a way because ladies in an all-ladies' school are well-organised. They're ready to learn. They'll always come with a pen, they'll always come with their books. There's very little issues with behaviour or showing off.* (SENCO, single-sex girls' school)

Again, however, few staff members in coeducational school felt that a single-sex school would be preferable, although some felt it might be better for girls academically or initially more comfortable for all students, male or female. The

converse was not true: there were staff across the single-sex schools which felt that coeducational would be preferable:

> [We have] *gone to a stage where I think mixed is more natural. I can see the advantages of all girls – girls will express themselves more, especially in the junior years boys can dominate classes. They can hugely dominate classes actually. Sometimes as the hormones start kicking in, they can be a little bit intimidated. From a societal point of view, we live in a mixed world, a mixed school is not a bad thing. It's just a matter of getting used to that change*. (Teacher, single-sex girls' school)

> *I think a mixed school is the way forward. Girls prosper and develop well in terms of academics in single sex but mixed is the way to go.* (Deputy principal, single-sex girls' school)

> *My own preference would be for co-ed schooling, and I think it gives a better-balanced position for young people emerging from those schools into what are co-ed colleges, co-ed workplaces. While I myself went to* [school name] *when it was a boarding single-gender school, and I got a great education there, I think I know enough of the world to say that perhaps co-ed schooling is a better bet.* (Board of management member, single-sex boys' school)

The reasons cited for this preference covered much the same ground as the open question in the student survey: greater subject choice, preparation for the future and the importance of coeducational socialisation. There is clearly some appetite for coeducation among staff in the single-sex schools in our sample, even if the nature of qualitative material means we cannot quantify it.

This chapter will end by considering possible reasons suggested by the data as to why single-sex schools remain so. One theory might be that the school community as a whole might prefer to remain single sex. However, the evidence does not support this. The majority of students in every school preferred to be co-educational, although this was not always the case for staff, parents and other stakeholders.

This would be entirely consistent with the qualitative material, which showed support for single-sex from at least some staff and/or parents across each of the single-sex schools in the sample.

The second reason is that the higher up the chain of command and experience the interviewee was, the more invested they tended to be in the existing school gender makeup (as with the commitment to ethos discussed in Chapter 4). One teacher

pointed to the role of that school's trust in defining the school's ethos, and the likelihood that trustees remained committed to the single-sex model:

> *I don't think it'd be a bad thing, that's my own personal opinion. But I would imagine that the ethos that's in this school, the trust, I'm not sure if that will be something that would be part of their view.* (Teacher, single-sex girls' school)

The third reason is that, even among those who express a preference for coeducation, the issue is not pressing enough to warrant diverting time, energy and resources towards it when schools are so busy with other, perhaps more pressing, things:

> *There are pros and cons to mixed and single sex – I would prefer mixed but I don't think single sex is a big issue. It's not going to benefit society as much as people think – it's not going to eliminate violence against women, just look at other countries. There's no evidence, it's just opinions. So there's no rush to eradicate really.* (Guidance counsellor, single-sex girls' school)
>
> *Are there other battles in education that we should be more concerned about? Is it such a big deal if we have single-sex schools? Youth are different nowadays compared to when single-sex schools was that you wouldn't see a boy from one end of the year to the next … Parental choice is part of our culture … Is it a battle worth fighting to remove it? I don't think it is.* (Stakeholder interview)

A final possible reason is that practical constraints prevent change, even if there is a preference for it. This might include financial costs or uncertainties about student numbers, space constraints and so on.

5.5 SUMMARY

Overall, the results show a mismatch between the attitudes of students and principals. They also highlight a tension between the purported importance of student voice in schools' ethos and the fact that an apparently strong preference among students for their school to be coeducational has not led to any change in the gender makeup of schools. While the results showed some students are delighted with their schools and teachers, and felt their school gender mix was optimum for learning and preparation for the future across both single-sex and coeducation schools, the scale of the preference expressed by students for coeducation was notable. Fewer than 20% of survey respondents in single-sex schools actively preferred their current school gender mix, compared to almost 90% in coeducational schools. Teachers and school leaders in many of these schools emphasised the student-centred nature of their ethos and their

commitment to the student voice, as discussed in Chapter 4. It might be timely to put those principles into practice, in conjunction with the voices of the wider school community. This is illustrated by the strong contrast between the survey results within one school, which showed strong student support for that school becoming coeducational and this observation of the principal of the same school:

> *Any parent who has made a deliberate decision to send their daughter here will know that they're well looked after and they're well cared for. I think it's wrong, this lobby that tries to say, 'it's unnatural and it's inhumane and it's all these things'. No it's not. If a parent and a child make this decision, it has to be respected. I don't think anybody can railroad something through. There's no appetite for it here, I'm not hearing students saying to me that they want to be in a mixed school, I'm not hearing parents saying it to me.* (Principal, single-sex girls' school)

In the survey responses from that school, 72% of students stated that they would prefer to be coeducational, 17% were neutral and just 11% stated a preference for single sex.

CHAPTER 6

Teaching and learning

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses our fourth research question: what is happening in the classroom in voluntary secondary schools? We consider: how students experience the transition to secondary school; the subjects available to students; how students view key subjects; their experiences of the Junior Cycle, Transition Year and Leaving Certificate programmes; how students feel about themselves as learners; the prevalence of different teaching and learning approaches; and additional supports available to students.

6.2 TRANSITION TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

Most second year students in voluntary secondary schools reflected positively on the transition (Figure 6.1). This is in keeping with the findings of the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study on 13 year olds, where most students reported positive experiences in transitioning to their secondary school (GUI key findings report, 2023). Although around 44% of second year students reported missing their friends from primary school, almost all students (strongly) agreed that they had made new friends (96% in our sample vs 97% in the GUI study) and had settled well into their new school environment (86% in our sample vs 96% in the GUI study). A slightly smaller proportion (strongly) agreed that they were coping well with schoolwork (71% in our sample vs 92% in the GUI study).

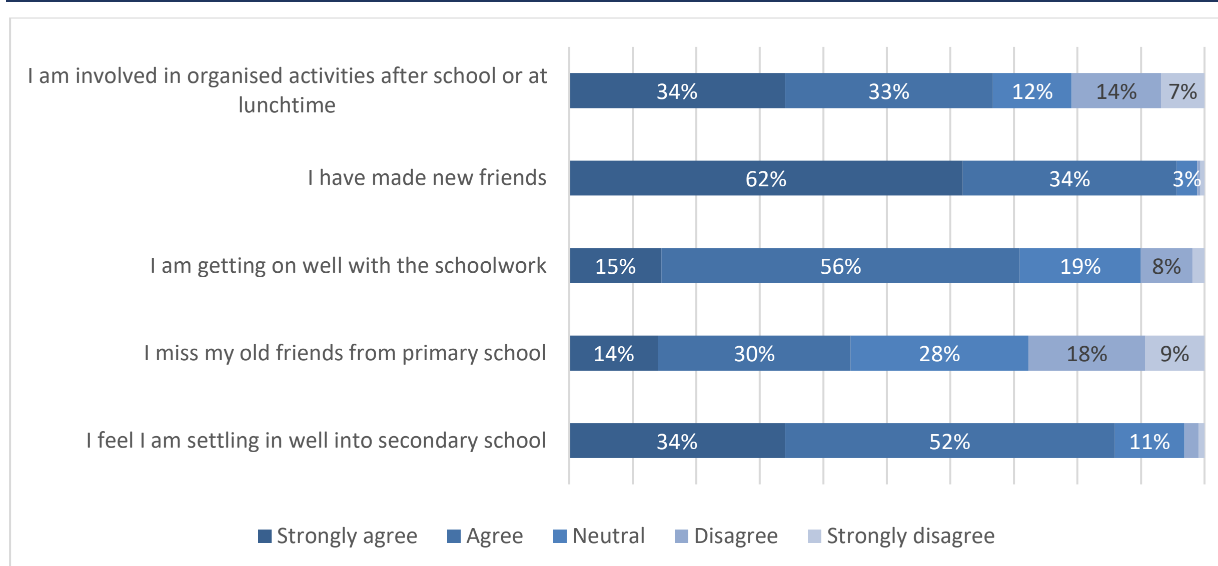
The slightly higher amount of positive findings among the GUI sample might reflect differences in the year group studied. Our study focuses on second year students, while in the GUI study, one-third were in first year, with the remainder in second year. Earlier research has shown a dip in student engagement and motivation in second year (McCoy et al., 2014a). Nearly two-thirds of students in voluntary secondary schools actively participate in school-organised afterschool or lunchtime activities, a rate that is higher than among students attending Education and Training Boards (ETB) or community and comprehensive (C&C) schools in the GUI study, just over half of whom actively participate in such activities.

Regarding settling into secondary school, some gender differences were observed, with a slightly higher proportion of boys agreeing that they 'settled in well' compared to girls (91% vs 83%). In line with the GUI findings on 13 year olds, more positive responses were found among students from families with higher household income, those without economic difficulties and those with degree-

educated parents, all of whom tended to reflect more positivity regarding their transition experiences.

Among students surveyed, those without special educational needs (SEN) tended to be more positive about their transition experiences (88% for those without SEN vs 78% for students with SEN). Earlier GUI research, with the ’98 Cohort, showed that young people with SEN were more likely to experience a negative transition to secondary school. In that study, the differences were much wider – students with general learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities were three times more likely to experience a poor transition compared to young people without SEN (McCoy et al., 2019). Findings from this study show that the gaps in transition experience are narrower, suggesting transition supports for students with SEN in voluntary secondary schools may be more effective in supporting their transition. The results may also reflect differences in SEN prevalence levels between the two GUI cohorts. Overall, the results here and in earlier research highlight the importance of transition supports for students with SEN in school planning.

FIGURE 6.1 STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON THE TRANSITION TO SECONDARY SCHOOL



6.3 SUBJECT CHOICE

Regarding subject choice, our findings generally align with the positive responses from the broader population included in the GUI study. Nearly 88% of the 13 year olds across different school sectors in the GUI study reported that they had choice over the subjects they studied. Similarly, 85.7% of our second year students in the voluntary secondary sector were satisfied with the level of subject choice they had. Positive responses were also evident among our fifth year students, with 79% being satisfied with their Leaving Certificate subject choices and 84% stating that they had the opportunity to change their choices, if needed. In particular, students

from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to express satisfaction with their Leaving Certificate subject choices compared to their peers. For example, 82% of those without economic difficulties were happy with their Leaving Certificate subject choices compared to 68% of those with economic difficulties; the corresponding figures were 80% of non-DEIS school students compared to 72% of DEIS school students, and 85% of fee-charging school students compared to 77% non-fee charging-school students. Similar patterns were observed among second year students.

Earlier research has highlighted the role of school size in shaping subject availability, as well as subject level availability (McCoy et al., 2019). A number of principals in the case study schools highlighted how changing school size is impacting subject offerings:

> *The bigger you go, the more* [subjects] *you can offer, the more that entices people in. We have introduced agricultural science, accounting, applied maths. With bigger numbers, the more of those opportunities you can provide.* (Deputy principal, non-DEIS school)

Several schools had local arrangements to offer subjects in conjunction with neighbouring schools, suggesting one approach for schools that want to offer a wide range of subjects without increasing their enrolment.

The lack of sports facilities, particularly a sports hall, was noted in a number of schools, in particular in relation to how it prevented them from providing physical education as a Senior Cycle subject, or obliged them to restricted the number of (non-exam) physical education hours they could offer students. A lack of appropriate classroom facilities was also seen as curtailing schools' plans to offer more practical subjects: 'practical subjects are not logistically feasible' (guidance counsellor, fee-charging school). Students in one school argued the school is 'academically sexist because we can't do metalwork or woodwork' (Fifth year focus group, single-sex girls school). Students in a few schools also alluded to a gendering of subject offerings: 'woodwork, technology, you can't do currently because they're "boys subjects" but I would like to do them' (fifth year focus group, single-sex girls school). In another school, a teacher observed, 'The lads love cooking but the school has no home economics, due to funding and having buildings that don't lend themselves to change' (Teacher, single-sex boys school).

Most schools spoke of students who received an exemption from studying Irish. However, difficulties in securing an Irish exemption were observed across a number of schools:

> *She doesn't qualify for an Irish exemption because of the flipping circular. There's so many children with autism who really don't cope well with Irish. It's a communication issue. And the circular has now added that they do have to try at least two years.* (SEN coordinator (SENCO), DEIS school)

Schools also varied widely in terms of alternative arrangements for students with such exemptions. In some schools, students attend learning support during this time, while in others, students attend the mainstream class and simply carry on with other work. In a small number of schools, alternative subjects are offered: 'Irish exempt students are offered geography in a small class to make up the points – it is great for them, an extra help' (teacher, non-DEIS school).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of fifth year students did not sit the Junior Cycle examinations (81%),[45] and 88% reported feeling that this has significantly impacted their preparation for Senior Cycle. Girls and students from fee-charging schools found the situation particularly challenging.

[45] The Assessment and Reporting on Students' Learning – Junior Cycle 2022 (Department of Education, 2020) specifies that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Junior Cycle exams were cancelled in 2021. Third year Junior Cycle students received a written report from their school detailing their learning achievements across a wide range of subjects and courses during the Junior Cycle. The assessment of their learning was conducted by their teachers. Schools had autonomy to determine the assessment process and report format after consulting with third year teachers. A State Certificate of Completion from the Department of Education was also provided, confirming that the student had completed the Junior Cycle programme of study. The certificate included a list of subjects, short courses, and priority learning units studied. See https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/c797a-arrangements-for-the-implementation-of-the-framework-for-junior-cycle-with-particular-reference-to-school-year-202021/.

TABLE 6.1 FIFTH YEAR STUDENTS SUBJECT CHOICE FOR CERTIFICATION

	Taking it and encouraged to take it	Taking it and felt pressured to take it	Taking it but not encouraged to take it	Wanted to take it but not allowed to take it
Mathematics (higher level)	53%	11%	8%	1%
English (higher level)	71%	7%	12%	0%
Irish (higher level)	43%	10%	8%	0%
Biology	46%	3%	11%	1%
Geography	20%	2%	6%	1%
French	29%	8%	7%	1%
Business	23%	1%	8%	1%
Home economics	14%	1%	4%	3%
History	16%	1%	5%	2%
Construction studies	9%	1%	3%	7%
Chemistry	14%	2%	6%	1%
Spanish	12%	3%	3%	7%
Art	13%	2%	4%	1%
German	11%	3%	2%	3%
Physics	15%	1%	6%	1%
Agricultural science	8%	1%	3%	2%
Music	12%	1%	1%	2%
Engineering	3%	0%	1%	11%
Design and communication	9%	0%	2%	6%
Physical education	23%	4%	7%	3%

Note: Given constraints on survey length, it was not possible to list all Senior Cycle subjects. Subjects taken by a larger share of students were selected for inclusion.

Over seven in ten students in our study reported being encouraged to take higher-level English, followed by higher-level maths (53%), higher-level biology (46%) and higher-level Irish (43%). Some students felt pressured to take these subjects, particularly higher-level maths (11%) and higher-level Irish (10%). Given the bonus points attached to higher-level maths, it is not clear whether this 'pressure' stems from students seeking such extra points or from their parents or teachers. In addition, around one in ten students took these subjects without being encouraged to do so.

Engineering emerged as the subject with the highest proportion of students who would like to have taken it but were not given the opportunity to do so, a finding that has clear implications for national science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) policy.

Significant disparities were identified in relation to the uptake of higher-level maths, based on family characteristics and SEN status. Compared to their peers, students with degree-educated parents (62% vs 45%), without economic difficulties (58% vs 37%) and those in non-DEIS schools, especially fee-charging schools (66% in fee-charging schools vs 40% in DEIS schools), were more likely to take and be encouraged to take higher-level maths. Students without SEN were also more likely to be encouraged to take higher-level maths compared to students with SEN (57% vs 29%).

Over the last two decades there has been a strong policy focus on supporting access to higher-level maths and STEM subjects more broadly (see McGarr and Lynch, 2015). The Report of the Project Maths Implementation Group, for example, stated that:

> *Ireland's future economic growth and competitiveness will increasingly depend on the extent to which it can support high value knowledge-based industries. Mathematics is essential for disciplines such as science, technology, engineering and finance … In a globalised competitive economy it is important that Ireland moves beyond being 'average' at mathematics towards the promotion of advanced levels of skills, creativity and innovation.* (Department of Education and Skills, 2010, p. 4)

Distinct gender differences emerged in the uptake of higher-level English and Irish, alongside the previously discussed disparities by family resources and SEN status. Girls were generally more likely to take and be encouraged to take higher level English and Irish than boys (74% girls vs 68% boys, 51% girls vs 35% boys, respectively). In line with statistics for the full population of Leaving Certificate students (State Examinations Commission), gender differences were evident in the uptake of home economics, construction, biology and physics. A larger share of girls felt encouraged to take home economics (21% vs 5%) and biology (58% vs 30%) compared to boys. Conversely, more boys felt they were encouraged to take physics (24% vs 8%), construction (20% vs 0.5%) and physical education (30% vs 18%).

In addition, students attending DEIS schools and those whose parents are not university educated were more likely to take construction. Similar patterns were

observed in the uptake of physical education, with students of non-university educated parents and those attending DEIS schools being more likely to take it.

6.4 EXTENT TO WHICH SUBJECTS ARE SEEN AS INTERESTING OR DIFFICULT

In general, fifth year students were most positive about science subjects, with physics (69%) and biology (69%) considered the most interesting subjects. Conversely, maths (46%), Irish (43%) and chemistry (43%) are perceived as the most difficult. Science is also considered interesting, which is of particular note as it was taken by effectively all students in our sample, whereas the Leaving Certificate Science subjects were actively chosen by students taking them. Similarly, second year students found Irish (44%) and maths (32%) to be their most difficult subjects and showed greater interest in history (41%), as well as science (41%).

Across both year groups, few students find Irish 'interesting' – just 15% of second year and 20% of fifth years. Close to half indicate the subject is difficult. The distinct patterns for Irish were echoed in interviews with school personnel, several of whom observed challenges around engaging students in Irish:

> *As an Irish teacher, it's difficult. It's difficult to keep them engaged … make it fun for them. … We can do our best. We can play as many games as you like, and you can use the apps on the iPad and stuff like that, which is great. But at the end of the day, I think when it comes down to it, it's probably on the bottom of everyone's list when it comes to their favourite subjects.'* (Teacher, DEIS school)

Students too emphasised the need for change in the way Irish is taught, while a number of school personnel highlighted a need for greater choice or an exam in fifth year, rather than sixth year:

> *It is unfair that students have to carry a subject like Irish which is so difficult for dyslexic students … there is a huge cohort of students with language processing difficulties who have to take Irish and often a foreign language as well for third level. So you're forcing them to take two subjects that they're not suited to.* (Guidance counsellor, fee-charging school)

Clear gender differences can be observed, especially among the Senior Cycle students, in terms of the subjects students find interesting and difficult. Girls in fifth year are more likely to find Irish and biology interesting, compared to boys (24% vs 16%, and 74% vs 59%, respectively). Notably, a higher proportion of boys in fifth year found biology difficult (29% boys vs 12% girls). While boys in fifth year

are more likely to find maths interesting compared to girls in the same year group (40% boys vs 30% girls), no significant gender differences are found when it comes to how difficult they perceive maths.

For second year students, boys are more likely to find history interesting (45% of boys vs 37% of girls) and less likely to find it difficult (13% of boys vs 23% of girls) compared to girls. Consistent with the GUI findings on 13 year olds across different school sectors, girls are more likely to find maths difficult (38% of girls vs 26% of boys).

6.5 JUNIOR CYCLE EXPERIENCES

Fifth year students were asked about their experiences of different aspects of the Junior Cycle programme. Overall, students shared positive views regarding the extensive array of subjects and courses offered during their Junior Cycle, with 64% (strongly) agreeing that they had benefitted from a wide range of subjects (Figure 6.2).[46] However, students also expressed concerns about an excessive focus on exams, with nearly two-thirds concurring on this point. While more than half of the students would have liked assessments that were more in line with 'continuous assessments' (53%), fewer than one-third agreed that they enjoyed the classroom-based assessments (CBAs). It should be noted that the framework for Junior Cycle does not provide for continuous assessment, but rather an increasing emphasis on formative assessment combined with one or two CBAs to complement the June exams.

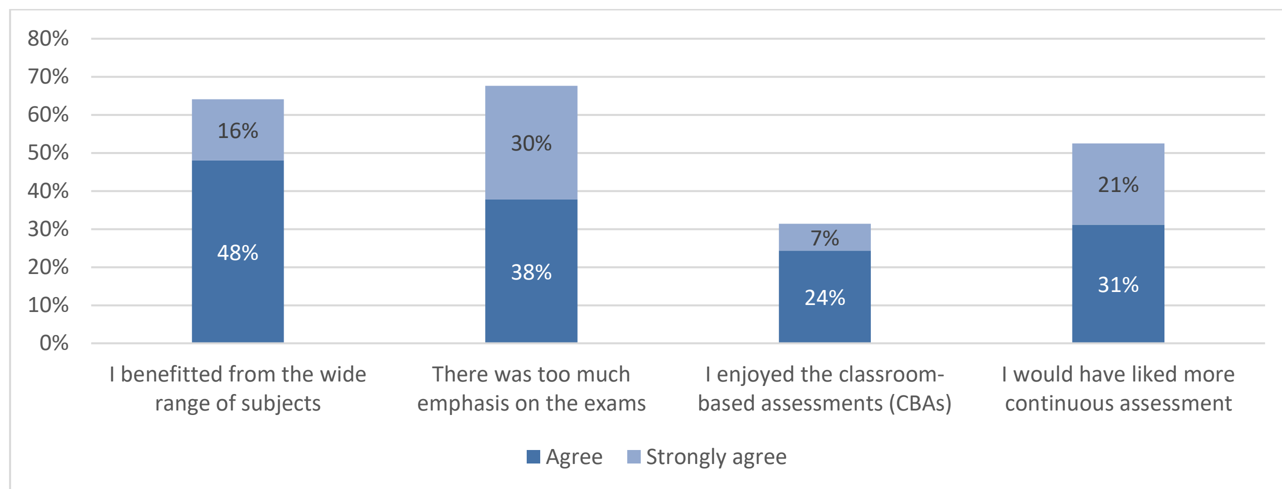
Students attending DEIS schools express notably lower levels of positivity regarding benefitting from a wide range of subjects compared to their peers in non-DEIS schools (54% for DEIS students vs 66% for non-DEIS students). Conversely, students without SEN (66% vs 56%) and those from more advantaged family backgrounds, such as those with degree-educated parents or who did not experience any economic difficulties, exhibited greater positivity (70% vs 59%, 70% vs 59%, and 66% vs 57%, respectively).

When asked whether they took any short courses at school, approximately four in ten second year students indicated that they took short courses (but the research team did observe confusion among students regarding this question), with around 86% of them expressing satisfaction with the variety of courses/subjects available. A slightly higher percentage of boys and students with SEN indicated that they took short courses compared to girls and those without SEN (45% boys vs 40% girls, 48% with SEN vs 41% without SEN).

46 The research team did not collect data on the actual number of subjects offered in each of the 21 schools.

Students with SEN are also more likely to agree that there is an overemphasis on exams in the Junior Cycle programme, with 76% of students with SEN compared to 66% of students without SEN agreeing. Interestingly, boys were more positive about CBAs compared to girls.

FIGURE 6.2 EXTENT TO WHICH STUDENTS ARE POSITIVE ABOUT ASPECTS OF THE JUNIOR CYCLE PROGRAMME



Students and school personnel across the case study schools pointed to a range of reasons for their dissatisfaction with the CBAs. Comments like 'they are pointless' and 'I'm not a fan of CBAs' were heard widely. The concerns included the pressure created, the competing demands on students' time, as well as particular pressure the CBAs are placing on students with SEN:

> *I can tell you from my own children as well, who only found the CBAs more pressure, without actually getting anything out of it. For SEN kids they're a huge pressure. Although you can tell them 100 times it doesn't really matter. But the pressure of standing in front of a class, like we do a lot of, with autistic kids, in their own little group and sometimes only with the SEN teacher … We're pressurising them. I mean, we're putting them into a pressure cooker.* (SENCO, DEIS school)

> *The CBAs are very disheartening because they're not worth anything to the students, and they've realised that, and they're overwhelmed with the amount of CBAs that they have to complete.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

However, not all school personnel were negative, and a small number of schools reported positively on student engagement with CBAs:

> *The CBAs are a wonderful opportunity for the girls to work together. And ours are taking it very seriously, putting a lot of work into it. I'm blown away by some of the work. I've heard from some colleagues that it's maybe not the same in other schools – It's a case of get it done. But I think it's the attitude of the teacher is key.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

A second aspect of the Junior Cycle Framework that provoked discussion related to the removal of foundation level papers. Teachers in particular raised concern about the removal these papers, and the consequent impact regarding both the accessibility of the curriculum and student confidence:

> *Most subjects you've common level – that's not appropriate for students who are really struggling. Foundation level … and marks for practicals – go in and answer just short questions – and they would pass. Papers are now supposed to be more accessible but they're actually not for the weaker students*. (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

> *We used to have a foundation level paper and that is gone and that needs to be reinstated. Certain papers can be extremely challenging for students. For example, science, business, they could be modified. The papers could be better differentiated, that they would only answer certain questions.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

> *Common level in history is just a waste of time because kids with dyslexia, dyspraxia, anybody that needs time first of all to comprehend what they're being asked but second of all to be able to structure an answer, common level is not the way to go.* (Special class teacher, non-DEIS school)

Conversely, a lack of challenge for some students was also highlighted across a range of school settings:

> *I think the Junior Cycle has lost some of its edge. The level of accessibility is not enough to challenge students to be something more or to engage at a deeper level. I'd hate to see that happen in the Leaving Cert.* (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

> *Even common level assessment at Junior Cert, and then the standard that's required for the high achievers to do well in biology or in agricultural science at Leaving Cert, I think there's a massive gap in terms of what's required.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

Teachers repeatedly highlight a concern with large numbers of students achieving a 'merit', with few achieving at the higher end:

> *You're getting far too many students coming out with results bang on in the middle, somewhere between, like, I don't know what percentage but I would say a huge percentage are coming out between 50 and say 70 per cent.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

Finally, there were concerns over the levels of preparedness for Senior Cycle, with one teacher remarking, 'I think it has always been there to some extent, but I think maybe the gap has widened' (teacher, non-DEIS school) and another asserting, 'The gap is just huge' (guidance counsellor, DEIS school). This issue was also highlighted in the context of the impact of changes in the Leaving Certificate grading scheme (McCoy et al., 2019). Some subject areas are cited more heavily, particularly business, science and history:

> *Students entering Senior Cycle, since* [the new] *Junior Cycle it honestly is a disaster – it's shocking the difference. … Everything is just short chunks of information. Especially in a subject like accounting, they find it very hard to sit with a question that might take a week to show them. They find it very hard to jump to that … I get that that's the skills we want them to learn but is there any harm in knowing a few facts and knowing some stuff well, and then being able to build on that? I would prefer to see the old syllabus. They came out knowing so much more about business than they do now, and with a better approach to learning than they do now.* (Business teacher, fee-charging school)

> *But course-wise for each subject, the amount that students have to learn has now gone down. It's not like what it used to be at all, which is not good. They don't have to learn all things like they used to do before. So, no the standard in Junior Cycle, it's very low.* (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

However, some did reflect positively on the changes at Junior Cycle and highlighted a value in moving towards more experiential learning:

> *But I think the way* [the] *Leaving Cert in particular is done isn't the best at the moment. Junior Cycle is better. Better from the point of view that they're allowed to almost create their own way of doing, they're allowed to talk, it's not all learning off and that kind of thing.* (Board of management member, non-DEIS school)

> *But I do think there's a lot of positives and we definitely hear in this school our kids love the approach to learning in Junior Cycle. They produce some phenomenal records of learning and examples of learning and they're very good with that. They do bring those skills with them into Senior Cycle, but I'd love to see them assessed more in*

> *that kind of stuff for Senior Cycle.* (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

6.6 SENIOR CYLE PROGRAMMES AND CURRICULUM

6.6.1 Transition Year

Over 90% of fifth year students had participated in the Transition Year (TY) programme, with about half of them choosing to take it (50%), while for the others the programme was compulsory (40%). Overall, students expressed satisfaction with their decision: 77% of those who took TY reported being (very) happy with their experience, and 61% of those who did not take TY were happy with their decision. For those who took TY, students with degree-educated parents, those without economic difficulties, and those attending fee-charging schools showed a more positive outlook on their TY experience (81% vs 73%, 80% vs 68%, 83% vs 75%, respectively). Sizeable differences were also noted in relation to school gender mix, with students in single-sex girls' schools being more positive about their TY experiences compared to students in coeducational schools or boys' schools (81% in girls' school vs 76% in boys' schools, vs 69% in coeducational schools).

Across the case study schools, students and their parents expressed positive views on the programmes on offer:

> *I think it's an opportunity for the guys just to break from core studies and develop and grow. So it's a breather and a kind of a break before getting into the to the Senior Cycle. I think what our school offers is very impressive.* (Parent, fee-charging)

School leaders, teachers and members of school boards also highlighted the importance of the TY programme, particularly in offering real world and workplace experience:

> *I actually see the value in the course because it is pretty much about experiential learning and the boys need to be getting out there and experiencing different kinds of people, workplaces, environments and challenges. It's a good opportunity for them to realise what their strengths are, understand their limitations, and to appreciate their uniqueness.* (Board of management member, fee charging school)

> [TY] *has been very beneficial for students in terms of the academia, helping them decide the career choice, expanding their range of interests, as well as their experiences at school.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *When you were teaching a senior class when* [TY] *was a choice, even if you never taught those students before, you would know who did Transition (Year) and who didn't just by maturity, just by awareness, just by their decisions about things*. (Guidance counsellor, DEIS school)

6.6.2 Leaving Certificate programmes

Out of the 21 case study schools included in the study, 8 provide the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA),[47] 4 of which are DEIS schools, while the remaining 13 do not offer the LCA. For fifth year students, 96% took the established Leaving Certificate programme, and the remainder took the LCA. Among those taking either course, the majority took the decision as to which programme they would take (where there was a choice), rather than their teachers or parents making the decision. Nearly half of them were (very) satisfied with the programme, while around 17% were (very) dissatisfied, and the remaining 34% were neutral. Most considered sitting the Leaving Certificate/LCA exams to be important or very important (93%) and over 95% were planning to sit the exam. Given the small number of respondents who were taking the LCA programme (fewer than 50), we don't focus on LCA experiences in the survey results. However, the qualitative interviews highlight some important aspects of the programme across the schools offering it. In particular, parents and students spoke with satisfaction about the programme – how it provided small, achievable modules, all underpinned by a practical, hands-on approach:

> *It was the best decision we ever made … the biggest thing is that everything is broken down so well … everything is small, achievable modules, there is no focus on a big exam at the end of the year or for your Leaving Cert … I love when teachers teach through practical methods and LCA is geared towards everything being practical, including the subject matter*. (Parent, DEIS school)

> [The LCA] *has been a phenomenal success …* [S]*ome of our brightest fifth years are doing it for emotional reasons. And it certainly is meeting the needs of very much a marginalised, smaller group in our school. So I think it's a win–win for everyone. But again, for those kids who do it, certainly a reform of the Applied Leaving Cert is urgently required in terms of the persona and the image of it out there as well. It's not that mainstream.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

However, some students highlighted the restrictions in terms of progressing to higher education, as well as the poor status of the programme within schools and

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47 The LCA, introduced in 1995, is a two-year prevocational programme designed to prepare participants for adult and working life. The LCA is taken by about 5% of the cohort. While certification in the LCA does not qualify for direct entry to third-level courses, students who successfully complete the programme are able to proceed to many PLC courses.

society more widely. Earlier research has shown the implications for student decision-making, and for student outcomes, with LCA programme leavers much less likely to realise their goals and experiencing higher unemployment levels, levels which have risen disproportionately over time (McCoy et al., 2014a):

> *LCA is so looked down upon first of all, within the students, within the school. Everybody knows LCA is looked down upon. And even teachers look down upon it, students look down upon it. LCA also – they're like, further education, that's an option. But they need to go and do a PLC* [Post-Leaving Certificate] *on top of that. And they need to go and do more college.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)
>
> *I met with students who struggled in JC* [Junior Cycle] *at the end of TY* [Transition Year] *to see would they be interested in doing LCA because academically they weren't that strong. And it was, 'no way, I'm not that stupid'. Now three-quarters of the way through fifth year those students are really struggling academically, maybe I should have talked to them a bit more about it. It's that in between, that they see LCA as for the dropouts and the Leaving Cert as the only route.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

While two schools had plans to introduce the programme next year, a number of schools noted a fall in numbers taking LCA:

> *I think maybe the way LCA is perceived, parents don't perceive it as a proper Leaving Cert. Maybe it's something to do with what we are offering here – to me they are in class too much, sitting down reading stuff rather than being activity focused and practical. I would love to see them out constructing a poly-tunnel, planting stuff.* (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

One school offered the programme every second year due to the small numbers choosing to do it. While this gave every student the option to do it, it also meant some students didn't get to avail of TY if they wanted to participate in LCA while others had to do TY even where they did not want to.

Finally, school and non-school stakeholders highlighted the need for an integrated Senior Cycle programme, incorporating aspects of the LCA programme into one mainstream programme. There are plans for greater flexibility around LCA student access to Leaving Cert maths, modern foreign languages and (forthcoming) social, personal and health education (SPHE), and our findings highlight that these improvements will greatly increase buy-in from students who would benefit from the programme. These changes will also mean a need for assessment of staff resourcing requirements.

> *The LCA model is not helping, it hasn't been reviewed in 20 plus years. Students are regressing after Junior Cycle, especially students doing Level 1 or 2. I would love to see a much more integrated approach – LCA English or maths but LC geography …* [In LCA] *they're completely split and I think that's completely the wrong message. And that's very challenging for those students. It puts off students who could benefit from that programme … It can compound the disadvantage for that child – especially for a SEN student, or a student from the target DEIS background.* (Principal, DEIS school)

6.6.3 Assessment at Senior Cycle

Earlier research has highlighted that the terminal, largely written examination-based nature of Leaving Certificate assessment, coupled with its high-stakes character, profoundly influences the nature of learning and skills development offered to young people (McCoy et al., 2019). However, there has been an ongoing shift towards multiple assessment modes, and it can be noted the vast majority of subjects at Leaving Certificate level now have either a practical or project-based second assessment component, and that just six subjects will rely solely on a final exam in 2024. School leaders and teachers were keen to highlight the positive impact of this diversification in assessment approaches at Senior Cycle:

> *I'm lucky in my subject that the project is worth 40% for DCG for Leaving Cert and then for construction, 50% of the grade is for projects as well. And I think that shows a better – it's a better assessment tool really, to make an assessment for learning.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

Many of the case study schools provided Level 2 programmes at Junior Cycle, and a small number offered Level 1 also, while a few schools provided a hybrid approach:

> *Now, we kind of do a hybrid here. Mostly Level 2 in life skills or being part of this community. Level 1, numeracy, literacy. Level 1, short courses in Food, Glorious Food and Around the World in Eighty Days. But I do love it. It's a fabulous programme.* (Special class teacher, non-DEIS school)

A key Issue for these schools related to the lack of progression opportunities for students taking Level 1 and Level 2 programmes:

> [In terms of] *Level 1 and 2, It would be great to have a Level 4 learning programme for the students who are moving on to Senior Cycle, they are not always able for LCA. There is a cohort of students who are not able for a Level 5 and it would be lovely to see a Level 4 or equivalent*

> *programme for those students. …* [Reforms at Junior Cycle] *have increased the gap between Junior and Senior Cycle and they just cannot cope with that jump. For the really weak student, it hasn't helped immensely.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

> *The biggest problem is that there is no follow up in the Leaving Cert. And the kids are dragged through a Leaving Cert that they cannot do. And their mental health is really struggling. And I find it absolutely atrocious to put a thing into place in Junior Cycle if you haven't put in place the follow up in the Senior Cycle. It is a sin for these children. And it is the fault of the Department for Education for not providing a programme that is a follow up programme for Senior Cycle for Level 2.* (SENCO, DEIS school)

> *But the Department has really let us down here because we've all these students coming up through, following a Level 2, get to Senior Cycle and we don't have anything that's appropriate for them. … It is a huge gap. And logistically it's a huge challenge for us. Are we doing the right thing by the students? Are we teaching them the right things? Our main focus with these is focusing on life skills and social skills and working in some kind of work placement that's appropriate to them.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

It should be noted here that Level 1 and Level 2 Senior Cycle progression modules are currently under development and are to be implemented soon. Our findings show the importance of implementing these modules quickly and effectively to ensure students are able to access a suitable curriculum at Senior Cycle.

6.7 ACADEMIC SELF-IMAGE

Academic self-image is a much-studied concept in educational research, given its powerful role in student engagement and achievement (Marsh et al., 2019; Carroll et al., 2022). Academic self-image was assessed based on students' self-reports regarding their exam performance compared to their peers. As shown in Figure 6.3, just over half described their exam performance as 'above average' or 'just above average' (51%). The pattern holds across different year groups. Significant differences, however, emerged based on students' SEN status and socioeconomic background. Students without SEN and those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, such as having degree-educated parents (62% vs 43%), experiencing no economic difficulties (54% vs 41%) and attending fee-charging schools (63% vs 48%), showed much higher levels of positivity regarding their exam performance compared to their peers. Boys are slightly more positive about their exam

performance than girls (54% of boys described their exam performance as 'above average', compared to 49% of girls).

FIGURE 6.3 ACADEMIC SELF-IMAGE OF STUDENTS

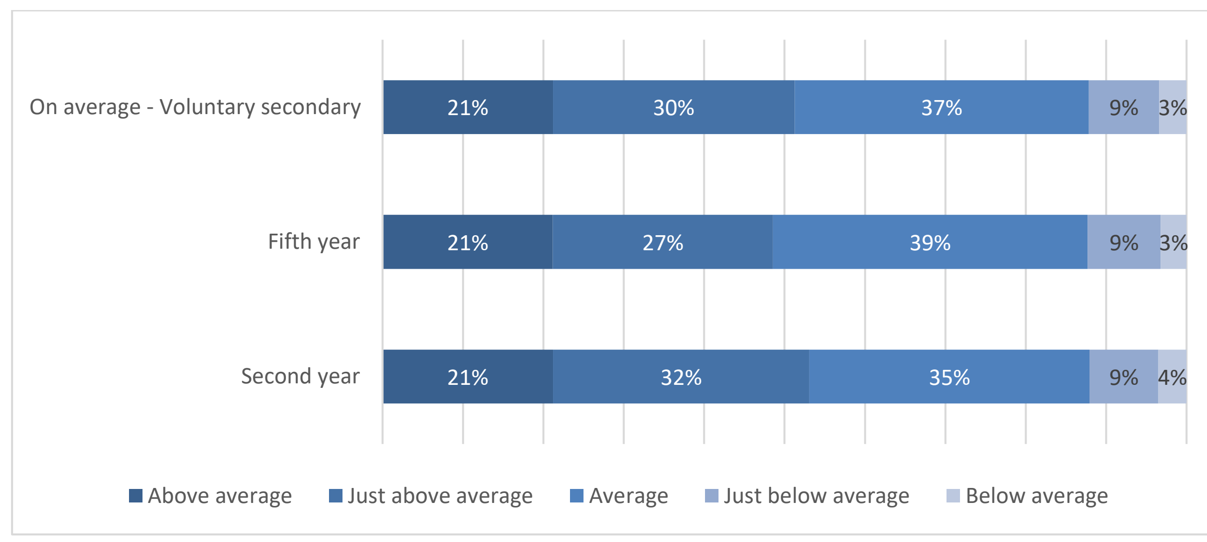


Table A8 in the appendix investigates factors associated with students' academic self-image among second and fifth year students using logistic regression models. Consistent with descriptive findings, gender, SEN and family background have a significant impact on students' academic self-image. In Model 1 considering student characteristics, girls, students with SEN and those uncertain about their SEN status are much less likely to have an above-average academic self-image (0.5 times, 0.3 times, and 0.4 times as likely, respectively). Those with university-educated parents and no economic difficulties, by contrast, are significantly more likely to report a higher academic self-image (2.1 times and 1.8 times as likely). In Model 2, accounting for school characteristics, students in fee-charging schools are substantially more likely to report a higher academic self-image compared to their peers in non-fee-charging schools (1.8 as likely). School gender mix does not appear to play a role here.

Finally, examining the relationship between students' academic self-image and other aspects of school life in Model 3, those with positive school engagement, positive teacher interactions and positive teacher expectations are more likely to report a higher academic self-image. Conversely, those who experienced negative teacher interactions (e.g., being given out to for misbehaving in class or untidy work) and those who missed more than ten school days are much less likely to feel that they perform better than average. Interestingly, fifth year students are slightly less likely to report a high academic self-image compared to second year students (0.91 times as likely).

Wide variation can also be observed across the case study schools, ranging from a low of 38% to a high of 71% of students describing themselves as 'above average' or 'just above average'. This suggests that it is not just their classmates they are comparing themselves to, but to students in other schools as well, as well as their own school against other schools.

The focus groups with students highlighted variation in the extent of academic pressure across the schools. Some students spoke of being expected to do their best, and work to their level, while others were acutely aware of the recognition of academic excellence and a perceived unfairness around that:

> *Last year we had a ceremony and they brought back last year's Leaving Certs and it was as if it was a competition. Whoever got over 550* [points]*, your name was mentioned … It was like it was one big race instead of just you studied and you got what you wanted … The rest didn't matter, just the ones who got good points, who give the school a good reputation. Say I get 450 in my Leaving, you won't hear my name but let's say you get 600 you'll be back here, pictures on Instagram and an award.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

However, achievement in the widest sense was seen as being recognised across several schools:

> *Student success, be that academically or sporting … every achievement is acknowledged. … It doesn't even matter if it is in school, if you achieve outside school, it is still recognised.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

6.8 TEACHING AND LEARNING

While students expressed positive views about teachers being effective in explaining things to them, overall they reported a strong focus on more traditional teaching methodologies (Figure 6.4). A significant majority of students reported copying notes from the board (94%) and teachers doing most of the talking (94%). Just under four in ten reported receiving feedback from teachers. Although most students felt that their teachers 'explain things really well' (78%), students felt that they had limited opportunities for active learning. Just under half of students reported that they regularly express their opinions (49%), while fewer engage in class activities like debates, presentations or role-play (19%), participate in project-based learning (21%), or demonstrate their learning in different ways (34%).

Internet usage in class by teachers was prevalent, with an average rate of 91%, ranging from 84% to 99% across case study schools. The use of computers or

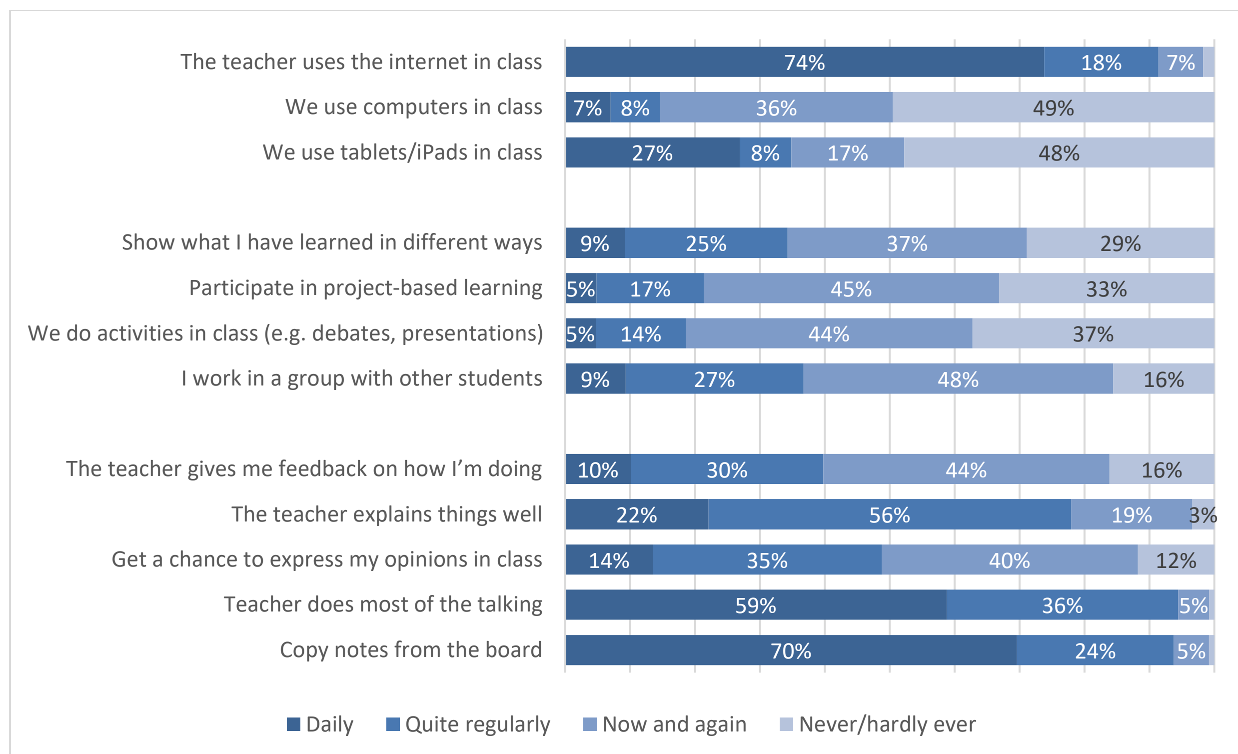
tablets by students was much lower (15% and 35%, respectively). Notably, wide variations are observed across the 21 case study schools in terms of the use of personal devices, with 7 schools having a notably higher rate of using personal devices in class and the remainder with a relatively low use of personal devices in class.[48]

Overall, fifth year students are more positive about their learning experiences at school than second year students. For example, 83% of the fifth year students found their teachers 'explain things really well', compared to 74% of second year students. Differences by gender or family characteristics are not noteworthy.

Fee-charging school students (46%), as well as students from single-sex girls' schools (44%), were more likely to participate in groupwork with other students compared to students from non-fee-charging schools (35%), boys' schools (32%) and co-educational schools (32%).

These findings have implications for teacher professional development, which we discuss in Chapter 11.

FIGURE 6.4 STUDENT REPORTS ON FREQUENCY OF DIFFERENT TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES



During the focus groups, students spoke of what helped them to learn at school. A number of common themes emerged, with many centring around the nature of

48 Schools where over 40% of students used tablets, iPads or computers at least three or four times a week are classified as schools with a high level of personal device use.

interaction with teachers and the use of more collaborative approaches in the classroom:

> *When the teacher is talking to you and not at you … when they are talking with you, then I am actually learning, like it's a conversation.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

> *In my music class, we all sit at one table, around the teacher's desk. So it is more of a conversation than a lesson.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

> *A* [good teacher is a] *person who explains stuff well, like takes time explaining.* (Second year focus group, DEIS school)

> *I know myself I learn better when a teacher asks you a question on the spot, because it goes into your head and you would be so surprised* [at your learning]. (Second year focus group, DEIS school)

> *I feel like teachers need to engage students more, because the more I engage with the class, or the more somebody's talking to me about it, I'm going to pay attention. If I'm just sitting there at the back of the classroom, not being spoken to, or not engaging in the conversations, or if there's questions being asked, I'm not going to be able to learn, because that is how you learn. You learn by speaking, you don't learn by listening. Because half of it is going in one ear and out the other.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

More interactive styles were frequently highlighted – across different settings students were vocal on the value of more interactive teaching approaches:

> *Teachers need to do more group work to get us paying attention, everyone's always dozing off. Practical things too so you're not just writing notes. Really boring, writing notes from slides. I wish we had more fun so we could get more interactive.* (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

Students also felt that 'formulaic' approaches were less effective, and they valued learning material that would be useful in their lives/careers:

> *I don't like the formulaic approach to teaching … I feel a lot of formulaic approaches to teaching don't really work. I'd rather get right into it. If the teacher tries to follow a formula it doesn't really work for them, it's much better when they do it their own way.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

Students spoke at length about what they think makes for a good teacher. Again, the nature of engagement and interaction with students was key in student reflections:

> *Good teachers are nicer. A good teacher would engage with the class, kind of act as if they're one of them but still has authority. It's a big thing to be able to motivate people. They make sure you're allowed to ask questions. We have a lot of good teachers.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

As discussed in Chapter 3, respect featured prominently in students' comments; students value teachers who listen to what they have to say:

> *And this teacher, she sits down at the table, at your level, and she talks, and she discusses, and she'll take your information. And she'll never say that you have a bad opinion. If you come up with something and you're, like, 'Oh, I don't really know if this is the right thing but, like, I was kind of feeling like this meant this,' she will take it on the chin.* (Fifth year focus group, fee charging school)

> *A good class is teacher and student going back and forth …* [I] *feel like we have such a close bond with teachers that I feel comfortable having the chats. Some teachers, not all teachers. There's just a really nice class atmosphere. You can just kind of talk about anything with them. A class feels more like a focus group, like what we're doing right now. You can discuss, you understand it more because you can just freely, you're not scared to say something. It's a conversation instead of being spoken to. It's when the teacher has the same respect for you.* (Fifth year focus group, fee charging school)

Teachers who were seen as having a passion for their subject were also viewed as more effective teachers:

> *I think if a teacher has a passion for the subject that they're teaching and you can pick up on that passion, it is so much easier to get engrossed in that subject as well. And when a teacher has that passion, it kind of shows that they want you to know the information, they want to introduce the subject to you and they want to teach it to you.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

Effective classroom management also featured in students' discussions of good teaching:

> *I don't like when the teacher is concentrating on one student when one student is bold. You're just sitting there bored and that takes up all the time. This happens often. It could be a few students, it depends on the class. Other teachers are able to manage them better.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

> *Good teachers are in between being too strict and too lenient. If you're too lenient the class just goes wild and you won't learn anything. If you're too strict people don't want to learn anything. Just sitting there waiting for the class to end.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

Students in fifth year observed a changing relationship with teachers as they moved through Senior Cycle:

> *The craic is better in Senior Cycle – the teachers treat you like adults. You have to be more independent. If you want to do the work you do the work whereas at Junior Cert you're pressured into it. Even the learning is way better at Leaving Cert than it was at Junior Cert. We get to choose the subjects we want to learn about, you build a relationship with your teachers. Compared to Junior Cert where they're drilling it at you, you become friends with the teacher.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

Active participation was mentioned regularly, particularly in the context of discussing what makes a good lesson or a good teacher:

> *Instead of getting students to sit there and listen to you, you should get them more involved … You are not just sitting there listening the entire time, you are actually doing something … in maths we have a student teacher and she does more fun activities … We learn much better.* (Second year focus group, DEIS school)

> *They just shoot loads of words at you and then be like, 'do this'. If there was more involving us, discussion, instead of just, 'this means this, write it down'. Giving us somewhere we could interact. Some people learn not by writing it down but by doing something, interacting with someone.* [We would like] *discussion classes more.* (Fifth year focus group, fee charging school)

Students also spoke about effective communication and the importance of teachers being able to relate to students on a human level:

> *Knowing how to communicate with people is important. I think knowing how different groups of people think. If some groups are*

> *kinaesthetic learners or some groups are visual learners, I think knowing how to cater to all. You can't learn if you're learning from a robot. You need to relate. They need to be vulnerable at times. And I think that really makes a teacher.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

Teachers were acutely aware of the requirements of the Leaving Certificate, and how it did not allow much room for 'fun':

> *So when it comes to Senior Cycle, you don't have time for fun and games. Senior Cycle is, you knuckle down and get on with your work. Fine for Junior Cycle – until the courses change or the methods of assessment change, until something else changes, that's the reality of it.* (Teacher, fee charging school)

Finally, good teaching was also equated with 'good notes', where teachers provide the relevant and important information to students:

> [A good teacher] *is somebody who gives proper notes, because some teachers are like, 'take down what you want'. Some teachers don't make you take down notes at all, so you kind of have to figure out yourself later on*. (Second year focus group, DEIS school)

Some students were seen by teachers to push back against fun and creative activities in the classroom, always focused on what might be asked in the exam and how it might be asked:

> *… Senior Cycle students who* [are] *very focused on academics. Even if you do a 'fun activity', they're still probing you as to whether it could be asked like this on the exam. And it's like, no this is trying to help you learn the idea. There isn't a complete openness to a variety of methods. In theory we're encouraged to try them,* [but] *students would kind of push against it.* (Teacher, fee charging school)

Across the diverse case study schools, teachers generally expressed positivity about the support they received from school leadership and colleagues, as well as the significant level of autonomy they enjoyed in their roles.

> *In the environment here, there is a lot of room for staff voice and for autonomy. Certainly, in the classroom, I would have great autonomy in my classroom. There's a huge amount of trust … We can do the job and we're doing the job effectively and in the subject departments as well. … I would feel a good level of autonomy.* (Teacher, fee charging school)

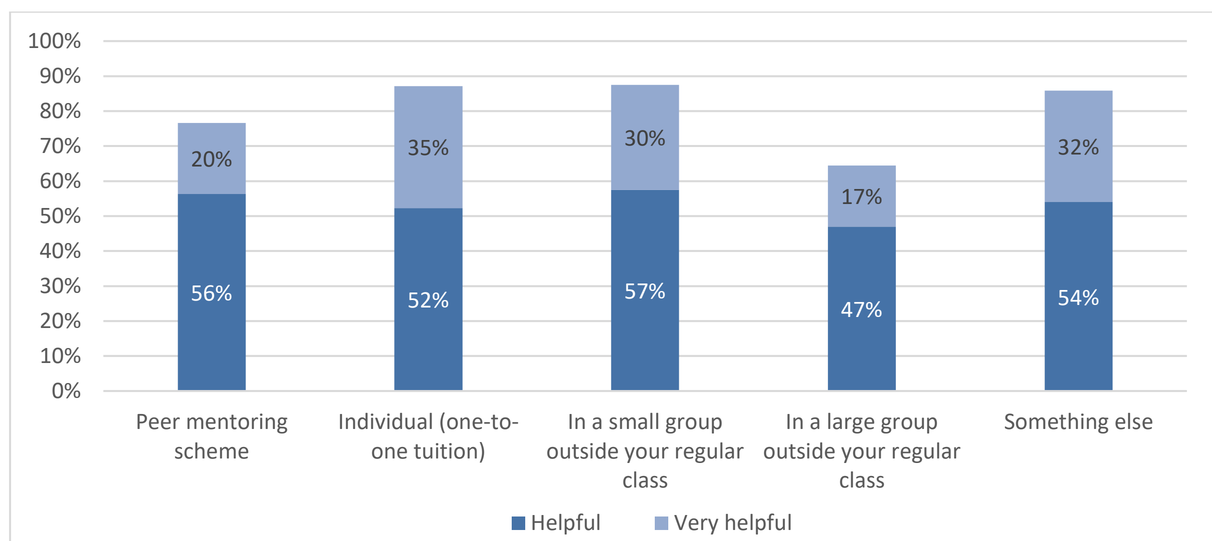
> *I remember coming in my first week here … expecting to get a textbook given to you and say, 'Yeah, work through that'. But it was, 'No, you design the way you want to teach. This is the course, this is what they need to know, and it's up to you what way you get around that'. So I definitely feel we have massive autonomy, then I suppose in how the course is given from start to finish.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

6.9 ACADEMIC AND SEN SUPPORTS

Among the students who were surveyed, 11% (strongly) disagreed that they get all the supports they need to learn, suggesting unmet needs. Higher levels of unmet needs were found among girls and those from economically vulnerable households. Just under one in five students indicated that they received extra subject help within school in the last two years. Boys (21% vs 16% girls) and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were found more likely to receive extra help, as were students attending DEIS schools (22% vs 17%) or attending schools in rural areas (23% in rural areas vs 16% in towns/cities).

For those who received extra subject help, most were positive about that support (Figure 6.5). Individual sessions or small group sessions outside regular class were viewed more favourably compared to larger group sessions. Peer mentor schemes were also rated highly, with 77% students considering them (very) helpful. Support gaps are evident, however, with close to four in ten students stating that they required additional supports. Consistent with earlier research, students with SEN, as well as those who experience greater economic difficulties, are more likely to report needing extra support (54% SEN vs 36% non-SEN, and 52% economic vulnerability vs 36% no economic difficulties). Notably, a larger share of girls and students attending fee-charging schools expressed a need for extra subject help at school.

FIGURE 6.5 PERCEIVED HELPFULNESS OF DIFFERENT FORMS OF ADDITIONAL SUBJECT SUPPORT



Note: Both second and fifth year students were asked whether they received any of the above-mentioned types of extra help and how helpful these subject supports were. Approximately 10% received peer mentoring, 11% received individual one-to-one tuition, 13% received subject support in a small group outside regular class, and 9% received subject support in a large group outside regular class.

One SENCO felt that, in relation to their school, an intensive six-week intervention would be preferred to withdrawing students throughout the school year, in particular to ensure more inclusive provision. The importance of avoiding separation and 'segregation' was also highlighted by other teachers (in keeping with earlier research pointing to adverse effects of rigid special class structures – see McCoy et al., 2014c).

> *I don't think that taking students out of Irish and MFL* [modern foreign languages] *is the best way to do it for a whole year. I think the school should move towards a kind of six-week intervention model. Take the kids out of their classes for six weeks, give them the intervention, whatever programme they want to run through, and then put them back in the class and see if there's been any meaningful changes in their education, rather than keeping them withdrawn and segregated in this resource class that they're alone in. I think it's kind of isolationist almost.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school).

> *Respecting the individual needs of students, knowing they're best placed with their mainstream teacher and having the individual supports to support them, that drives inclusion. … And having the supports in place for the boys who would be accessing a little bit of withdrawal but making sure the rest of their timetable is with their peers. Mixed ability drives it as well I guess, mixed ability classrooms.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

Each school has their own systems and structures to support students with additional needs. Most centre on an active additional needs support team, which often includes chaplain and guidance counselling supports as well as teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs). Several spoke of increases in the numbers of students with additional needs, particularly reflecting the impact of COVID-19 (as is discussed in Chapter 8).

> *Since COVID we are certainly seeing a huge rise in anxiety, as well as a huge rise in students qualifying for spelling and grammar* [accommodations] *in the state exams. I was speaking to a student yesterday and they said they didn't write for the two years over COVID-19. I think with technology as well, we have all got lazy about our spelling and grammar.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

Many schools had (recently) introduced special classes, particularly for autistic students. This required 'a learning curve' to adapt teaching methods and resources to ensure students' needs are met.

In general, students spoke of a culture of care in their school: 'The teachers really care about us and our grades and if we need extra help with anything [we can get it]' (fifth year focus group, DEIS school). However, in a number of schools, students spoke of a lack of support to meet their particular learning needs:

> *I think teachers don't understand, like I'm dyslexic and when I'm in a class, I have other things on my mind and I am trying to picture which subject am I learning now and I don't think teachers really understand that. They are giving out to me for trying to pick this up but I can't do all of it … they give out to you because other students are doing it and you are not.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

More broadly in terms of SEN and additional educational needs (AEN) supports, a number of key challenges arose across the schools. The first relates to the increasing demands being placed on schools:

> *We are now responsible for doing the Irish exemptions, it was sold that the school have the autonomy, but we are now responsible solely for that. We are now responsible for allocating the hours for the SNAs … Our NEPS* [National Educational Psychological Service] *psychologist is fantastic, but her role has changed hugely and it's a more supervisory role, the same testing and assessment is not done … We would find that the NCSE* [National Council for Special Education] *don't engage with schools unless it is to audit, that supportive role seems to have gone.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

The second stems from difficulties in having the required number of staff, with the relevant professional qualifications and skills, to work in roles supporting students:

> *But the problem is getting staff with a higher diploma in special needs, it is really difficult. … So I will have to train them all up. You can obviously sign up to NCSE courses, but there's very little about how to read a psychological report, to understand psychological reports … So we get people who are training to be a teacher and don't know anything about SEN because it's not covered.* (SENCO, DEIS school)

> *I'd love to see all the PME* [professional master of education] *teachers come out with a higher level of special educational needs training. … A lot of teachers, as it stands, don't understand the kind of behind the scenes work that happens for AEN and all the kind of interactions that happen. I'd like for teachers in the PME to experience that, to kind of get a feel of what actually happens in the AEN department.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

The need for specialist psychological support, in-house, was reiterated time and again across many of the case study schools:

> *Why is* [it] *that in the North they can pay a psychologist to go in and support the guidance counsellor, but we can't? …* [R]*eaching out to NEPS is a waste of time. NBBS* [National Behaviour Support Service]*, waste of time. All of these organisations are at three arms' length, they're not immediate … they can't respond to you when you want them. So there's no point*. (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *All secondary schools should have access to somebody on site for those kids … The traumas, really scary traumas for some children. Even as stopgap, it can be a large gap. Somebody with the appropriate skills – we as year heads try, we try so hard but sometimes you need the professional expertise that we can't offer.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

A couple of schools had part-time psychotherapy/psychological supports in place, using alternative funds, but this was very much the exception to the rule:

> *We have a psychotherapist in on Fridays* [funded by school] *– providing specialised high-level care to children that need it. That has worked extremely well. Schools do need an onsite psychologist … Schools are floundering trying to support those students and it's just unfair.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *We employ a psychologist on* [a] *part time basis. This is the first year of it: it is absolutely amazing, something every school should have. … A localised system would be amazing* [for all schools] – *students do on occasion need to be referred, there's only so much you can do, but a liaison in school would be a fabulous model. First response in school, then additional supports outside.* (Principal, fee charging school)

The third challenge relates to the physical infrastructure of schools and the lack of appropriate space and classroom design to meet students' needs, particularly for students in special class settings. School infrastructure and standards of the plant are discussed further in Chapter 10.

> *For schools to be truly inclusive, you need an awful lot of support. All schools should champion inclusion and … have more funding and supports in place. We are opening an autism class but we don't have an actual physical space for that class.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *I think we're doing our best but I think we're growing so much and we're in prefabs that there's kind of a limit to how much support we can provide.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

The fourth issue relates to a perceived inadequacy of the primary passport (developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to support the transfer of pupil information from primary to second-level school), with a particular lack of information on SEN/AEN students on arrival to second-level school settings:

> *I am not really interested in the hobbies of the child or the friends that they have in order to do an educational transition. The information I need is scores, standard scores, weaknesses and strengths … that is not part of that passport. The passport is a nice sweet little thing for the tutor to just get to know the child. But it's not enough information for SEN students.* (SENCO, DEIS school)

Across some, though not all, schools overall resources available were seen as falling short of what is required to adequately support students and meet all needs. To some extent this reflects differential allocations for the voluntary secondary sector (an issue we return to in Chapter 10):

> *There is a lack of support available for mental health issues – it's at crisis levels in schools.* [The school has a] *specific guidance counsellor and chaplain but could do with a full-time qualified therapist. The chaplain is privately funded. The Department don't fund this role in*

> *voluntary schools but do in community schools.* (Principal, fee charging school)

> *Social media, COVID, all these things, teenagers are dealing with a huge amount … There is a need for more supports. It's a pity that there isn't more external support – like CAMHS. Children are waiting a year to be assessed or access supports. And it's falling to teachers.* (Home-school-community liaison (HSCL) officer, DEIS school)

Delays in accessing assessments were widespread, as captured by these SENCOs:

> *This year we are only allowed two assessments – but there is a waiting list for next year of five students. … There is no recognition of exceptional circumstances. …* [W]*ith our school we would have financially vulnerable families as well who aren't in a position to get those* [private] *assessments done*. (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

> *We have a list of referrals to NEPS, but our issue here is that there's just not enough availability in NEPS. This year they offered us two referrals. We have a list with ten students for referral on there. …* [W]*e have guys with extremely high needs, undiagnosed, and the parents might not have the money to do it privately.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

Severe challenges around the availability of specialised supports and lengthy waiting lists for many critical services were highlighted by many SENCOs:

> *I would love to see a whole raft of supports for SEN – SLT* [speech and language therapy]*, OT* [occupational therapy]*, psychologists. There was talk each school would have access – fiction is what I call that. …* [T]*here's loads of kids going through while we're waiting for all these things to be put in place, putting them at a disadvantage.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

> *Don't get me started on CAMHS. Like, we have loads of kids with ADHD or, you know, that we suspect with ADHD. They won't even be seen before they finish school. So it's all left to us to fix or to manage and we know we could theoretically know what to do better but we're not allowed to do it.* (SENCO, DEIS school)

Particular challenges were highlighted in non-DEIS school settings, where the level of need is great, but resources insufficient to meet those needs:

> *Educational welfare officers (EWOs) will tell you that referrals coming in, 60% are from non-DEIS schools because they don't have the resources. The needs are huge, the profile is changing, but there are*

> *no supports. …* [B]*ut in my mind wouldn't it be lovely to have a home school community liaison officer and a School Completion Programme (SCP) in every school.* (HSCL officer, DEIS school)

> *We have a DEIS cohort in non-DEIS school – it's difficult within the town, we are competing against an ETB school that has DEIS status – they have breakfast clubs, free book scheme, after school study, homework clubs, anything like that. We can't compete.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

More broadly, stakeholders and school personnel highlighted a disconnect between the various agencies and services involved in supporting schools and students/families:

> *So the problem is that they all fall under different categories. So* [name of agency] *does some of it, but only for the kids with the more moderate needs. Then you have to go through your primary care for the others. So you're dealing with loads of different agencies, and nobody talks to each other.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *There is a breakdown between education and health – they don't really talk to each other. … We need a much more integrated support. You see it in other European countries, not here. CAMHS don't talk to us, can't refer. Health not understanding how education works … There is a lack of understanding across sectors, and a need for a multi-agency structure.* (Principal, DEIS school)

While not the focus of this study, earlier research has shown that Ireland has below average proportions of high-achieving 15-year-old students (PISA, 2022; OECD, 2023). Research highlights the need for a more inclusive and effective curriculum framework, one that is delivered at an appropriate pace for high ability students (Cross et al., 2022). In this context, it is interesting to note that the Department of Education has established a working group to develop a policy on students who are exceptionally able or gifted.

6.10 SUMMARY

Chapter 6 provides a comprehensive overview of students' educational journeys, including the transition to secondary school, Junior Cycle experiences, Senior Cycle programmes and curriculum choices and subject choices. It also examines students' academic self-image, classroom experiences, teacher support and autonomy, academic and SEN supports.

Most second year students in voluntary secondary schools reflect positively on the transition to their secondary school, with more positive responses found among boys, those from more affluent families, and those without SEN.

In terms of subject choices, the majority expressed satisfaction with their Leaving Certificate subject choices and had the option to make changes if necessary. Notably, students in DEIS schools were more likely to be happy with their choices compared to their peers in non-DEIS schools. Subject and subject level availability to some extent depended on student numbers, gender mix and facilities availability (e.g., availability of classroom and sports facilities). Both quantitative and qualitative analysis revealed gender bias in the types of subjects provided in different settings, and that subject choices are closely associated with socioeconomic factors and students' SEN status.

Regarding the extent to which subjects are seen as interesting or difficult, science subjects were considered most interesting, while maths and Irish were perceived as the most difficult subjects by both year groups. Clear gender differences emerged, especially among the Senior Cycle students. The persistent gender differences in terms of subject provision, students' subject choices, as well as in the extent to which subjects are seen as interesting or difficult, are concerning and highlight the need to develop a more inclusive and gender-neutral approach to curricular/subject provision; this is particularly important for national STEM policy.

When it comes to Junior Cycle experiences, students generally had a positive view of the extensive range of courses offered and the different forms of assessment provided. However, concerns emerged, particularly relating to a perceived pressure on students created by CBAs, the removal of foundation level and ordinary level papers, the perception that the Junior Cycle course lacked challenges for some students, the large proportion receiving a 'merit' grade, as well as students being unprepared for Senior Cycle.

Most students took part in and appreciated the TY programme, finding it particularly beneficial for gaining real-world and workplace experiences. Regarding Leaving Certificate programmes, concerns related to taking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, including its relatively unfavourable status within schools and society, the limited availability of the programme across schools, and the perception that it lacked challenge for some students while being too challenging for students who completed Junior Cycle Level 1 or 2 programmes. In terms of assessment at Senior Cycle, there has been an ongoing shift towards multiple assessment modes, a change that is appreciated by many school leaders and teachers.

Chapter 6 also explores how students feel about themselves as learners, their academic self-image; here, it highlights clear (and familiar) patterns in terms of the relationship between academic self-image and student gender, SEN status and socioeconomic background.

When it comes to teaching and learning experiences, a strong emphasis on more traditional, teacher-centred teaching methods emerged. While most students felt that their teachers explained things well, they also shared that they had limited opportunities for active learning. Students emphasised the importance of incorporating more collaborative and interactive approaches in the classroom to enhance their learning experience. However, teachers expressed concerns about the challenges of doing so due to heavy workloads and the exam-focused nature of the Leaving Certificate programme.

Across the diverse case study schools, teachers generally expressed positivity about the support they received from school leadership and colleagues, as well as the level of autonomy they had in their roles.

Chapter 6 explores the types of academic and SEN supports students receive. Individual sessions or small group sessions outside regular classes were viewed more favourably than larger group sessions, underscoring the importance of providing more individualised support. Many schools had recently introduced special classes, particularly for autistic students. This required an adjustment period to adapt teaching methods and resources to meet student need. While students generally observed a culture of care at their school, some expressed concern in relation to a lack of support to address their specific (learning) needs. Several challenges emerged, including the growing demands being placed on schools, difficulties in securing an adequate number of staff with the necessary professional qualifications and skills, shortcomings in terms of physical infrastructure and appropriate classroom design to accommodate students' needs. Issues such as delayed assessments, perceived inadequacies in the primary care support system, and disconnects between agencies and support services were also found to pose challenges for schools in meeting students' needs.

CHAPTER 7

Technology use at school

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Evidence shows that in 2012, 2015 and 2018, students in Ireland reported similar rates of access to digital technology in school as averages for the European Union (EU) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. However, it also shows that usage during *school time* was considerably and significantly lower in Ireland than across the EU and OECD countries. Moreover, despite comparatively high rates of home access, Irish students' reported use of digital technologies outside of school to support their learning was also substantially and significantly lower than the EU and OECD averages. Further, in 2018 the Irish mean score on an index of schools' capacity to support teaching and learning using digital technologies, as reported by principals, was significantly lower than the EU and OECD means. In particular, levels of perceived adequacy of technical support staff were very low, with only 21% of students attending schools where this was perceived to be adequate (Cosgrove et al., 2022).

However, since 2018 there has been a rapid migration towards digital learning, a development that began as a direct response to the challenges posed by COVID-19 in schools (Mohan et al., 2020). The Department of Education announced the Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 (DSS), recognising the need to sustain momentum in digital technology adoption and invest in a robust digital ecosystem in schools. This strategy supports digital infrastructure advancement through targeted funding and collaboration with government staff to ensure broadband connectivity for all schools, regardless of location. Funding for the DSS amounts to €210 million through an infrastructure grant for schools (see Chapter 1 for details).

Research in the context of COVID-19 showed that unequal home learning environments further magnified existing social inequalities (Mohan et al., 2020; Mac Domhnaill et al., 2021). Digital inclusion has become crucial as school communities navigate new learning experiences while adapting to an ever-changing dynamic environment (Marcus-Quinn and Hourigan, 2021). This chapter assesses whether and how the 21 schools included in this study embed digital learning within and across their classrooms and what this means for student learning.

7.2 OVERALL USE OF TECHNOLOGY AT SCHOOL

In total, four out of five students in this study have personal devices at school. Three-quarters of these personal devices were funded by parents and one-fifth were provided by the school. A higher prevalence of device use is observed among

second year students, signalling the shift towards greater use of personal devices in the classroom over time (Marcus-Quinn and Hourigan, 2021; Mac Domhnaill et al., 2021). It likely also reflects the greater embedding of technology and opportunities to use it within the Junior Cycle Framework. In this chapter, we categorise the schools in our sample into 'high', 'medium' and 'low', based on technology use in the classroom.[49] Over two-fifths (43%) of students attend 'high technology use' schools, 35% attend 'medium' and 22% attend schools ranked as 'low' in terms of technology usage. Usage of personal devices is significantly higher among students attending Educate Together and fee-charging schools, with nearly all students from Educate Together schools using personal devices at school (97.8%).

The wide variation regarding technology use levels across schools can also be discerned from discussions in interviews and focus groups. Some schools have embraced technology, with students having their own laptops/personal devices and some students observing that they couldn't imagine functioning without Microsoft Teams (non-DEIS school, fifth year focus group). Conversely, other schools have been slower to adopt technology, using it primarily in Leaving Certificate exams for specific subjects like physical education, technology, and design and communication graphics (DCG); in these schools, the overall integration of technology is limited.

> [We] *used technology in some subjects – PE* [physical education] *for projects, technology, DCG. Other than that, generally no. It would be a special thing in maths. Homework is on OneNote, and it's pretty much just taking down notes. All work goes up. We also use Teams for organising outside classroom.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

A range of challenges were raised in relation to technology integration, including inadequate hardware, internet connectivity problems, and students' and teachers' varying levels of technology proficiency.

> *It's dodgy because some* [laptops] *work and some don't, or they run out of battery.* (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

> *Half of the time with the class it's figuring out how to turn on the computer*. (Fifth year focus group, fee charging school)

49 Schools where students use tablets/iPads or computers at least three or four times a week in class are categorised as 'high'. Those using tablets/iPads or computers one or two times a week are categorised as 'medium', while those using them less frequently are categorised as 'low'.

There's good stuff and bad stuff. There's some people who are very slow with the computers – can hold everyone up. (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

Limited funding and resources present significant obstacles to technology adoption in schools, despite the allocation of DSS funding to all non-fee-charging schools to assist students at risk of educational disadvantage in late 2021 (see Chapter 1 for details). Some schools struggled to secure adequate funding to purchase enough devices for their students. For instance, one principal mentioned that they only had 100 devices for 700 students, indicating a significant shortfall.

Teachers are looking for devices but there are only 100 for 700 students, we don't have enough. (Principal, non-DEIS school)

Additionally, financial constraints limit the accessibility and availability of essential digital tools like C-Pens (pen shaped text scanners), which can only be used within the school premises. This lack of resources impacts the ability of schools to fully leverage technology for educational purposes.

It's very difficult – my budgets coming in and going out, and I try very hard. So I have two or three C-Pens left and they're in school; you can only use them in school. (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

7.2.1 Use of technology in class

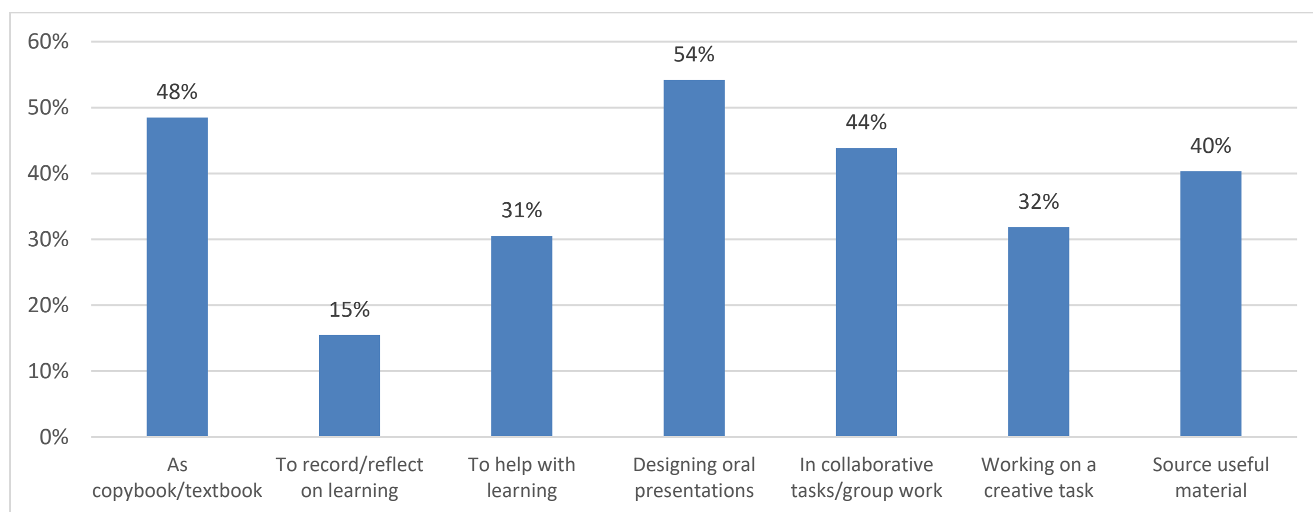
Students across most schools reported that the internet is frequently used in class, with 91% of students reporting that their teachers use it quite regularly. Tablets/iPads are used in class on a quite often or daily basis by 35% of students. Notably, students from schools serving more socio-economically advantaged families are more likely to use tablets/iPads frequently in class (41% of non-DEIS vs 13% of DEIS school students).

Figure 7.1 shows the extent to which students use tablets/iPads for various learning purposes. For those using tablets/iPads, more than half stated that they used tablets/iPads to a great extent when designing oral presentations (54%). A large share reported using tablets/iPads with other resources (e.g., a copybook or textbook) (48%) in collaborative tasks when doing group work (44%), or to source useful material for class, which can be shared on a class virtual space (40%) to a great extent. However, students are less likely to use tablets/iPads to record and reflect on their learnings as part of portfolio work, with only 15% of the students doing so 'to a great extent'.

Sizeable differences are found by school characteristics. A significantly higher proportion of students attending fee-charging schools use tablets/iPads for various

learning purposes, while students in single-sex boys' schools are less likely to do so.

FIGURE 7.1 STUDENTS' USE OF TABLETS/IPADS FOR VARIOUS LEARNING PURPOSES ('TO A GREAT EXTENT')



Regarding information communication technology (ICT) learning at school, most students (83%) believe it is important to learn about internet safety, with a higher proportion of girls agreeing with this (88% girls vs 78% boys). Overall, students are positive about ICT use at their school, with more than half (strongly) agreeing that ICT use in teaching and learning is positively impacting their school experience (71%), school achievement (55%) and motivation in school (52%). Only a small minority feel that ICT has a negative impact – just 11% disagreed with the statement that it positively impacts their motivation in school.

Students from Educate Together schools were particularly positive about ICT use compared to students attending other schools, with a higher proportion of Educate Together students agreeing that ICT use has a positive impact on various aspects of school life (e.g., overall school experience, motivation, achievement, and preparing them for work and life). Fifth year students, boys, as well as those with degree-educated parents, are also more likely to agree that ICT has a positive impact. Interestingly, more students attending DEIS schools feel that ICT use has a positive impact, although the differences are small.

Consistent with the survey findings, students and school personnel were broadly positive regarding ICT use in school and the classroom. Many participants perceived technology as an essential tool for teaching and learning, improving communication, submitting assignments and accessing resources. Teachers employed various online tools to actively engage students in class, encouraging collaboration and project-based learning. Technology also facilitated access to

resources, with platforms like YouTube proving especially beneficial for demonstrating practical subjects, such as agricultural science.

> *I'll incorporate as much as I can … Whether it's Kahoot! or Mentimeter or whatever you're using, they'll always buy into it when it's to do with the phone. That's great too because that's the world we're living in.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

> *I suppose it's easier to bring subjects to life in the classroom, like your access to YouTube, especially for the likes of agricultural science, and your practical subjects, you're able to bring in videos and stuff. It definitely helps with getting students' attention and building an interest, no doubt about it.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

However, it's important to note that the effectiveness of technology in teaching and learning largely depends on how it is used. Some students expressed concerns about the excessive use of certain media, like slide shows, and insufficient interaction during online classes. They also highlighted issues with the pace of teaching, with some teachers moving too quickly.

> *Overuse of PowerPoint annoys me in class.* [There was] *not enough interaction, just staring at a screen. Quizlet* [was] *also a waste of time: real boring, it doesn't really help.* (Second and fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

> *Sometimes they just have a PowerPoint up and they read it and flick through it and when they want you to take down notes the PowerPoint is too fast.* (Second year focus group, DEIS school)

An overreliance on technology echoes the findings of the Ratoath report (Dunne et al., 2020), in which it was found that students felt the use of technology is not always planned and sometimes does not serve any real purpose.

Teachers, meanwhile, were concerned that the attention span of students has declined in the digital age, with the need for bite-sized inputs to maintain interest levels:

> *They'll get bored – you have to mix up the lesson. You have to have it as interactive as possible. …* [D]*efinitely attention span is something* [that has changed] – *it's just evolution … they have their smartphones. They have access to so much information, so little time. They'd rather watch a ten-second TikTok now than a five-minute YouTube video. A five-minute video is too long.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

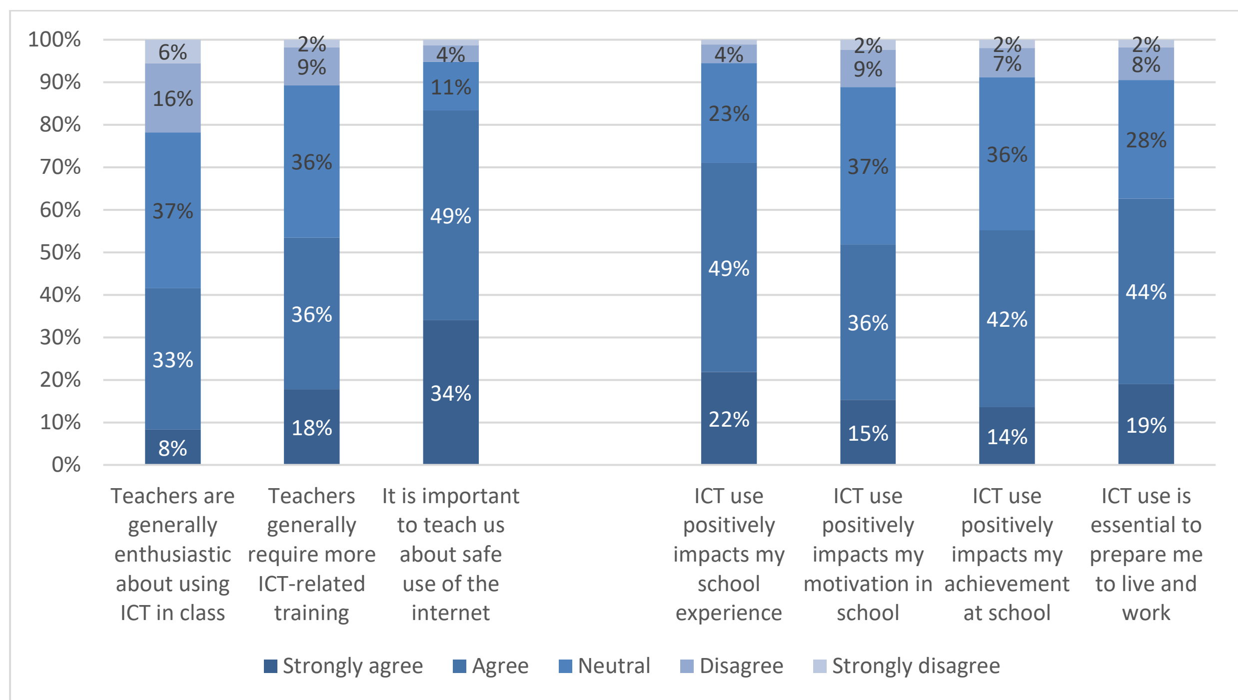
Students expressed some reservations regarding teachers' digital proficiency (Figure 7.2). More than one in five students (strongly) disagreed that teachers are generally enthusiastic about using ICT in class, and over half agreed that teachers need more ICT-related training (53%). Regarding students' perceptions of ICT-related training for teachers, variations exist primarily at the individual school level rather than by school type. The percentage of students indicating a need for more ICT-related professional development ranges from 21% to 67% across the case study schools. Similar variability is observed in the percentage agreeing that teachers are enthusiastic about using ICT in class, ranging from 21% to 70%. Additionally, differences across school types are noted regarding teachers' enthusiasm for using technology, with higher levels of enthusiasm observed in non-DEIS schools, particularly fee-charging schools, compared to DEIS schools (37.4% in DEIS schools vs 41.5% in non-DEIS schools and 46.3% in fee-charging schools). This echoes earlier work, in a pre-COVID era, showing wide variation in the extent of technology adoption and orientation across schools (Marcus-Quinn et al., 2019; McCoy et al., 2016).

Significant differences also emerged when we consider students' family and school characteristics, as well as their stage. Fifth year students, students attending fee-charging schools, and students in Educate Together schools were more likely to agree that teachers are enthusiastic about using ICT in class. Meanwhile, fifth year students, students with degree-educated parents, as well as those attending non-DEIS, non-fee-charging schools were more likely to agree that their teachers require more ICT-related training.

Earlier research has highlighted that many teachers engaged in a steep learning curve in relation to technology adoption in the context of COVID-19 (Mohan et al., 2021). However, 'technostress' was also reported across a wide range of experiences, with particular reference to upskilling for those with only basic digital skills (Marcus-Quinn et al., 2021). Research is also highlighting significant gaps in terms of the provision of computer science classes in schools around the country, with a lack of qualified teachers for the subject cited is the main barrier to greater access and participation.[50]

50 See https://www.rte.ie/news/regional/2023/0327/1366530-computers-schools/.

FIGURE 7.2 STUDENTS' ICT EXPERIENCES AT SCHOOL



7.2.2 Use of virtual learning environments

Regarding the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs), most schools (82%) are using some type of VLE regularly (more than three or four times a week), with a sizeable number using emails, social media or an app to either communicate with students (78%) or their parents (57%) on a regular basis. Students attending non-DEIS schools reported more frequent use of VLEs at school, particularly those attending fee-charging schools (85%) and Educate Together schools (93%), compared to students in DEIS schools (75%). As might be expected, the use of VLEs has significantly increased compared to the pre-COVID pandemic period when only 49% used personal devices and 40% used VLEs on a regular basis at school.

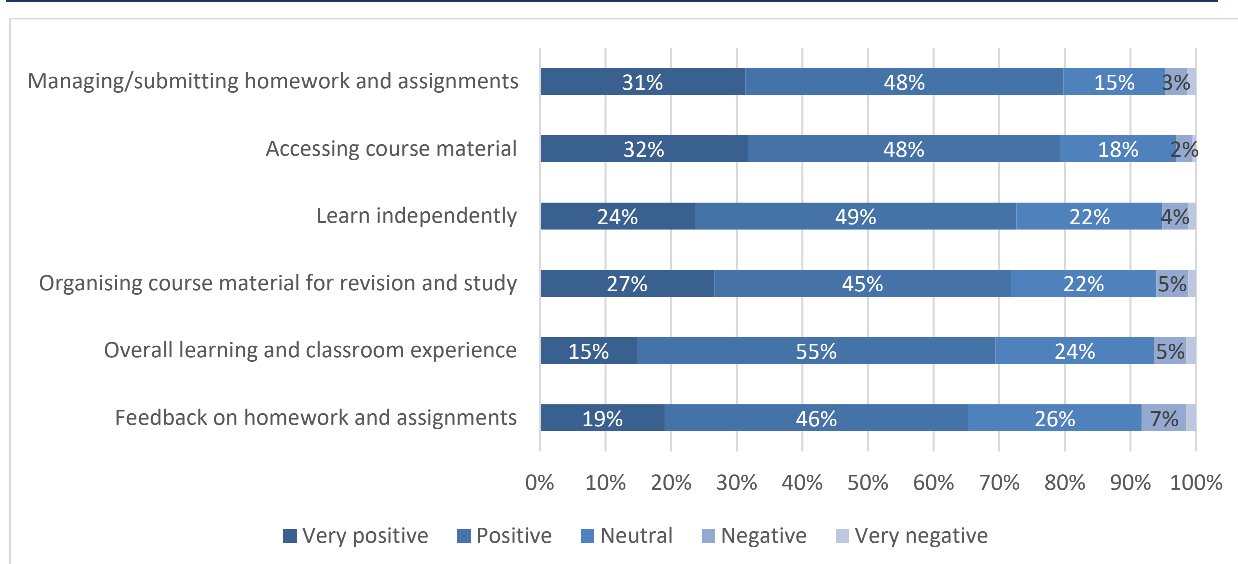
Overall, students have a positive attitude regarding the impact of VLEs (See Figure 7.3). They find VLEs particularly useful for managing and submitting homework or assignments and accessing course materials, with nearly eight in ten students being (very) positive about these aspects. Additionally, students are positive about the impact of VLEs in terms of improving opportunities to learn independently (73%), organising course material for revision and study (72%), and the overall learning and classroom experience (69%) facilitated by VLEs.

Despite generally positive perceptions of the impact of VLEs across various aspects of students' learning experience, significant disparities are observed in relation to students' socioeconomic backgrounds and SEN status. Students without SEN show a higher level of positivity in their attitudes towards VLEs. For example, 70% of students without SEN, compared to 62% of students with SEN, found VLEs to have

a (very) positive impact on their overall learning and classroom experience. A larger difference is observed in terms students' attitudes towards the impact of VLEs on 'organising course material for revision' (74% without SEN vs 62% with SEN) and 'managing and submitting homework and assignments' (82% without SEN vs 70% with SEN), with students without SEN being more positive about the role of VLEs in supporting them. The results suggest that a more inclusive approach is necessary to ensure that all students, including those with SEN, can fully benefit from and engage with VLE technology. Devising and implementing strategies to address these disparities and provide equal opportunities for all students is crucial in fostering a more inclusive and equal learning environment.

The evidence also points to the extra out-of-work hours undertaken by teachers that has happened as a direct result of the embedding of technology in schools. Many teachers now get requests from students via the school VLE or via email outside of hours, and in some schools students may expect a response to their queries, creating an additional burden on teachers.

FIGURE 7.3 THE VALUE OF VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN SUPPORTING DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF LEARNING



Similarly, in focus groups, students found the use of personal devices and VLEs in teaching and learning to be highly beneficial: they can easily access their homework, exam materials, and class notes through platforms such as OneNote and Microsoft Teams.

> [The] *iPad* [is] *in nearly every single class. … Better than books* [as they are] *easier to access, keep track, not weighing everything down.* [You have] *stuff on OneNote you and homework goes up on MS Teams,*

> [which] *makes it easier to manage.'* (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

> *Most teachers post work and homework, exam stuff on it. … I think it's nice to have everything on the one app, you know it's there. Digital is better than sheets and sheets and sheets.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

> *Google Classroom is now where a lot of the business is transacted. A lot less paper is used. Students send back work on Google Classroom. People are working smarter not harder.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> [The use of technology at school] *does benefit them. They have access to all the notes, all the homework is always posted. ... As you go forward you have everything there as opposed to putting it on the board. You have a resource there … That's really valuable for them.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

The use of technology also helped students with their project work, offering them the tools to research, create, and collaborate effectively.

> [We] *mainly* [used it] *for CBAs* [classroom-based assessments] – *Googling, PowerPoint, Kahoot. I feel like it adds to learning experiences. I would like to use more of it, it feels like it's easier to work with it.* (Second year focus group, fee charging school)

While many teachers and students appreciated the convenience and accessibility of digital materials, they also encountered certain issues. For some students, navigating multiple online resources, especially during revision, can be challenging. Meanwhile, the quality of these resources can vary significantly by subject, as highlighted by McCoy et al. (2016). One teacher noted that this challenge can be linked to students' organisation of resources within their VLE space.

> *One aspect is to do with the students' own organisation. So navigating a lot of online pages and so on when you're doing things, especially when you're doing revision, is harder because you have to remember that the resources that are online were made by us organically so the quality will vary by subject and so on.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

Therefore, some students may prefer to have a physical copy of their textbooks for revision.

> *I liked it at first but then I think now, especially during revision, some notes on this are barely anything. When I'm making notes at home, I'll go through, and it'll be a picture and a line with two words in it. And*

> *then I'm aware that's not any good for revision. So sometimes I think I'd prefer if there was a textbook with just solid information.* (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

While the focus has often been on students' ability to navigate and utilise online resources effectively, it is equally important to acknowledge the role of teachers' organisation of these resources. Teachers play a crucial role in curating and structuring digital materials within the VLE space to facilitate students' access and comprehension.

On the other hand, teachers expressed concerns about the workload associated with creating digital resources, such as duplicating existing content or risking unintentional plagiarism.

> *Another is just our workload, so I, among others, feel like sometimes I'm wasting my time creating a resource that probably already exists. Or there's a risk I'll end up plagiarising something. So the feeling amongst staff is why would we not just have a textbook and then I can spend the time that I'm using kind of recreating a textbook to do something more interesting, you know, like setting up a project or whatever.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

Earlier work has also highlighted the importance of digital schoolbooks being accessible – and thereby having the potential to promote inclusivity, flexibility and personalised learning, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes and a more equitable educational experience (Marcus-Quinn and Hourigan, 2022).

Teachers in this study noted that although digital platforms and devices provide students with great tools to find things out for themselves, they may not necessarily foster independent learning skills. Overreliance on them can shift the focus away from students taking ownership of their learning, as they may rely heavily on teachers for all relevant information.

> *Students are more and more dependent on technology and especially during COVID times, it was primarily technology that allowed them to access the knowledge and information. … but I feel that it takes away from the students taking ownership of their own learning and puts more pressure on the teachers, because they are relying on us to provide everything. If there are notes to be put up for a topic, the question is, 'is it on Google Classroom, can I access it there?' The focus in class is, 'can I see the notes?' As opposed to, 'maybe I will listen to the teacher explain the notes'. There is an overreliance on technology.* (Teacher, fee charging school)

Some students also found it difficult to concentrate when using personal devices in class.

> *If you have your proper class with your notetaking, you actually remember stuff but if you put a Chromebook in like you're not fully focused on the teacher. It can just distract you. Like if they assign work because they've not really walked round the class, you can just scroll through other things.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

> *It's really handy for that. I can take notes easily and whatnot. But at the same time, I can get pictures on my iPad. I can look up Netflix, and I literally do in class.* (Fifth year focus group, fee charging school)

Regarding the extent of technology use in the classroom, it is crucial to strike a balance to ensure it enhances, rather than hinders, the learning process, and is planned and serves a real purpose (also addressed by Dunne et al., 2020). Additionally, it's important to respect students' diverse needs and preferences. There were mixed views among students who participated in the focus groups. One student expressed reluctance, stating, 'I'm hopeless with technology'. Indeed, while this generation may be 'digital natives' who have been using technology their whole life, that does not automatically mean they have the skills to use it for educational purposes (see for example Mohan et al., 2020). Others held a more neutral perspective, viewing technology as 'handy to have but not necessary' (second year focus group, non-DEIS school).

Meanwhile, constant use of technology can be 'draining' for some students (fifth year focus group, fee charging school). This concern was also echoed by parents, with one remarking, 'I actually think it's good not to have too much technology since they're already on their devices in the morning and night' (parent, fee charging school).

A preference for a balanced approach to technology in education emerges across the interviews. Students appreciate a mix of digital and physical resources, finding it less distracting and beneficial for engagement.

> [It was] *a bit distracting*. [I] *would prefer to have notes written out and less screen time.* [Having a] *mix at the minute is grand. … so you're not getting bored or having a pain in your head. Google Classroom is good for putting everything up, especially if you miss something*. (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

> *I'm happy with the mix … I like having a physical book in my hands to write notes down on or just have in my hands.* (Fifth year focus group, fee charging school)

Parents, teachers, guidance counsellors and SENCOs also advocated for a hybrid model that combines technology with traditional learning tools such as textbooks and handwritten notes.

> *I wouldn't send my own child to an only iPad school. … It's not good for your eyes. You know, there's a lot of other things that are not just educational. … Some children prefer books. So you need to have a mixture of everything.* (SENCO, DEIS school)

> *The good thing about technology is it forces you to be innovative and probably more engaging. So what I would like to see is a balance where we do have textbooks, but there's a very clear requirement that every scheme of work involves going off the page. I think that would be the best of both worlds*. (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *I do think it has to be a combination of resources that you're using and I think that's really, really helpful. I think where technology lets students down, or lets schools down, is that they don't develop skills in the practicalities of keeping copies and handwriting and organisation and having textbooks for everything and copies for everything.* (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

Stakeholders urge caution should be exercised not only regarding the extent of technology use in classrooms but also the types of devices employed. Concerns have emerged among educators, particularly regarding personal devices such as smartphones, which evidence suggests can have a detrimental impact on students' wellbeing and potentially contribute to increased anxiety (Dempsey et al., 2020). Certain educators advocated for the use of school-provided devices like Chromebooks, iPads and laptops, as an alternative to smartphones, because the extensive use of phones and social media may have led to the decline in book reading and the prevalence of instant gratification culture (Dempsey et al., 2019). While the debate on whether to ban smartphones continues, there is a shared belief that addressing these issues is crucial for the overall wellbeing of students.

> *… I do find it quite ironic that we are spending 400 hours on wellbeing over a three-year cycle, and yet we have more children with more anxieties than we've ever had … What I would blame actually is technology. I think mobile phones should be banned in all schools … We can still use technology, using Chromebooks, iPads, laptops etc., but we don't need phones.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

> *I'm not just blaming COVID, and I hate saying this, but it's phones, it's social media, it's all that. Kids never sit down and read a book. They*

> *expect instant answers and they're not motivated to actually look for something. And we're guilty of that.* (SEN teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *This* [smartphone] *is probably the biggest challenge for us in terms of technology* – [we] *haven't banned phones. I'm loath to do it,* [as we have] *students coming in from very rural areas. A lot of stuff that happens outside of school is brought into school, and it's not easily fixed. So we're educating students about the dangers and the importance of internet safety and all of that.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

7.2.3 Digital skills development

In terms of self-assessed skills development related to technology use, over seven in ten (73%) indicate that their school is benefitting them. However, 23% of students indicate that their school did not help them to develop computer or digital skills, with a small number of students finding their school has a negative impact. Not surprisingly, students attending schools where technology is more embedded in teaching and learning are more likely to be positive in terms of their school supporting their digital skills development. Differences in relation to gender and students' family characteristics are not significant.

Across the diverse interviews and focus groups, staff and students alike observed an improvement in students' digital proficiency, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when they had to rely heavily on online learning:

> *The use of IT is imperative in education now because the reality is the students are so wholly developed in IT outside of school. They upskilled much quicker than staff did as a response to COVID as well.* (Teacher, fee charging school)

However, this proficiency appears more related to using personal devices such as tablets and smartphones. Some students struggled with basic computer tasks, such as sending emails, but excelled at using their smartphones for various functions, highlighting a digital skills gap.

> *The number of students that don't know the basics, how to do an email etc* [was massive] *… For example, for PowerPoint and Google Slides, they don't know how to put a different text box onto the same slide. But then you ask them to do something on their phones and they fly it.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

Meanwhile, there were students complaining that their digital skills development at school sometimes was just 'learning a lot of typing in the computer room' and that they 'preferred to be doing something better' (second year focus group, fee

charging school). The evidence highlights that developing students' digital skills extends far beyond teaching basic typing or tablet use and requires careful design and integration. Finding the right balance in the use of technology is seen as crucial, as ultimately, 'It should still only be a facilitator of the learning, an enhancement of the learning experience' (principal, non-DEIS school). The evidence also emphasises the importance of enhancing teachers' digital proficiency through effective professional development to ensure that they use technology in a way that benefits students' learning and development.

7.3 SUMMARY

Overall, technology has been embraced by students and schools in various ways across the case study schools. Its use can enhance teaching and learning by making the process more interactive and engaging. Technology was also seen to have the potential to facilitate communication between students and the school, as well as among students, aiding in assignment submission and resource access. However, the effectiveness of technology in teaching and learning depends largely on how it is utilised. While it is a valuable tool for collaborative work and encouraging students to seek information independently, the evidence shows that it does not necessarily contribute to students' independent learning skills. Meanwhile, concerns regarding teachers' varying technology proficiency levels were highlighted, with a consensus among students on this, who emphasised the need for more ICT-related professional development. Striking the right balance is crucial to ensure that technology enhances, rather than hinders, the learning process, and that it is planned and serves real purpose (Dunne et al., 2020). This includes a need for caution in choosing the types of devices used in schools and the role of smartphones in the classroom. Moreover, it is important to note that developing students' digital skills is not just a case of teaching basic tablet use or typing skills; it requires planned, scaffolded instruction and intentional curriculum design, as with any other subject taught by schools.

CHAPTER 8

COVID-19 impact

8.1 COVID-19 EXPERIENCES AND IMPACT

In mid-March 2020, almost all schools closed at short notice and shifted to a diversity of distance learning modes, with differential impact on student engagement and learning (Mac Domhnaill et al., 2021). Researchers have repeatedly argued that in order to prevent a return to the classroom with more social differentiation in outcomes, it is imperative that policy, planning and investment strive to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on educational inequality (Mohan et al., 2021).

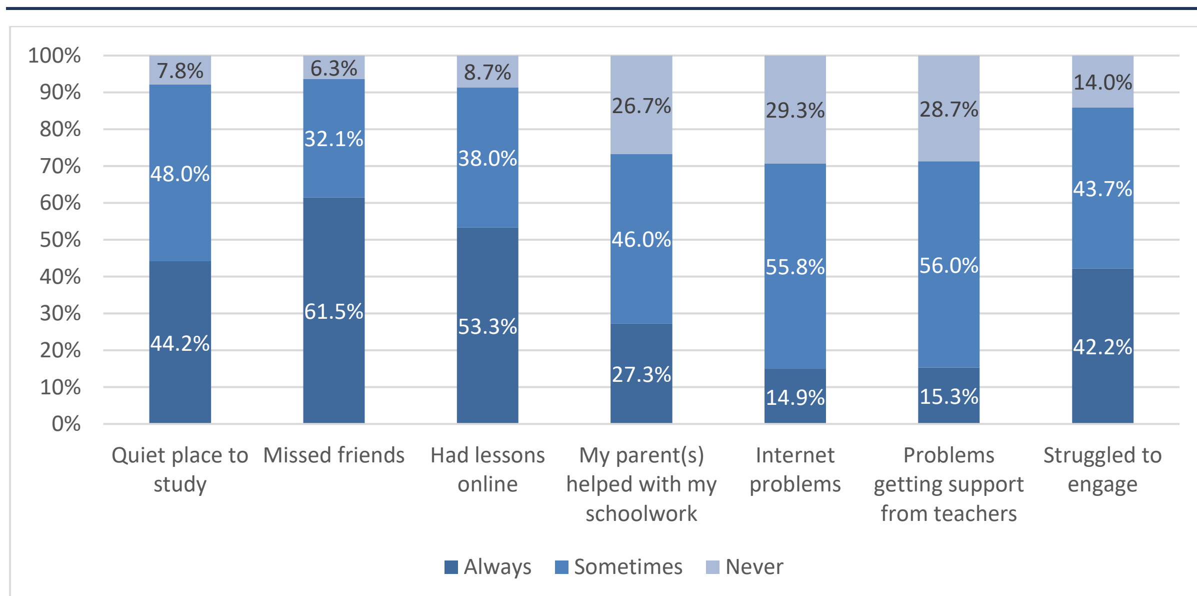
PISA 2022 results show that 80% of students in Ireland reported that their school building was closed for more than three months due to COVID-19 (OECD, 2023b). On average across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, 51% of students experienced similarly long school closures. During remote learning, 39% of students in Ireland had problems at least once a week with understanding school assignments and 25% of students with finding someone who could help them with schoolwork (OECD averages: 34% and 24%). Across the OECD, support for students' wellbeing was often limited when schools were closed. In Ireland, 69% of students reported that they were supported daily through live virtual classes on a video communication programme, compared to an OECD average of 51%. Only 9% of students reported that they were asked daily, by someone from school, how they were feeling, compared to an OECD average of 13%. Given limited earlier research we ask, how do students and school personnel reflect on the pandemic? More importantly, to what extent has there been an enduring impact on different aspects of students' lives and learning?

Figure 8.1 illustrates how second and fifth year students in voluntary secondary schools reflect on the period of remote learning. Similar to the COVID-19 experiences reported by the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study, the majority reported they 'always' or 'sometimes' had a quiet place to study at home (92% in our sample vs 94% of 13 year olds in GUI). However, our research with voluntary secondary students shows these students are less positive in terms of their capacity to engage with their schoolwork, with 86% struggling and feeling unmotivated, whereas only 53% of 13 year olds in the GUI study reported experiencing difficulties with their studies during the pandemic (these studies were carried out at different points over the course of the pandemic). A significant number of students in our sample also reported difficulties in obtaining support from their teachers (71%) and accessing the internet (71%). The school closures significantly disrupted students' social lives, with 94% of students stating that they sometimes or always missed their friends.

Although a higher proportion of fifth year students reported that they had a chance to attend lessons online (98% of fifth years vs 87% of second years), they were also more likely to feel that they struggled to engage with their schoolwork during COVID-19 (92% of fifth years vs 82% of second years reported feeling unmotivated). Meanwhile, second year students relied more on parental support, with 85% of them receiving help from their parents with schoolwork compared to 57% of fifth year students. Significant differences were observed among students with special educational needs (SEN), with 80% of them experiencing difficulties obtaining support from teachers, compared to 70% of their peers without SEN.

Apart from the difference within schools, wide variations were also observed between schools. For example, the percentage of students reporting they 'always' struggled to engage with their studies ranged from 24% to 56%.

FIGURE 8.1 STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON THEIR HOME LEARNING EXPERIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



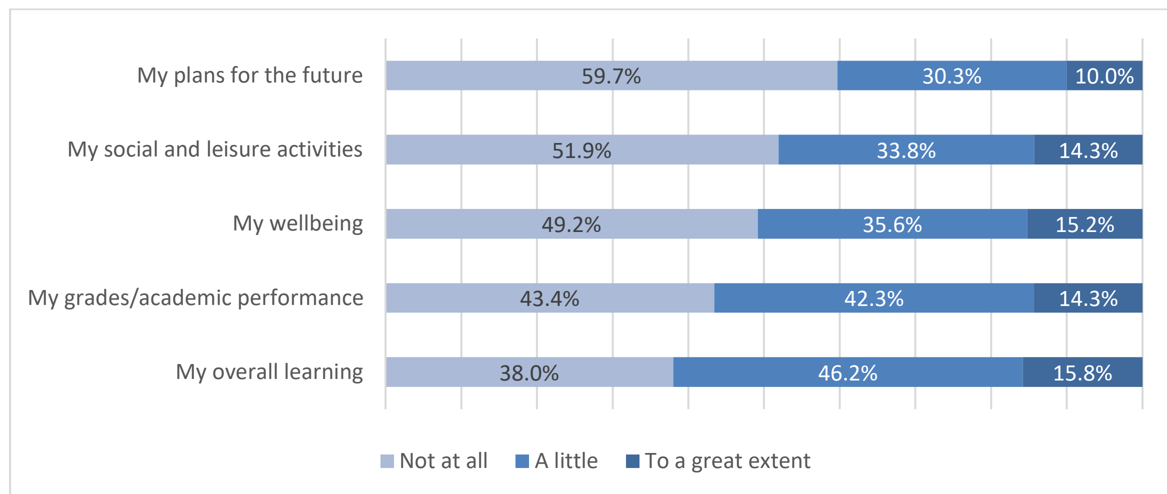
Though the restrictions were lifted at the end of February 2022 in Ireland, COVID-19 continues to impact many aspects of students' lives today. According to the principals' report in the GUI study (conducted at an earlier timepoint than our study), the wellbeing, school engagement and motivation of 13 year olds have been adversely impacted, to varying extents. For instance, nearly 80% of 13 year olds were in schools where their principal reported (much) worse student wellbeing, and 71% were in schools where their principal reported (much) worse attendance compared to the pre-COVID-19 situation. Principals also reported greater impact on the use of groupwork in class, conducting extracurricular activities (both sports and non-sports) and practical work. In the PISA 2022 study (OECD, 2023b), many students across the OECD described feeling confident about

using digital technology for learning remotely, but fewer said they felt confident about taking responsibility for their own learning, if school buildings must close again in the future. In Ireland, some 81% of students feel (very) confident about using a video communication programme and 48% of students feel (very) confident about motivating themselves to do schoolwork (OECD averages: 77% and 58%).

The lasting impact of COVID-19 is clearly evident in our study (Figure 8.2), with over half of students noting adverse effects on their wellbeing (51%), overall learning (62%) and academic performance (57%), although more than half reported that it had no impact on their future plans (60%) or social/leisure activities (52%).

The extent to which students perceive COVID-19 as continuing to impact them varies widely across the school settings. The percentage indicating that COVID-19 continues to have a great impact on: their overall learning ranged from 5% to 25%; on academic performance from 4% to 24%; on social/leisure activities from none to 23%; and on future plans from 3% to 16%. The largest difference was in terms of wellbeing; the proportion indicating the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect their wellbeing 'to a great extent' ranges from 4% of students in one school to 31% in another. This suggests variation across schools and student populations in the extent to which wellbeing supports are offsetting the profound ongoing impacts of the pandemic (Mohan et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2021).

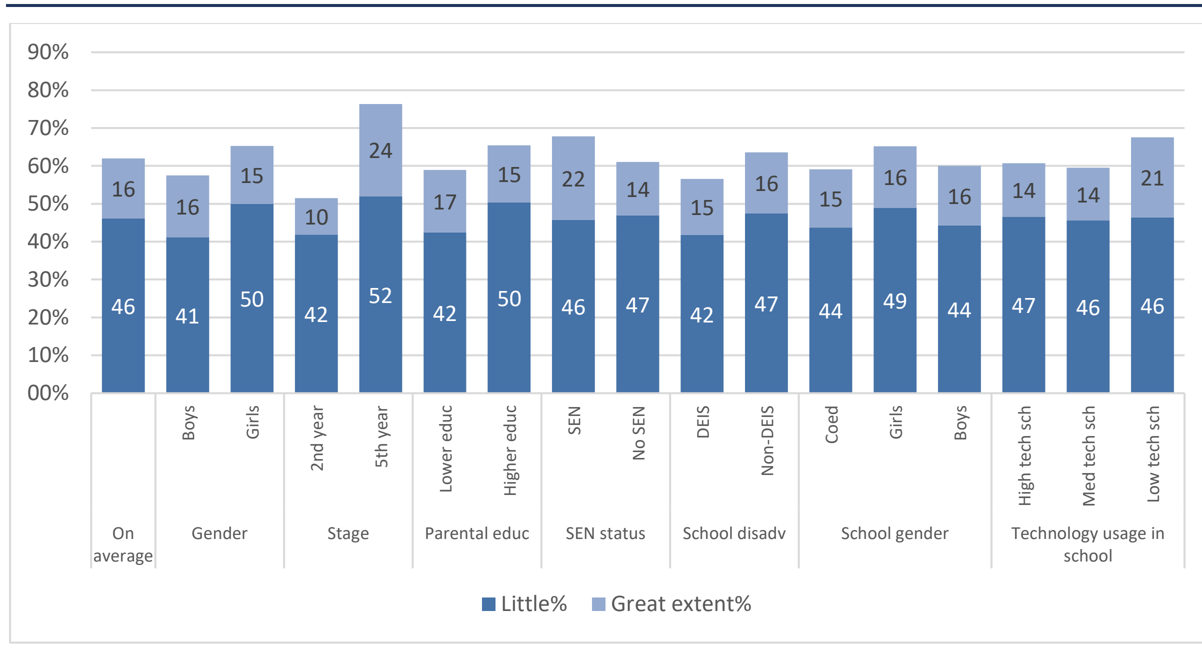
FIGURE 8.2 STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON THE EXTENT TO WHICH COVID-19 IS STILL IMPACTING ON DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF THEIR LIVES



Notable disparities were observed in relation to student gender, stage, parental education level and SEN status. Girls, fifth year students, those with degree-educated parents, and students with SEN are more likely to report enduring effects of COVID-19 on their overall learning experience compared to their peers (see Figure 8.3). Similar patterns are also evident in terms of the impact on students'

academic performance, wellbeing, social and leisure activities, as well as their future plans.

FIGURE 8.3 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS INDICATING THAT COVID-19 IS STILL IMPACTING THEIR OVERALL LEARNING



To further investigate factors associated with the extent to which students perceive an enduring impact on their overall learning, we employed logistic regression models (see Table A9 in the appendix for detailed model results).

The impact of SEN status and school stage is highlighted in model results. In Model 1, considering student characteristics, students with SEN and those uncertain about their SEN status are significantly more likely to report that COVID-19 is continuing to impact on their overall learning (2 times and 1.4 times, respectively). Additionally, fifth year students are significantly more likely to find that COVID-19 still impacts their overall learning to a great extent, compared to second year students (1.5 times as likely). There is, however, no significant difference in relation to gender or students' family background. Similarly, in Model 2, when accounting for school characteristics, the impact of having SEN and being in fifth year persists, while no significant differences in relation to school characteristics are found.

Finally, Model 3 examines the relationship between an enduring impact of COVID-19 on students' overall learning and other aspects of school life. It shows that those who always missed their friends, experienced internet problems, had difficulties getting help from their teachers and struggled to engage with their studies during COVID-19 are all more likely to report an enduring impact on their learning. It appears that the extent to which COVID-19 continues to affect students' learning

experience depends more on their learning and social experiences during COVID-19, their SEN status and their stage in school, rather than school characteristics or their family background.

8.2 QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

The ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was also noted during interviews and focus groups, where it was found to touch on various aspects of students' academic, personal and social lives, even after they returned to school.

8.2.1 Remote learning experience during COVID-19

One theme mentioned frequently by students was the increased use of technology associated with their remote learning when schools were closed during COVID-19. Online learning was appreciated by some students as they had more autonomy and control:

> *A lot of them* [autistic children] *really enjoyed teaching – learning online because it was a safe environment and they had control. They could take off the earphones and switch off and do whatever*. (SENCO, DEIS school)

However, many students found that they struggled to engage with their study online. Such disengagement was largely associated with distractions in the home environment, a lack of supervision and a sense that engagement was not important.

> *I learnt nothing overall online, and it's not even that the classes were bad or whatever, I just couldn't pay attention in my own house. There's people who have loud households who had to stay home, like they have five, six brothers and sisters, they have animals … they have everything in the house, it's going to make so much noise … you can't focus on what you're doing when you're stuck in the house with so many people.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

> [We] *didn't attend a lot of online classes because nobody was forcing* [us to]. [It was] *difficult to engage in classes with the camera off, lying in the comfort of your own bed, you would fall back asleep.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

> *It was hard to work during COVID on the computers. It all felt kind of optional as well. I was in my room, desk over here, TV over there, phone and everything.* [I was] *constantly distracted. In most classes* [I

> had] *mic and camera off, waiting to hear your name called and that's it*. (Second year focus group, Non- DEIS school)

> *You wouldn't really have to pay attention in class online, because you had nobody there telling you what to do, or you had internet troubles, so you weren't online as much.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

In particular, students faced challenges concentrating, and online learning was often less effective than classroom-based learning, as it often required greater self-motivation with limited teacher guidance. This aligns with findings on the use of technology at school in Chapter 7, which highlight the struggles students encountered with online learning compared to in-person teaching.

> *It was very easy just to click join on the class and leave the room. I don't think I learned anything. Anything we were learning was just through a screen online and no one was really paying attention … Once the school day was done, you just turned off your computer.* (Fifth year focus group, non- DEIS school)

> *If we didn't do it in the classroom, it doesn't have the same effect. You're not being taught it, you're kind of self-teaching. Home school was self-taught a lot of the time, teachers just came in and out to guide you*. (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

Remote learning posed particular challenges for students with SEN, as it demanded a high degree of independence, which many of these students found difficult to manage, resulting in declining motivation and engagement.

> *SEN students really struggled with online learning. Because it took so much independence, it was very easy for them to not engage … Whatever they would have learned in classroom*, [there is] *no hope at home.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

Learning practical and language subjects, where hands-on demonstrations and practice were crucial for comprehension, was also greatly impacted.

> *It was just so difficult to try and engage in an online class when it was a language. Then we came back to school, and they* [teachers] *are, like, 'Oh, we did this online'.* (Focus group fifth year, DEIS school)

Concern relating to students' increasing disengagement with remote learning was also raised by many teachers:

> *For my subject it was tough because it's a really practical subject. It's kind of something you have to be shown how to do it. And now all of*

> *a sudden, we were taking videos of our drawing and sending it out. … I felt that you're nearly waiting for 24 students and they're all at home, are they even doing it? I don't know.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

> *They might have turned on the laptop. They're there but they're on the phone, like, they weren't there. … The class was going on, the work was going on, but they were in a different world, like, you know, when they had that flexibility, and you couldn't see really what they were doing. They weren't really engaged in it*. (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

Moreover, many students became more solitary learners, lacking the interactive and collaborative learning experiences they would have in a traditional classroom setting. This may well have impacted their engagement and the depth of their learning experiences.

> *The groundwork for how to engage academically is missing. It's there, but it's weak. The scaffolding is not as strong as it would be if we were there in person helping them to develop their learning style or the way that they engage with academics … They are solitary learners rather than group learners and pretend learners. A lot of the time during COVID when we had online classes, the device was being engaged but I don't believe the student had, that's had an impact.* (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

8.2.2 COVID-19 impact on overall learning

In line with the results of the student survey, many students emphasised that COVID-19 continues to significantly affect their overall learning, including their school performance, literacy, numeracy skills and interactions in the classroom. For instance, some students mentioned reduced confidence in speaking during class:

> *I would be one hundred percent more conscious of what I would say in class* [now]. *I wouldn't want to put my hand up because I wouldn't be fully sure I'm right. I don't know why … Even though when you walk out of class you talk to all of these people, but just for whatever reason in class we are all just kind of quiet.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

Academically, younger students struggled more with the basics of their courses:

> *Academically, basic, core fundamentals, like rounding numbers, concepts like that that obviously hadn't been attained in maybe third class or fourth class were not attained at all. Reading the clock, tying your shoelaces, those sorts of things. I'm finding especially with the first years and with the current second years that you'd be surprised*

> *that they haven't quite mastered stuff like that.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *We missed out on a lot of stuff that I still haven't caught up on. They're just easy things, like the basics of what you're learning.* (Second year focus group, Non-DEIS school)

Many fifth year students found the transition to Senior Cycle education challenging and even overwhelming.

> *I feel like the way in which it* [self-teaching] *happened was just a bit all over the place, very overwhelming. We're kind of in the deep end, don't really know what we're doing, just winging it. It's a scary feeling.* (Fifth year focus group, Non- DEIS school)

> [B]*ut then going straight into fifth year after having basically two and a half years of no work, going straight into it where it's like continuous work is being thrown at us, it's like we don't really have that much time to breathe and catch our breath before we're going into another class then and having loads of information put into our brains that we – just don't know how to handle it, it's just a lot.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

Students stressed their unpreparedness for the increased workload, which they attributed to the relatively unstructured nature of learning at home during COVID-19:

> *It's almost as if we were kind of spoon fed the Junior Cert … and now it's all just shoved down our throats. …The dramatic difference between not even my grades or anything, but just the amount of things that you have to know, the things you have to learn, the things you have to cover in class. … We got so used to not having class that now when we do have class it feels like it's being shoved down your throat.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

Missing the Junior Cycle exams was particularly challenging for the fifth year students. Many students mentioned that knowing they would not have to sit the Junior Cycle exams significantly (negatively) impacted their motivation to study at home, resulting in a decreased level of effort dedicated to their studies:

> [It was] *harder to concentrate because we knew we weren't going to have a Junior Cert, so we weren't putting in the same effort, not thinking about fifth or sixth year at the time … Coming into fifth year was a bit of a shock, especially when the topics covered in second and third years served as the foundation for what we're learning now. So,*

> *many teachers assumed, 'Oh, you did this in the Junior Cert', but we didn't really. We couldn't have any tests.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school)

The absence of significant exam experiences also heightened stress among the fifth year students, a stage where there was a heavy focus on exams:

> *We had no experience of sitting state exams. The mocks will be a big shock. Our first test in November* [was] *an eye opener about the work to be done. We were dropped into the deep end. School helped in first year, but we forgot during COVID and we are not sure now.* (Second year focus group, Non- DEIS school)

> *We have to do the full Leaving Cert, which is really frustrating, because we missed out on so much – we missed all the second year and all the third year. I don't remember anything from then and we still have to do the full Leaving Cert.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

Students not only struggled with catching up on their academic performance; they also found it challenging to manage the pressure of preparing for exams, meeting deadlines and completing a substantial amount of writing within a limited timeframe in an exam context:

> *I think the students have missed key concepts, basic skills that they would have gotten in Junior Cert …* [The fifth years] *are finding it quite hard to adapt to the pressure.* (Teacher, non- DEIS school)

> *I suppose there is reluctance for writing ... Like, in geography in Leaving Cert, you have to write quite extensively within a timeframe, 12 to 15 minutes with one exam question but students really struggle with the amount that's required in the time … Because with COVID, everything would have been very brief and online. We would have been relying on them even maybe typing into text boxes and quizzes. So, the pen and paper is suffering.* (Teacher, non- DEIS school)

> *For two or three years they have missed out on core aspects of education, for example presentation, basics in maths, literacy and so forth … In my eyes they are a year behind where they should be. When they come in here for the first couple of months, we go back and concentrate on the basics, we introduce some concepts that they might have missed out on in national school … the learning we feel is needed to access the curriculum. Basics of penmanship, presentation, grammar.* (SENCO, non- DEIS school)

8.2.3 COVID-19 impact on motivation

Apart from the impact on their overall learning, COVID-19 also appears to be having an enduring impact on student motivation. One student remarked:

> *I feel like a lot of people lost their motivation to learn because of it* [COVID]. *Because we used to go to school and see our friends and be happy with our friends and learn. But then once it hit, we couldn't see our friends and, like, we lost our motivation.* (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

The decreased motivation was also observed by teachers, even for the highest achieving students.

> *If you asked me what he'd get in his Leaving Cert in first year, he was a 625-point student. I don't know if it was the COVID halting his learning or what, but* [when] *he's come back – he's still a brilliant and bright student, but the drive academically has just vanished.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

However, some teachers did feel that declining motivation might not be only associated with COVID-19 but with the increasing use of smartphones and declining attention more generally, as discussed in Chapter 7.

> *I think students are much harder to motivate … They seem to be kind of much more inward in themselves … I think it's a combination of COVID, and then your technology and your phones … We've come out of COVID, but they haven't come out of their phones.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *That is a problem, particularly at Junior level. … Whether it's COVID or not, it's hard to* [say] *… there seems to be a real difficulty in terms of maybe motivating them, and driving them on, compared to what there would have been years ago … Say, going back a few years ago, on the old Junior Cert cycle, they've have been driven, they'd have been focused, they'd be kind of saying, 'Have you got any notes on this?' or, 'Would you mind maybe revising this for us?', but now it's like, 'whatever you want to do it'll be grand'* (Teacher, non- DEIS school)

8.2.4 COVID-19 impact on wellbeing

Young adults' mental wellbeing was also adversely impacted by the pandemic, characterised by 'a general trend of less psychological wellbeing and more mental health problems, such as heightened stress, and depressive and anxiety symptoms during the pandemic' (Wolf and Schmitz, 2023, p. 1). School refusal based on social

anxiety has become an increasing problem, making reintegration into school life challenging.

> *The long-lasting impact would be the anxiety amongst students. We have noticed a sharp increase for some students and there are still some effects on them. … It was obviously hard to engage students when they were at home rather than in the classroom. It was challenging to reintegrate students into school life.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *The most common problem I feel that gets landed on our doorstep in regard to attendance is social anxiety. School refusal just based on social anxiety. There's umpteen cases of that.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

For some students, the impact of the pandemic on their learning led to them 'falling behind by as much as two years' and developing a sense of 'learned helplessness'.

> *COVID has a profound impact on the kids. I'd see them as two years behind where you'd expect them to be. There's a learned helplessness that's shocking – more and more of our time taken up doing parental jobs.* (Principal, DEIS school)

The weakened wellbeing of students has resulted in a higher demand for support services, with more students seeking personal counselling especially since COVID-19. The issues range from social anxiety, educational based anxiety, self-harm, conflict with others in their lives and various mental health concerns. It highlights the need for comprehensive and accessible supports which are responsive to individual need.

> *COVID has had massive effect. Students who would never cross our door in terms of personal counselling previously, they need that support now.* (Guidance counsellor, fee charging school)

> *Personal counselling particularly since COVID* – [We] *wouldn't have seen many* [going for personal counselling] *pre-COVID,* [and there are] *loads now. There are more junior students* [coming for counselling service]. [Issues include] *anxiety, mental health, panic, distress in school.* (Guidance counsellor, fee charging school)

> *Anxiety is huge. Self-harm is huge. There's school refusal. Anxiety, you could kind of break it down into social anxiety and then just kind of educational-based anxiety, like not being able to do something …* [There is massive] *anger. … I definitely would see conflict. I would deal*

> *with conflict, not from a discipline perspective but from a kind of a mediation or a restorative-practice perspective. It's endless. I would say I know a certain percentage of it and that there's way more that I'm not even aware of.* (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

8.2.5 COVID-19 impact on social development

The pandemic has profoundly impacted students' social lives and interpersonal skills. Many students experienced disruptions in their social interactions, leading to lost friendships and difficulties in reconnecting.

> *There's a huge social impact on our lives. I know for a fact that I've lost contact with a few of my friends I had before COVID because, one, they could not have a phone, they could not have great internet, whatever. And then I couldn't go out and see them, so I just lost contact completely.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

> *I think people need to remember that COVID did have a real impact and will have a really big impact on us for the rest of our lives.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

> *We are so used to not doing anything and not going anywhere, that has nearly become normal.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

Students also expressed concerns about the long-term effects on their social development, such as not being able to resolve conflicts and socialise in groups.

> *Maturity wise, that we weren't experiencing having fights or resolving things or anything. So if it came to something happened and we're older, we still don't have some of those skills to resolve it ourselves.* (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

Parents and educators also highlighted the lasting impact of COVID-19 on students' social skills, with concerns about student maturity, especially among the younger cohort who had recently experienced the transition from primary to post primary education.

> *The educational development and maturity of the students has been significantly hindered, not so much the older students, but certainly our junior students from third year down, those students who made the transition from primary to post primary education under COVID restrictions, their social development was hindered greatly because it's a milestone moment, a real moment of transition, a physical moment walking into the school for the first time, being the small kids in the school, getting to know the surroundings. A lot of that didn't*

happen because of COVID. … And it's tricky to catch up with. As the years go on, I feel like, 'God, when is this going to end that I'll have a cohort of students that are where they should be on all levels'. (Teacher, fee charging school)

Some students socially, I think, are not as advanced as they would have been. (Guidance counsellor, DEIS school)

I would say [the impact on] *the social skills element for maybe the first years. Like, we have first years in here playing like tag around the yard and hide and seek. That's really immature for a batch of first years. I'm not saying that they need to grow up really quick. But compared to like the school five years ago, there wouldn't have been first years in here playing chase and hide and seek. There's still a kind of childlike behaviours happening.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

One parent shared their view that the impact of the pandemic on students' social development is immeasurable and continues to unfold, affecting their social behaviours and interactions both inside and outside of school.

I think the social impact of COVID was immeasurable … after it finished it was very difficult for them to interact in groups and friendships were lost in school and outside of school, the ability to have conversations with each other. Everything was too technology-based then [during COVID]*, it became very awkward for them … The social impact is yet to be seen … the social anxiety, depression, so many … and we still haven't seen the* [full] *extent of it yet*. (Parent, DEIS school)

More broadly, concerns were shared around decreased coping skills, reduced resilience and heightened stress levels, especially among younger students.

From a socialisation point of view I think, particularly with the younger ones, 13, 14, 15 years [there is an impact]. *I think coping skills and resilience has decreased and stress levels increased. Just their ability to do day-to-day things – if I have a big test … they would get really overwhelmed and they shouldn't be.* (Teacher, fee charging school)

Moreover, they noted that students, especially those transitioning into new grade levels, faced difficulties in re-establishing social connections.

I think the worst part coming back was the socialisation that they'd missed. … It took a while for them to be comfortable, even talking to each other across the room or whatever. … I do think, especially our fifth, sixth class coming in, they lost. There's always certain

> *expectations of students coming in, transitioning into first year that they have a certain amount done. I think it's taking us a little while to catch up there.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

8.2.6 Returning to school

The lasting impact of COVID-19 on students' social development manifested in real challenges as they returned to school. A sense of isolation and detachment persisted upon returning to in-person classes, highlighting how the extended period of remote learning at home affected their ability to engage with traditional classroom dynamics.

> *Even when we came back to school, every desk was two metres apart, and we had masks, it didn't feel like we were sitting in the classroom, it was just so isolated. You could hear someone talking in the room, but it was like, this isn't school. Because obviously you don't go into class just to sit there and talk to your friends, but just the fact of having people around you, instead of being in your own form, your circle.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

> *I knew that when I first came back it was really weird to be learning with loads of people and the teacher explaining it. Because I wasn't used to that. I was used to going onto whatever website we were using and just learning it … doing it myself*. (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school)

Some students also expressed challenges in adapting to the social aspects of classroom learning and a tendency to disengage during class:

> *Because you're at home by yourself for the two years, whatever I was doing was my actions. But then I get to school, and I realise I am so much quieter than other people. That's what I've become and what I was comfortable with my two years in COVID. I know I dissociate a lot in class. I am listening and I get good grades, but I can dissociate really, really quickly.* (Fifth year focus group, fee charging school)

School leaders and teachers also observed a continued reliance on smartphones and technology for communication, with reduced face-to-face interactions among students. This shift towards digital communication has led to concerns about decreased sociability and interpersonal skills, which may potentially affect students' readiness for the workplace and other developmental milestones.

> *I don't think they're at the same level they had been* [for communicating]. *I think it's a combination of COVID, and then your technology and your phones. I think COVID pushed them more and*

more down the route of into the phone and technology. (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

Even if you left a class for a minute or walked into a class, students are not necessarily talking to each other, they're looking at their phones. Or even, they'll show each other videos that are on their phone, but there's no interaction among themselves. (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

Students are not as sociable as they were … each morning I would stop and intentionally say, 'how are you?' Some fellas will look as if you are an alien, asking, 'why is that man asking how I am?' Is that an impact of COVID? I don't know. It could be an impact of their online being and presence and how that has taken over from their physical being … Some of their behaviours are not in line with being able to enter the world of work, the world of apprenticeship, maybe they haven't met those developmental milestones. (Principal, non-DEIS school)

Meanwhile, returning to schools and reengaging was seen as particularly challenging for students with additional needs.

It's the vulnerable kids or the ones that lack support at home. I do think it [COVID] *has exacerbated anxieties that might have been there already and/or exacerbated bad habits that people might have been inclined to easily stay at home. That became much easier and therefore has had a lasting impact on absenteeism, attendance, punctuality, that kind of thing.* (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

8.3 SUMMARY

While COVID restrictions in Ireland were lifted in February 2022, the pandemic is having an enduring impact for many aspects of students' lives. Evidence from school principals as part of the GUI study shows that nearly 71% of 13 year olds were in schools where their principal reported (much) worse attendance compared to the pre-COVID situation.[51] While we did not directly ask students about the influence of COVID on their school attendance, interviews with school personnel suggest increased absenteeism, which is likely to be associated with a deterioration in student mental wellbeing during, and after, the pandemic. This is confirmed in our model examining the factors influencing school attendance, highlighting a higher likelihood of school absence for those who consistently struggled to engage with their studies during COVID-19 (see Section 4.4 for details).

[51] Fieldwork for Cohort '08 in the GUI study ran from July 2021 to June 2022. See https://www.growingup.gov.ie/pubs/Key-Findings-Cohort-08-at-13.pdf.

Our survey results show that most students struggled to engage in remote learning, and experienced difficulties accessing timely teacher support and stable internet connections. Students also highlighted a lasting impact on their overall learning, academic performance and wellbeing. Our qualitative analysis delved deeper into these effects. Younger students struggled with basic coursework, while older students found the transition to Senior Cycle education challenging. They felt unprepared for increasing workloads and exams in fifth year, and were worried about sitting the state examinations without having taken Junior Cycle exams or even 'mock exams'. Students reported that their motivation had been adversely impacted even after their return to school.

The pandemic was also seen to impact on students' mental wellbeing, leading to heightened anxiety levels for many students and an increased demand for support services, particularly personal counselling. This highlights the importance of comprehensive and accessible supports, responsive to individual needs. The evidence also points to a profound and enduring impact on students' social lives and interpersonal skills, raising concerns about their maturity, ability to reconnect with peers, rebuild social networks, develop coping skills, and maintain resilience amid heightened stress levels. These long-lasting impacts have manifested themselves in various challenges faced upon returning to school, including disengagement in class and decreased interactions among students, which many argued could be partly fuelled by increasing smartphone and social media use, independent of or in conjunction with the fallout from the pandemic.

CHAPTER 9

Broader social and personal development

9.1 INTRODUCTION

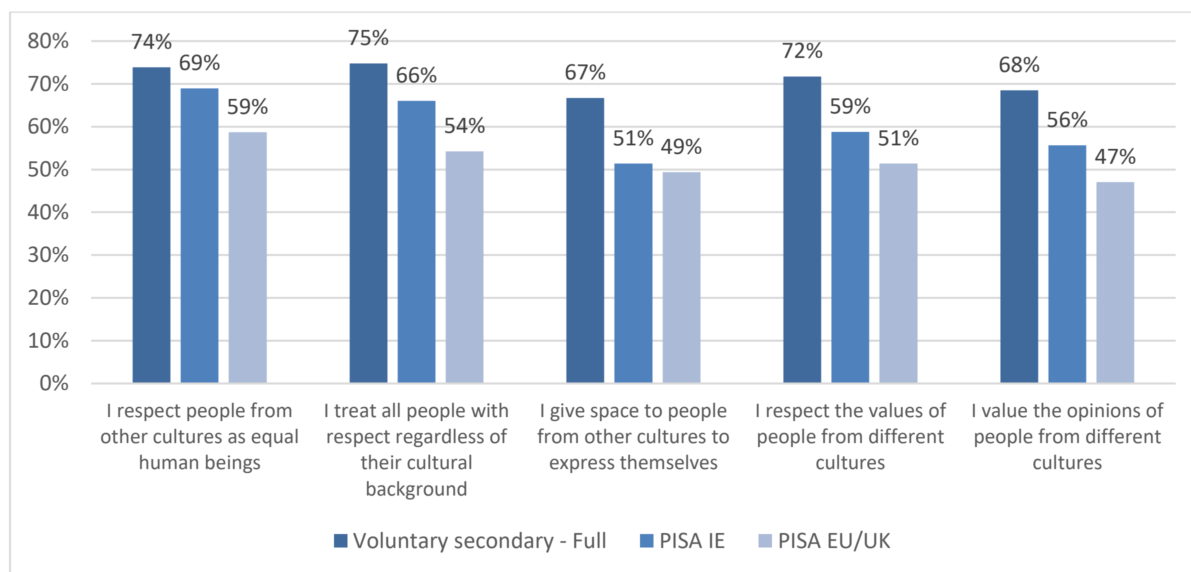
While the 'core business' of schools remains teaching and learning, aligned with subject-specific curricula and framed by if not entirely directed towards state examinations (particularly the Leaving Certificate), schools aim to foster learning and developments in other areas as well. This chapter assesses diverse aspects of young peoples' social, personal and civic education, both within and outside the school setting. In doing so we assess aspects of what is happening outside of the classroom in voluntary secondary schools, as well as some additional aspects of classroom life. This includes citizenship education and social awareness, participation in activities outside of school, the perceived benefits of secondary education, student wellbeing and life satisfaction and their plans for the future. These aspects are relevant to schools across the country, both within and beyond the voluntary secondary sector, underscoring their significance to the broader educational context.

9.2 CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AND SOCIAL AWARENESS

Public schooling, in the broadest sense, has always been key to the creation of a public sphere and the development of individuals ready to engage in it (see for example Dewey, 1966). As the issues considered part of the public sphere and the media available to citizens to contribute to it have grown more diverse and complex in contemporary democratic societies, so too have the challenges facing schools in providing this aspect of education. A key component of democratic ideals relates to the area of global competence, which is a multidimensional capacity. Globally competent individuals can examine local, global and intercultural issues, understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible action toward sustainability and collective wellbeing (OECD, 2018). Developing students' awareness of social issues and fostering respect for different cultures is becoming increasingly important in modern societies; with civic knowledge important in empowering young people to see their citizenship as a practice, not an outcome (Brodie-McKenzie, 2020). In our study, second and fifth year students were asked their views on the importance of having respect for people from different cultures. The vast majority expressed positive views, reporting that it was 'very much or mostly like them' that they treat all people with respect regardless of their cultural background (94%), respect people from other cultural backgrounds (93%), value the opinions of people from different cultures (90%) and give space to individuals from diverse backgrounds (90%). Indeed, two-thirds to three-quarters of students

chose the strongest agreement option in the survey for each question in the section (see Figure 9.1). Of course, this self-reported data do not necessarily reflect respondents' actual behaviours or true beliefs; a large body of literature exists on social desirability bias in survey responses on sensitive items (see for example Krumpal, 2013; Timmons et al., 2023). Bearing in mind this caveat, however, these self-reported levels of respect are notably high compared to students from other EU countries (and the UK) in the PISA 2018 study (see Figure 9.1).

FIGURE 9.1 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS DESCRIBING CULTURAL VIEWS AS 'VERY MUCH LIKE ME'



Note: The category 'Voluntary secondary – Full' refers to the full sample of our study, including all the responses across second and fifth year students. 'PISA IE' refers to student responses in Ireland in the 2018 PISA study, and 'PISA EU/UK' refers to student responses in the EU and UK (excluding Ireland).

Consistent with the findings from the PISA study on 15 year olds in Ireland,[52] differences are evident by individual, family and regional characteristics. For example, girls, those with degree-educated parents and those from urban areas are more likely to describe themselves as 'respecting people from other cultures as equal human beings'. It is worth complicating these findings here by noting that previous Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) research on attitudes towards supports for disabled people and towards immigration suggests that greater social desirability bias may exist in the responses of more affluent groups (Timmons et al., 2023; McGinnity et al., 2020). No significant differences were observed in terms of school DEIS status, while school climate emerges as a more important factor, with students from schools viewed as having a stronger ethos[53] more likely to express positive responses compared to those in schools with a

[52] In the 2018 PISA study in Ireland, more positive responses regarding respecting different cultures and values were found among girls, students with parents of higher educational levels and those from urban areas.

[53] School ethos is measured by six individual items: 'Promoting spiritual and human development'; 'Achieving quality in teaching and learning'; 'Showing respect for every person'; 'Creating community'; 'Being just and responsible'; and 'Encouraging different types of achievement (music, sports, drama, debating, young entrepreneur etc.). Schools with a stronger ethos score are in the top 20% on this scale. Further details can be found in Chapter 2 (Methodology).

weaker ethos (85% vs 71%). Increasing maturity also seems to influence this, with a higher proportion of fifth year students reporting this compared to the second year group (79% vs 70%).

Similar trends are observed for other measures that capture the extent to which students respect people from different cultures.

To further investigate the factors related to students' respect for diverse cultures, we employed logistic regression models (see Table A10 in the appendix for detailed model results). The outcome variable is students' perception of their school emphasising strong values, based on the five individual measures that capture students' respect for different cultures.[54]

Consistent with descriptive findings, students with university-educated parents are 1.4 times as likely to report their school having a strong value emphasis. Girls are substantially more likely to report this (3.5 times as likely). Fifth year students, compared to second year students, also show a more positive response. However, students with special educational needs (SEN) and those unsure of their SEN status are less likely to report a strong value emphasis at school (0.5 times and 0.7 times as likely).

Strong differences emerge across school types. In Model 2, accounting for school characteristics, students in fee-charging schools are much more likely to report a strong value emphasis. Interestingly, positive responses are also found among students in DEIS schools. Meanwhile, girls in single-sex girls' schools, compared to students in co-educational schools, are also more likely to report this.

When considering additional aspects of school life in Model 3, those with positive school engagement, positive social engagement, and those attending schools with a student-led ethos and stronger ethos are more likely to report a strong value emphasis at school.[55] Gender differences persist across all three models, with girls being nearly three times as likely to perceive their school as having a strong value emphasis.

In the fifth year survey, students were asked about their familiarity with various social topics (Figure 9.2). The results show that students are most familiar with climate change and gender equality issues, with over 80% stating that they either 'know something and can explain general issues' or 'are familiar with the topics

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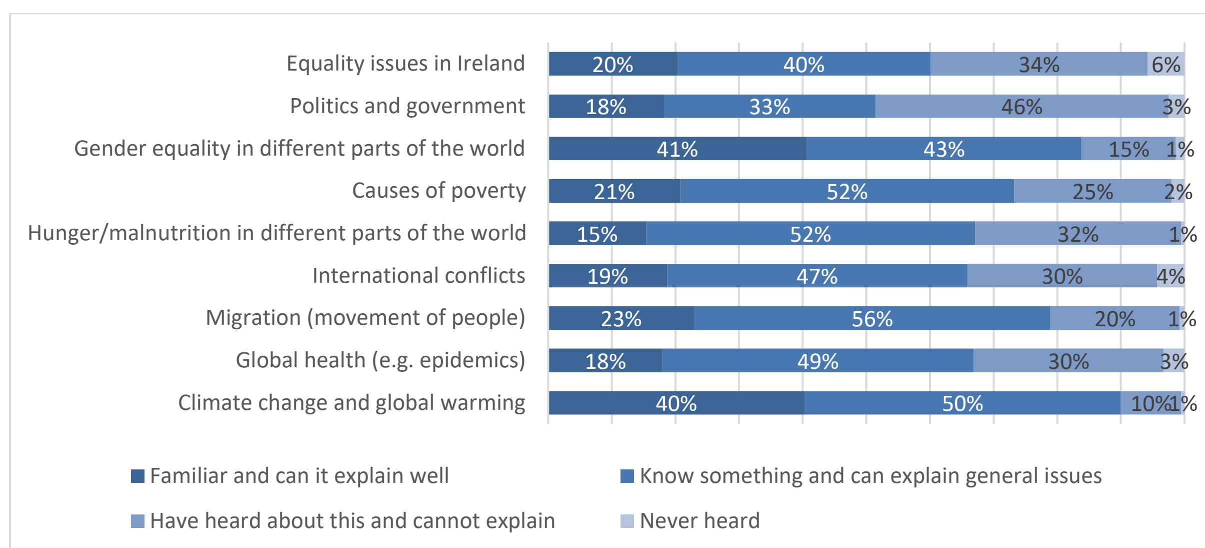
[54] Details on how the variable is constructed can be found in Chapter 2 (Methodology).

[55] The student-led school ethos measure is constructed based on three of the individual measures: 'I am encouraged to make up my own mind'; 'I am encouraged to express my opinions'; and 'I am encouraged to discuss the issues with people having different opinions'. Details of how this measure is constructed can be found in Chapter 2 (Methodology).

and can explain them well'. They also exhibit good familiarity with social issues related to migration (79%) and the causes of poverty (73%). Despite the high levels of perceived familiarity with these topics, considerable variation is observed across the case study schools. For example, the percentage reporting a high level of familiarity with environmental issues ranged from a low of 14% to a high of 65% of students.

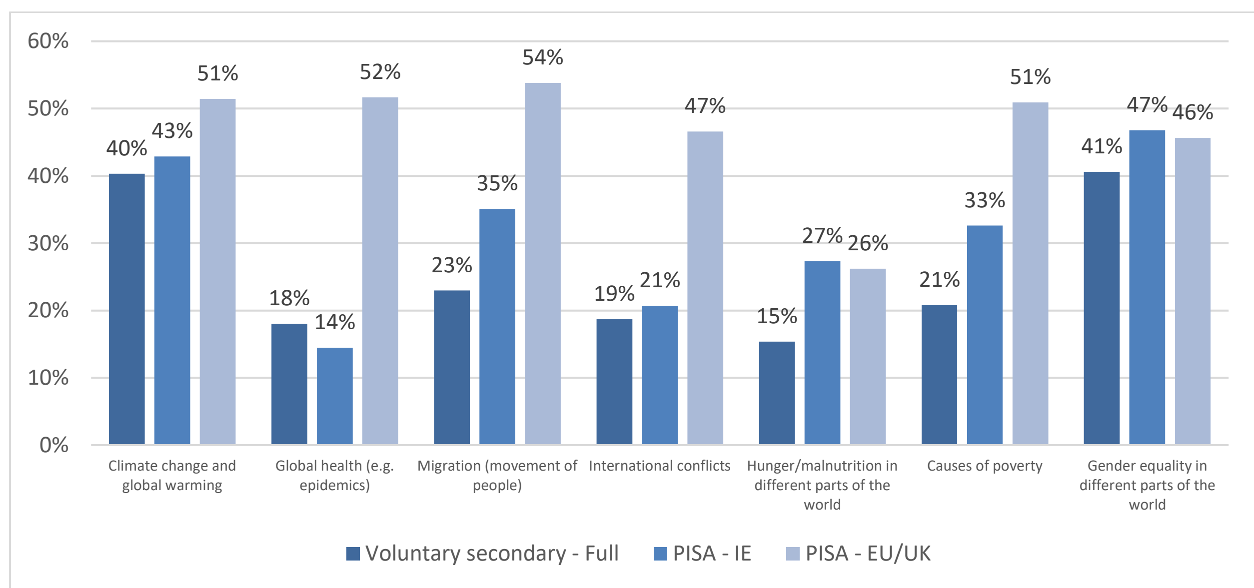
While few students reported never having heard of a particular issue, some topics were recognised but not fully understood by many students. These included politics and government, general equality issues in Ireland, hunger or malnutrition in different parts of the world, international conflicts, and global health.

FIGURE 9.2 STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF A RANGE OF SOCIAL ISSUES AROUND THE WORLD



The same list of questions were also included in the 2018 PISA study. Figure 9.3 below illustrates the percentage of students describing themselves as 'being familiar and able to explain the topic well'. Students in our sample report less familiarity with these topics as compared to students in the EU (including the UK) according to the PISA 2018 study, with sizeable gaps found in terms of perceived awareness of global health issues (18% vs 52%), migration (23% vs 54%) and the causes of poverty (21% vs 51%).

FIGURE 9.3 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS FAMILIAR WITH A RANGE OF SOCIAL ISSUES AROUND THE WORLD, COMPARED WITH PISA DATA



Note: The category 'Voluntary secondary – Full' refers to the full sample of our study including all the responses across second and fifth year students. 'PISA IE' refers to student responses in Ireland in 2018 PISA study, and 'PISA EU/UK' refers to student responses in the EU and UK (excluding Ireland).

We also explored the percentage of students who report being familiar with and capable of explaining environmental issues, such as global warming and climate change, where greater levels of perceived awareness was noted among students from more affluent family backgrounds (e.g., with degree-educated parents or attending non-DEIS schools, especially fee-charging schools).

Gender differences are also apparent, with girls more likely to report greater awareness of gender equality (49% of girls vs 28% of boys stating they are familiar with the topic and can explain it well), general equality issues in Ireland (24% vs 14%), and environmental issues such as climate change (42% vs 37%). Notably, non-Irish students indicate greater familiarity with migration and poverty issues compared to Irish students (38% of non-Irish students vs 21% of Irish students). Moreover, students from non-White backgrounds display more awareness of poverty issues compared to White students (33% of non-White students vs 20% of White students reported familiarity with the causes of poverty).

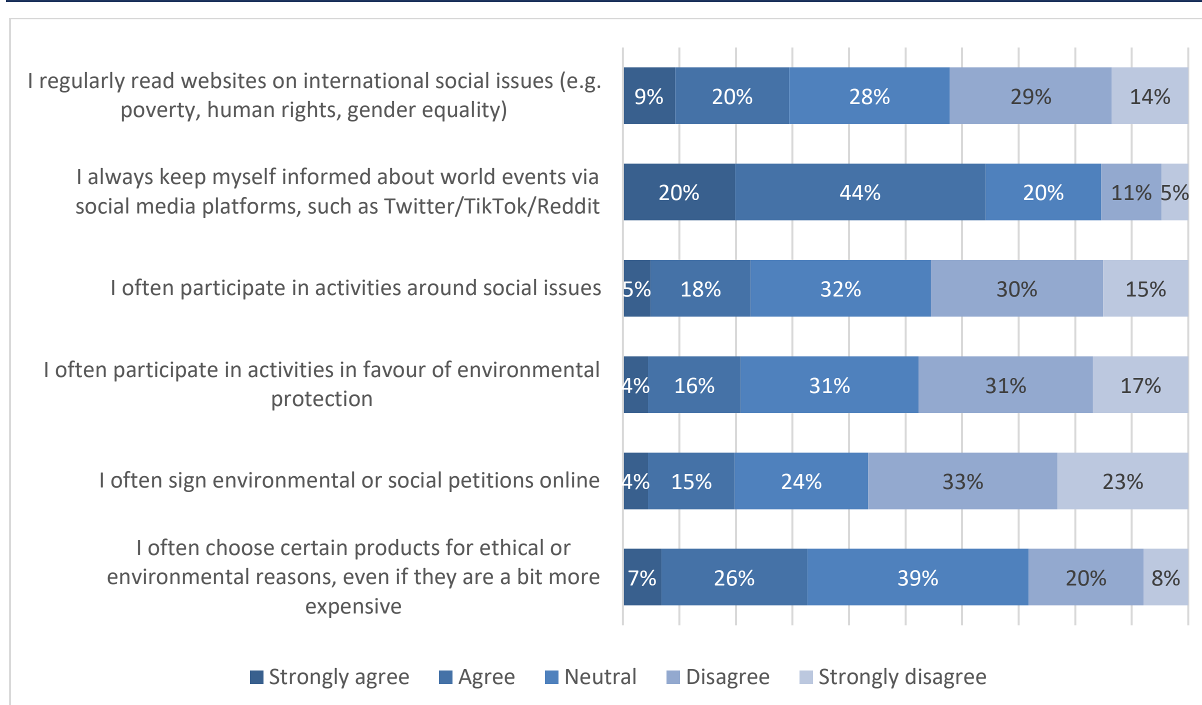
Differences between rural and urban areas are generally not significant across the listed social issues, except for a slightly higher proportion of students in urban areas reporting familiarity with environmental issues such as climate change and global warming (47% in urban areas vs 37% in town or rural areas).[56]

56 This aligns with the findings from the 2018 PISA study on 15 year olds in Ireland, where girls were more aware and familiar with various social issues, including climate change, gender equality, migration, malnutrition and the causes of poverty. No significant differences were observed between rural and urban areas.

Despite students' strong awareness of environmental issues, their reported level of action is comparatively low. Only about three in ten students often choose more expensive products for ethical or environmental reasons (Figure 9.4). Activities such as signing environmental or social petitions online (20%), participating in environmental protection activities (21%) and engaging in social issue-related activities (23%) are less common among students in Ireland.

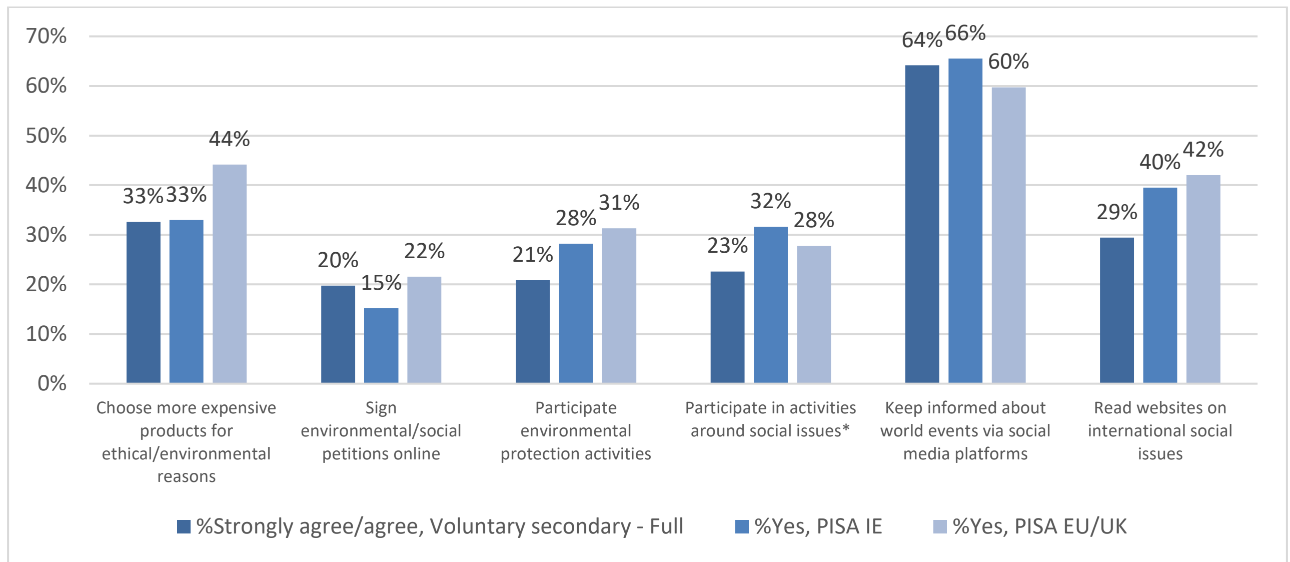
Interestingly, social media platforms have become the primary source of information for the younger generation, with approximately 64% of students (strongly) agreeing that they always keep themselves informed about world events via these platforms. In contrast, only 29% of students reported accessing such information by reading websites on international social issues.

FIGURE 9.4 STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL AWARENESS ACTIVITIES



Compared to the broader population across the EU (including the UK) in the 2018 PISA study (See Figure 9.5), our students showed persistently lower rates of participation in social issue activities, except for seeking information around world events via social media (64% in our sample vs 60% in PISA study at EU level). The differences, however, might be partially attributed to the differing response categories: our sample students were asked to express their agreement level on a scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', while the students in the PISA study were given a binary choice ('yes' or 'no') to indicate simply whether they are involved in these activities.

FIGURE 9.5 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS INVOLVED IN SOCIAL AWARENESS ACTIVITIES, COMPARED WITH PISA DATA



Note: The category 'Voluntary secondary – Full' refers to the full sample of our study including all the responses across second and fifth year students. 'PISA IE' refers to student responses in Ireland in 2018 PISA study, and 'PISA EU/UK' refers to students' responses in the EU and UK (excluding Ireland).

Consistent with the findings from the PISA 2018 study on 15 years olds in Ireland, significant differences in relation to gender and family background were observed. Female students, especially those in single-sex girls' schools, are more likely to participate in these activities. For instance, 35% of girls, compared to 28% of boys, (strongly) agreed that they frequently opt for ethically or environmentally conscious products, even if they are more expensive. Similarly, students attending fee-charging schools, those with degree-educated parents, and those not reporting economic difficulties are also more likely to report such behaviour. No significant differences are observed between rural and urban areas.[57]

Similar patterns were observed across the other activities, with higher levels of social awareness among girls and those from more affluent families.

9.3 PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE SCHOOL

Social, cultural and sporting activities outside school are associated with a range of positive educational, social and physical outcomes for young people (McCoy et al., 2012; Murphy et al., 2020). Students were asked to specify their daily time allocation to a range of activities at home, including interactions with friends and family. As shown in Figure 9.6, most students spent between one-half to two hours with their family (58%) or doing homework (54%). Notably, compared to the broader population included in the GUI study, where only 8% of 13 year olds

[57] This is also in line with the 2018 PISA study on 15 year olds in Ireland, where no significant differences were found between rural areas (areas with less than 15,000 people) and urban areas (areas with more than 15,000 people).

indicated that they spent more than two hours daily doing homework, about 19% of the second year students and 46% of the fifth year students indicated this. It is of concern that most students devoted less than half an hour to reading for pleasure (60%). A similar pattern is also observed among 13 year olds across all school sectors in the GUI study, where only 13% indicated that they read for pleasure daily and 41% did it less than once a week.

Students were also asked about their typical weekday screentime. It is concerning that students in our sample are more likely to spend long hours watching TV/ playing video games; 42% of the students in our sample as opposed to 31% of 13 year olds in the GUI study spend over two hours watching TV per day, and 21% as opposed to 16% in the GUI study spend more than two hours playing video or computer games (see Figure 9.7).

Gender disparities emerged across the various activities. Girls devoted considerably more time to homework (39% of girls compared to 17.4% of boys spent over two hours on homework) and somewhat more time to being with friends (40% of girls compared to 36% of boys spent over two hours with friends). Conversely, boys were more engaged in video/computer games (32% of boys vs 9% of girls) and watching TV/films/videos online (46% of boys vs 40% of girls spending over two hours on an average weekday).

While excessive screentime has been found to have adverse impacts for young people (Dempsey et al., 2020), it is not clear that all such activities are negative, given that this covers a broad spectrum of activities from chess to Fortnite to educational apps. These types of activities may be classified as 'online games' by some but they are likely to be positive and constructive experiences.

FIGURE 9.6 STUDENTS' OUT OF SCHOOL TIME ALLOCATION ON AN AVERAGE WEEKDAY

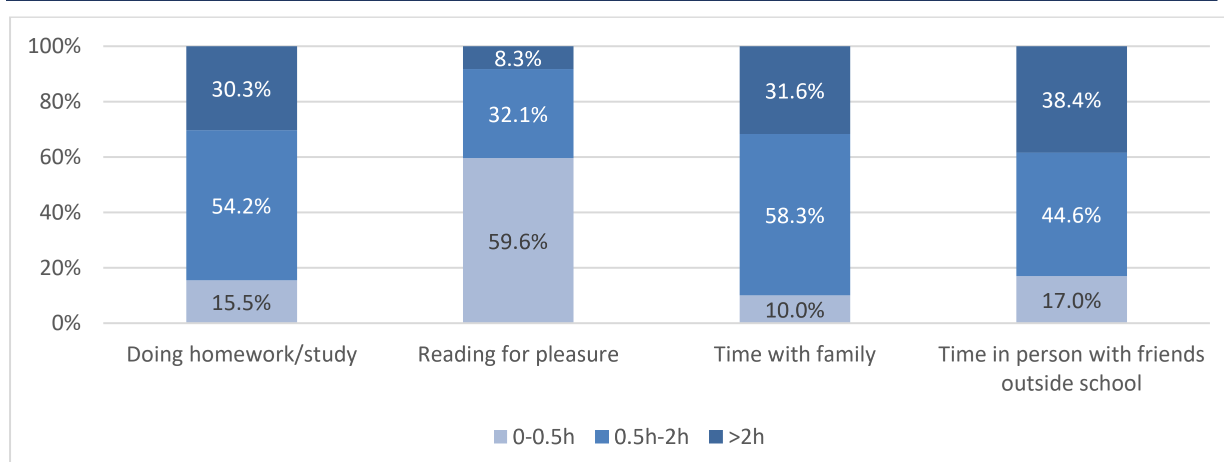
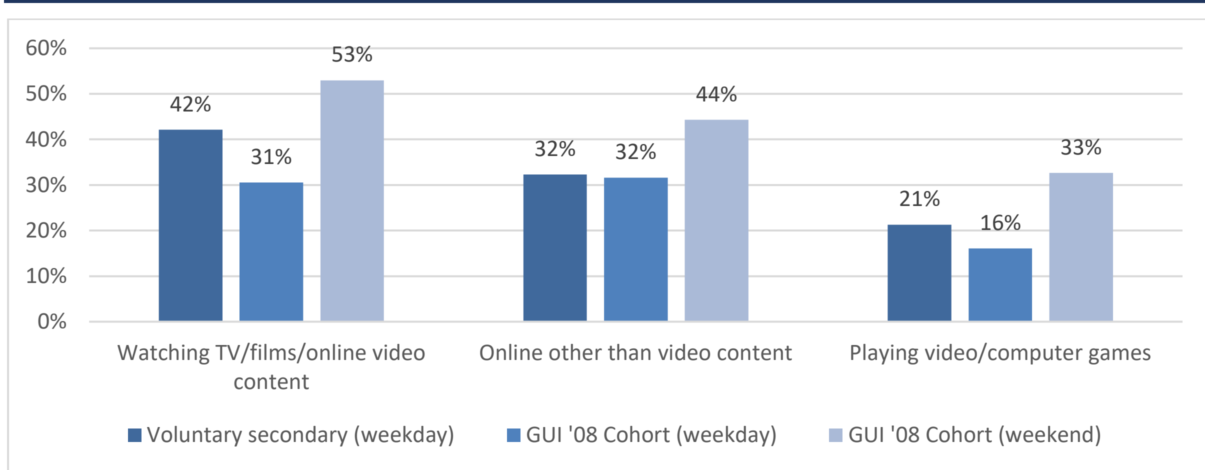


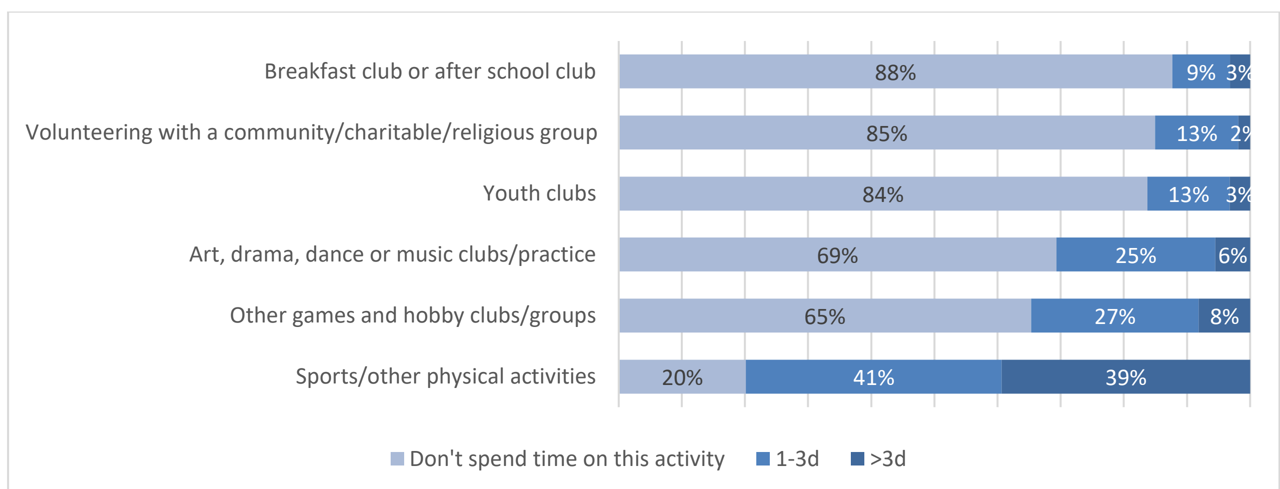
FIGURE 9.7 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS REPORTING MORE THAN 2 HOURS SCREENTIME ON AN AVERAGE WEEKDAY



Source: Survey in voluntary secondary schools, as reported here; GUI 08' Cohort, Wave 6.

Figure 9.8 provides an overview of the extent to which young people engage in different types of sports, cultural and community activities. Consistent with the findings on the broader population included in the GUI study, the most commonly engaged in category is 'sports or other physical activities', with 39% participating in such activities more than three days a week. In contrast, activities like breakfast clubs or afterschool clubs, youth clubs and community/charitable/religious group volunteering are less prevalent, with over 80% of students not participating in any of these.

FIGURE 9.8 TYPES OF ACTIVITIES IN WHICH STUDENT ENGAGE AFTER SCHOOL



Overall, second year students engaged more frequently in various activities at least once a week than fifth year students. Similar to the GUI data on 13 year olds, disparities in sports participation in relation to gender and socioeconomic background are evident. Boys participated in 'physical activities or sports' more

frequently than girls (44% boys vs 36% girls engaged in physical activities more than three days a week). Additionally, students from more advantaged backgrounds, including those with degree-educated parents, without economic difficulties and attending fee-charging schools, are more likely to engage in sports at least once a week (88% vs 73%, 83% vs 69%, 96% vs 77%, respectively). Evident gaps in physical activity levels are also noted between students without and with SEN (82% vs 68%) and between second and fifth year groups (83% vs 76%).

To further understand the factors associated with students' sports participation we used logistic regression models (see Table A11 in the appendix for model results). Consistent with the descriptive findings, gender and socioeconomic background have a significant impact on students' sports participation. Those with degree-educated parents and no economic difficulties are substantially more likely to participate in sports at least weekly (2.5 times and 1.7 times as likely). However, girls, students with SEN and those uncertain about their SEN status are much less likely to engage in sports (0.8 times, 0.4 times and 0.7 times as likely, respectively). Fifth year students are slightly less likely to report weekly sports participation (0.8 times as likely). In Model 2, when accounting for school characteristics, students in fee-charging schools are twice as likely to report sports participation compared to their peers in non-fee-charging schools. Additionally, boys attending single-sex schools are more likely to report sports participation compared to students in coeducational schools. A gendering in sports participation has been reported elsewhere, with McSharry (2017) noting inequalities experienced particularly by girls who attend coeducational secondary schools where specific male sports dominate school life.

Finally, examining the relationship between students' sports participation and other aspects of school life in Model 3, those who had a sense of belonging at school and positive teacher interactions are more likely to participate in sports-based activities at least once a week. Conversely, students who missed more than ten school days are much less likely to engaging in these activities.

Art, drama, dance and music club participation is more common among girls than boys (36% girls vs 23% boys participated these clubs at least once a week). Again, there is social structuring in participation, with students attending fee-charging schools or not experiencing economic difficulties engaged more frequently in these art-related activities. While these findings echo earlier research with primary school students (McCoy et al., 2011), the social structuring in access to cultural activities is perhaps less pronounced among second-level students.

Given the particular policy focus within the DEIS programme, it is important to note that students from less affluent backgrounds (e.g., those facing economic difficulties, with parents of lower educational levels or attending DEIS schools) are

more likely to attend breakfast clubs, afterschool clubs and youth clubs. No significant differences were observed in terms of students' participation in volunteering activities with community or religious groups.

School leaders and teachers across most of the case study schools commended the diversity of extracurricular activities on offer to students and the culture around participation. As seen in Chapter 4, for many stakeholders these activities were central to the overall ethos of the school. Students too were broadly positive about the opportunities open to them. Reflecting the survey results, students, particularly in single-sex settings, spoke with satisfaction in relation to the extracurricular activities available at their school:

> *This is a big sports school. There is an emphasis on every sport. Even if you're not into sports there's something for everyone. Everyone is expected to do PE* [physical education]*, it's treated like an actual subject. We are big fans of this. Chess, music, after school classes and study. The resources are very good.* (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school and single-sex boys' school)

> *Soccer, hurling, football, rugby, golf, badminton. Green school committee, student council, other stuff … there is nothing that we'd like to do that isn't available. There is drama as well for TYs* [Transition Year students] *every year. Debates as well and games club. Speech competitions. We had an art exhibition by students in library. There was a day out for the trad* [music] *group and ceremony for anyone who wanted to pop in from town, that's an example of the community, everyone could come in.* (Second year focus group, non-DEIS school and single-sex boys' school)

> *There are loads of extracurricular stuff on Wednesday afternoons. Loads of sports, guitar lessons. Gifted people do something on a Monday, we have singing and piano as well. We do a clean-up outside, part of the Tidy Towns* [competition]*. We have chess club. There's a library club on Tuesdays and Thursdays.* (Second year focus group, DEIS school and single-sex boys' school)

There was some evidence of a hierarchy in terms of which sports are recognised and valued in a number of schools:

> *They only care about A teams, there is no mention of B teams. Hockey is the most popular sport. In cricket last year people got to the final and nobody knew. We are brought to support hockey and basketball but not other sports. One student won a cup at* [name of a music

> competition] *and nothing was said. The lunchtime concert was never mentioned.* (Second year focus group, fee charging school)

In a number of schools, students indicated that they would benefit from more diverse, arts-based activities in their school:

> *I think more of diverse sports options or diverse art options in school, I think would be really interesting. And would help people grow in terms of their minds and develop as people*. (Fifth year focus group, non-DEIS school).

School leaders and teachers were very conscious of the importance of diverse extracurricular activities, including non-sporting activities:

> *This school has a focus on non-sporting extracurricular activities – hobby clubs, Model UN, politics, environment, debating, Minecraft. If you name it there's an extracurricular activity opportunity there. Then you have your sporting activities as well. It is a nice balance and gives all types of students an opportunity to engage and build relationships.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

Teachers too recognised the importance of extracurricular participation, and were happy to give their time, which allowed them to develop a rapport with students outside of the confines of the classroom:

> *People give so willingly of their time in terms of extracurricular – not just sport but music and drama. I enjoy the lads, they're good lads. It helps that I see them out and about – going to matches, playing matches at weekends. You have that rapport with them. Also being interested in sport you can talk about that. The rapport with students would be a big part of it*. (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

However, a number of school personnel highlighted constraints in terms of resources to support extracurricular provision in their schools. In particular, interviewees felt that 'trying to provide a quality extracurricular programme relies entirely on goodwill and I don't think that's sustainable' (Teacher, non-DEIS school).

Finally, school leaders in a number of schools pointed to what they saw as serious shortcomings in terms of physical infrastructure and the absence of a sports hall, which greatly impacted their capacity to support student wellbeing and development. This issue is addressed at length in Chapter 10, where we discuss funding challenges facing schools in the voluntary secondary sector.

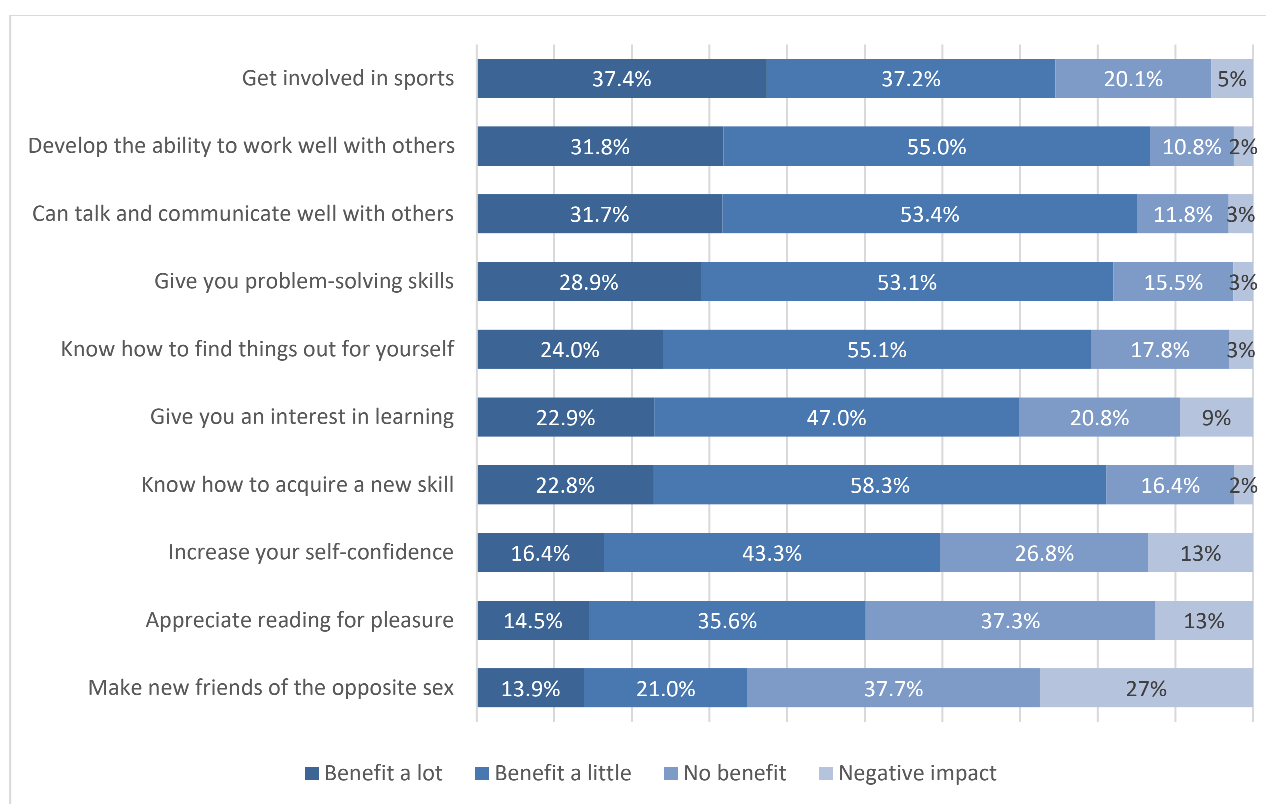
9.4 BENEFITS OF SECOND LEVEL EDUCATION

Overall, students are broadly positive in terms of how their schools contribute to different aspects of their development (Figure 9.9). They report that school is helpful in terms of making new friends (87%), developing teamwork (87%), communication (85%), language (83%), and problem-solving skills (82%). They also report that their schools support them in acquiring new skills (81%) and finding things out for themselves (79%). Additionally, students appreciate their schools' support in terms of getting involved in sports (75%), the development of digital skills (73%), and fostering an interest in learning (70%). Similar positive responses are also notable in the 2022 PISA study, with 81% of students in Ireland reporting that they make friends easily at school, against an OECD average of 76% (OECD, 2023b).[58] However, students in our study are somewhat less positive in relation to building self-confidence (60%) and promoting reading for pleasure (50%). Notably, only one-third of students felt their schools help them make friends of the opposite sex (35%).

Meanwhile, notable differences between schools are observed. For example, the percentage of students who feel their school supports their involvement in sports ranged from a low of 57% to a high of 94% across the case study schools.

58 The results here should be interpreted with caution as there were slight differences in the way this was asked: students in the PISA 2022 study were asked to what extent they agree with, 'I make friends easily at school', with responses ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'; students the survey reported here were asked, 'In general, do you think that your school benefits you in helping you to make new friends?', with responses ranging from 'yes, (benefit) a lot' to 'negative impact'.

FIGURE 9.9 PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF SCHOOL IN TERMS OF SKILLS DEVELOPMENT



Among the voluntary secondary school cohort, fifth year students hold more positive views in terms of school promoting their skill development. For instance, fifth year students express greater positivity regarding their schools' ability to foster an interest in learning, as compared to second year students (74% vs 67%). Among these students, boys, particularly those attending single-sex schools, reported much more favourable responses across several aspects. For instance, 68% of boys, compared to 54% of girls, felt that their schools helped enhance their self-confidence. In particular, boys attending single-sex schools displayed greater positivity, with 74% acknowledging their schools' role in cultivating self-confidence, whereas 56% in single-sex girls' schools and 52% of students in coeducational schools were similarly positive. Moreover, students who did not experience economic difficulties (62% vs 53%) and those without SEN (61% vs 55%) are more inclined to report positive responses. School climate seems to play a role here. Students in schools characterised by having a stronger ethos and more diverse and interactive teaching methods are more likely to view their schools as instrumental in fostering self-confidence (67% vs 38%, and 70% vs 57%, respectively). The role of teaching methodologies in student academic, personal and social development is discussed further in Chapter 11.

The patterns are broadly similar for students' perceptions of other skill domains, except in the case of making friends with members of the opposite sex. In this

respect, more positive responses emerged from second year students, those with SEN, and those from less advantaged backgrounds and attending DEIS schools. Not surprisingly, compared to single-sex schools, students in coeducational schools were much more positive about their schools helping them make friends of the opposite sex (79% vs 18%).

We further explored the factors underlying student perceptions of their school's role in supporting reading for pleasure in multivariate models (see detailed model results in Table A12 in the appendix). Students with university-educated parents are more likely to believe that their school has helped them appreciate reading for fun, while no significant gender or SEN-related differences were observed. This echoes recent research in Denmark showing that girls read more than boys, but the differential is attributed to girls reading more outside school hours, during weekends and holidays than boys, with no gender differences observed in reading activity during school hours (Smith and Reimer, 2023). Moreover, fifth year students are slightly less likely to feel the same way (0.9 times as likely). Challenges around finding any time for reading were echoed in some of the focus groups:

> *I can't remember the last time I read a book that wasn't compulsory for school. Like, reading for my own pleasure, or whatever, to be able to actually just sit down and read a book, I can't do that anymore because I have so much work to do, and it's just consistently sit at the kitchen table, do my homework.* (Fifth year focus group, DEIS school)

When accounting for school characteristics in Model 2, students in DEIS schools are much more positive about their school's role in promoting reading, highlighting the emphasis on literacy skills within the DEIS programme. Additionally, girls in single-sex schools are twice as likely as students in coeducational schools to believe their school has helped them appreciate reading for fun. Finally, more positive views on school supporting reading are reported where students indicate positive teacher expectations, positive teacher interactions, as well as attending schools with a strong ethos.

Our descriptive results show that boys, particularly those in single-sex boys' schools, are much more positive about their school supporting their involvement in sports compared to their peers in single-sex girls' and, particularly, mixed schools (84% in boys' schools vs 75% in girls' schools vs 65% in coeducational schools). Notable gaps are also observed between students attending fee-charging schools and other schools (85% vs 72%). This is confirmed in model results, which we run separately for boys and girls. When examining boys' perceptions of their school benefitting them in sports participation, students attending a fee-charging school are almost twice as likely to report a positive response. Support for sports participation is also higher among those reporting positive teacher interactions,

positive social engagement, attending schools with a student-led ethos and schools with stronger ethos (See detailed results in Table A13.1 in the appendix).[59]

Similarly, when examining perceptions of the extent to which their school benefited them in terms of sports participation for girls, there is a positive association with attending fee-charging schools (2.5 times as likely). Girls in single-sex settings are also more likely to perceive that their school supports their sports participation compared to girls in coeducational settings. These findings again align with earlier research showing inequalities experienced particularly by girls who attend coeducational secondary schools where specific male sports dominate school life (McSharry, 2017). Other factors positively associated with this include positive school engagement and positive social engagement. Notably, compared to those in non-DEIS schools, girls in DEIS schools are significantly more likely to perceive school benefits in sports participation (2.8 times as likely); see detailed results in Table A13.2 in the appendix.

The issue also arose in a number of focus groups with students. In one coeducational school, second year students argued that there are fewer sports available for girls and three out of four girls in the focus group would have chosen a single-sex girls' school if they had known before they enrolled:

> *It's not ideal for girls, there is not enough for girls … We have volleyball, basketball, football … If we had more variety there might be more people joining. …* [In a neighbouring girls' schools] *they would have really good sports teams so a lot of people would tend to go to them.* (Second year focus group, DEIS school)

As McSharry (2017) notes, there appears to be a normalisation of physical differences between boys and girls as the basis for unequal recognition and resourcing of girls' sport in certain, particularly coeducational, schools.

9.5 STUDENT WELLBEING AND LIFE SATISFACTION

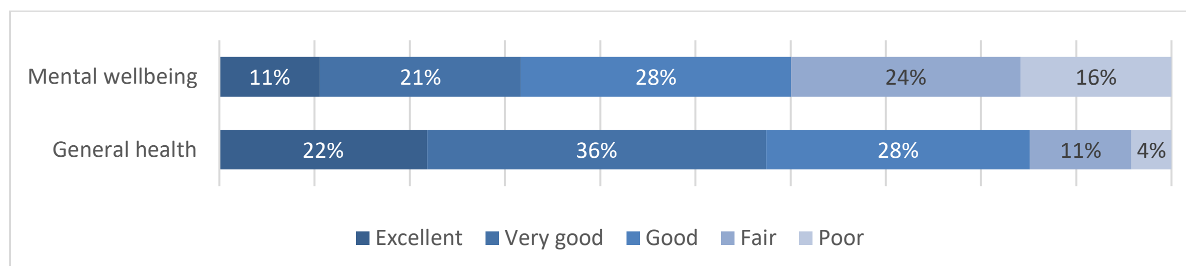
9.5.1 Self-assessed wellbeing

Eighty-five percent of students assessed their general health as 'excellent,' 'very good,' or 'good' (Figure 9.10). However, only 60% expressed the same level of positivity in assessing their mental wellbeing. Students without SEN, those without economic difficulties and boys (particularly in single-sex boys' schools) reported more positive responses regarding their general health. School climate also seems

[59] The student-led school ethos measure is constructed based on three of the individual measures: 'I am encouraged to make up my own mind'; 'I am encouraged to express my opinions'; and 'I am encouraged to discuss the issues with people having different opinions'. Details of how this measure is constructed can be found in Chapter 2 (Methodology).

to play a role, with positive responses more prevalent among students attending schools perceived as having a stronger ethos (94% vs 83%), as well as among students who were more engaged at school (93% vs 79%). Similar patterns were observed in terms of how well students assessed their mental wellbeing.

FIGURE 9.10 STUDENTS' SELF-ASSESSED GENERAL HEALTH AND MENTAL WELLBEING



9.5.2 Life satisfaction

Students were also asked to rate their satisfaction with life and personal relationships on a scale of one ('not satisfied at all') to ten ('completely satisfied'). On average, they reported a satisfaction level of 6.5 for life and 6.7 for personal relationships. Approximately 16.9% rated their satisfaction with life between one and four, and 16.2% rated their satisfaction with personal relationships between one and four. The patterns among these voluntary secondary students are largely comparable to results across all school types within the GUI study.

Recent years have seen a general decline in student satisfaction with life, across many countries and economies. On average across OECD countries, the proportion of students who are not satisfied with life increased from 11% in 2015 to 16% in 2018 and 18% in 2022. The figure for Ireland in 2022 was 19% of students reporting dissatisfaction with their life, with these students rating their satisfaction with life between zero and four on a scale ranging from zero to ten. In 2018, about the same proportion of students (18%) were found to be unsatisfied with life here.

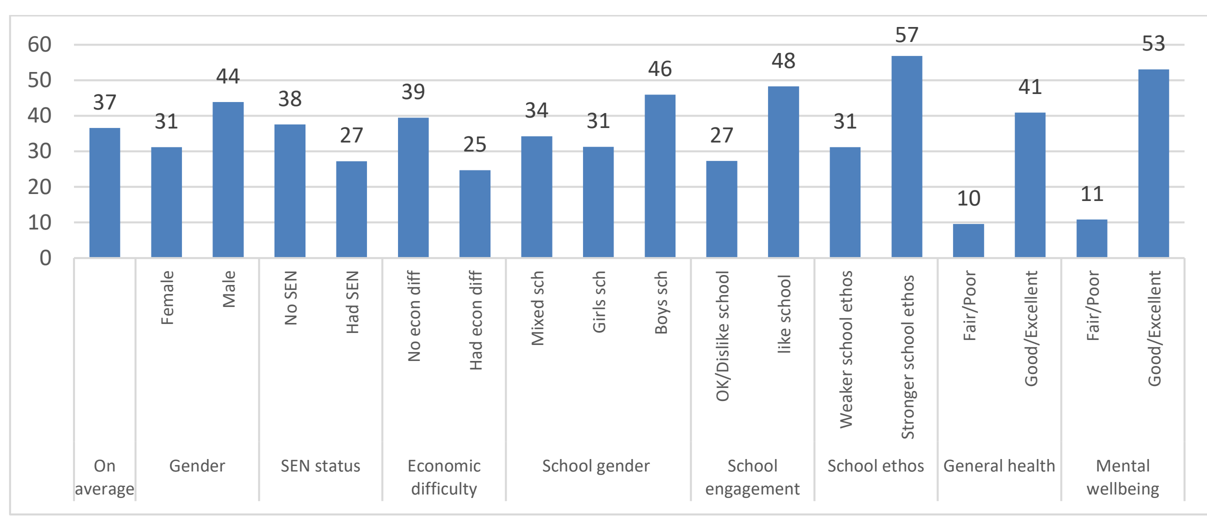
When we consider the extent to which life satisfaction levels vary, we find differences by gender and family background characteristics (see Figure 9.11). Boys, in particular those in single-sex boys' schools and those without economic difficulties, tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction, defined as eight or above on the scale (46% of those in single-sex boys' schools vs 34% in coeducational schools vs 31% s in single-sex girls' schools; 40% of those without economic difficulties vs 25% with economic difficulties). Similar patterns are also observed among students across all school types within the GUI study. Additionally, students without SEN are more likely to report higher life satisfaction than their peers with SEN (38% vs 27%). As is to be expected, life satisfaction is closely related to perceived health and mental wellbeing, with considerably more positive responses found in students reporting good general health and mental wellbeing.

School characteristics also play a role, with students attending schools seen as having a stronger ethos and those who have positive school engagement reporting higher levels of life satisfaction (57% of students in schools with stronger school ethos vs 31% of students in schools with weaker school ethos, and 48% of students who like school vs 27% who dislike school). These patterns also apply to students' satisfaction with their personal relationships.

To further unpack the factors associated with students' life satisfaction, we conducted logistic regression modelling (See Table A14 in the appendix for detailed results). Girls, those with SEN and those not sure about their SEN status are only around half as likely to rate their life satisfaction as eight or above. While those without economic difficulties are 1.5 times as likely to report higher satisfaction. Fifth year students are only 0.8 times as likely to rate their life satisfaction level as eight or above compared to second year students.

While there are no school type effects, those who feel that they belong at school, who report positive teacher interactions, attend schools with a strong school ethos, and perceive their school as having good wellbeing supports, are more likely to report a high life satisfaction level. In contrast, those who felt that school is a place where they experienced unhappiness are only 0.6 times as likely to report high life satisfaction compared to their peers who did not feel the same. Sports participation has a positive impact on students' wellbeing, with those who participated in sports at least once a week being 1.4 times as likely to report higher life satisfaction. Participation in art/cultural activities is also positively associated with wellbeing. Students' experiences during COVID-19 also matter, with those who always had parental help with schoolwork during COVID-19 being 1.4 times as likely to report a high life satisfaction. However, those who reported an enduring COVID-19 impact on their wellbeing are only half as likely to be satisfied with their life.

FIGURE 9.11 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WITH LIFE SATISFACTION LEVELS ABOVE 8



9.5.3 Outlook for the future: Excitement or worry

Fifth year students were also asked whether they feel more excited or worried when considering the next five years. Thirty-nine per cent stated that they were either really excited or excited about their future, 24% indicated a neutral response and 37% reported being (really) worried about their future. Significant variations at the school level are observed, with levels of concern about the future ranging from a low of 17% to a high of 51%, and the share of students expressing excitement ranging from 40% to 65% across the case study schools.

Girls showed more concern about their future compared to boys. Specifically, 42% of girls were worried, while only 28% of boys expressed this emotion. Conversely, 45% of boys were excited, compared to 37% of girls. Similarly, students with SEN displayed higher levels of concern about their future compared to their peers without SEN (49% with SEN vs 35% without SEN). In contrast, 28% of students with SEN were excited, compared to 41% of students without SEN.

Family background also appears to shape how students feel about the future. Those facing economic difficulties displayed more worry, with 45% feeling concerned compared to 34% without economic difficulties. Conversely, 30% of economically vulnerable students were excited about their future, compared to 42% of students without economic difficulties. Similarly, students with degree-educated parents are more likely to report feeling excited about their future (44% vs 36%) and less likely to report feeling worried (33% vs 40%) compared to their peers with parents without a degree.

Table A15.1 in the appendix examines factors related to feeling worried among fifth year students, and Table A15.2 explores factors related to feeling excited about the future, both using logistic regression models.

Variation in terms of student gender and SEN status on student worry about the future is confirmed. Girls are twice as likely and students with SEN are 1.7 times as likely to be worried about their future. Family background, such as economic difficulties, does not seem to play a significant role. The gender and SEN impacts persist when school characteristics were taken into account. Additionally, those who reported a lasting COVID-19 impact on their overall learning and those planning to pursue higher education after leaving school are nearly twice as likely to express worry about their future (1.7 times and 1.9 times as likely). Positive school engagement is also associated with this, as students with positive school engagement are only half as likely to report high levels of worry about their future.

Factors impacting students' excitement about their future differ slightly. Considering only student characteristics, students with SEN and those uncertain about their SEN status are significantly less likely to be excited about their future (0.5 times and 0.6 times as likely). Conversely, students with degree-educated parents are more likely to report high excitement levels about their future (1.4 times as likely). Where other aspects of school life were considered, students with positive school engagement were found to be substantially more likely to be excited about their future (2.3 times as likely). Having a strong academic self-image and access to parental help with schoolwork during COVID-19 (introduced for this model) are also positively associated with students' excitement about their future. The gender impact, on the other hand, is mediated by school experiences.

It is interesting to note that for both life satisfaction and outlook for the future (worry or excitement) we don't find any significant variations by school gender mix. In line with studies elsewhere (DeAngelia and Dills, 2021, we find that schools serving more socioeconomically advantaged populations, particularly fee-charging schools, have a lower likelihood that individuals report mental health difficulties. Our evidence also points to a positive impact of schools in supporting student wellbeing, particularly schools which are part of the DEIS programme. The implications will be discussed further in Chapter 11.

These models highlight the importance of positive school engagement in fostering a positive outlook for the future. Furthermore, the pronounced impact of SEN (increased worry and decreased excitement about the future) suggests that students with SEN may require additional support to facilitate both positive school experiences and successful transition into post-school education, training or adult day service settings.

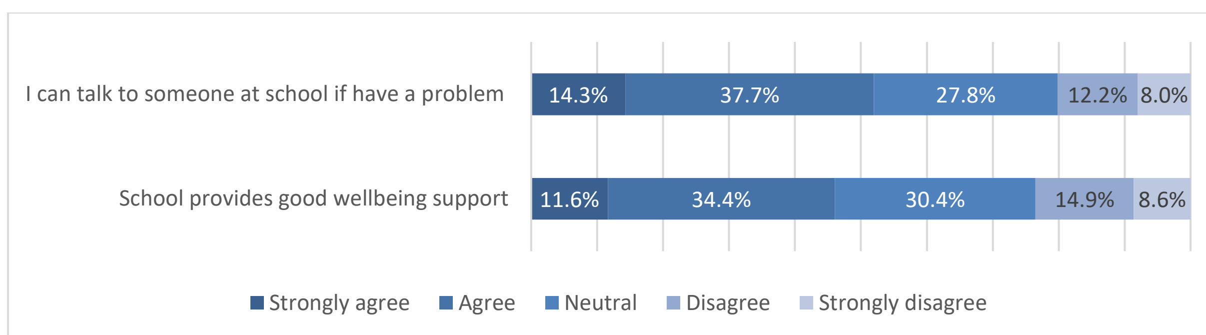
9.5.4 Wellbeing supports at school

While students generally reflect positively in relation to the role their schools play in their skills development, only 46% (strongly) agree that their school provides adequate wellbeing supports (see Figure 9.12). Slightly over half agreed that they

can talk to someone at school when facing problems. These results may reflect a lack of specialised socio-emotional supports at school or a reluctance among students to seek support when they are in need. The results further point to the need for therapeutic supports for students across the school system.

Concerning school wellbeing supports, boys reported more positive responses compared to girls (55% of boys vs 39% of girls are positive). Furthermore, students with higher levels of school engagement were more likely to report positive responses compared to their less engaged peers. For instance, 55% of students not experiencing any conflict with their teachers, as opposed to 44% of those who experienced conflict, agreed that there is good wellbeing support at their school. Similarly, 61% of students who indicated that they like their school, in contrast to 35% of those who dislike school, reflect positively on the wellbeing supports available. Similar trends were observed in relation to students' willingness to seek help from their teachers.

FIGURE 9.12 STUDENTS' REFLECTIONS ON SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS AT THEIR SCHOOL



School leaders and teachers spoke of the importance of wellbeing supports at their school.

> *We have a lot of wellbeing subjects in school. We also like to offer a really diverse range of extracurriculars to cater for wellbeing. We would have other sports, such as chess club, riding club, that gives students the opportunities to meet other students of similar interests. That all contributes to wellbeing. We would have student support teams in place that would be mindful of certain students who are a little bit more at risk. Our home school liaison would be helpful in terms of linking in with home–school life and ensuring that there's proper support and place for those students who do need the typical support at a certain time in their life.* (Principal, DEIS school)

However, a number of interviewees raised concerns over the adequacy of professional development for teachers to deliver wellbeing programmes:

> *A wellbeing programme is great but the teacher doing it is a history teacher or a maths teacher and this is sellotaped on – brilliant in concept but reality is that delivering a really meaningful programme is actually quite challenging. The reality for teachers is they have deadlines to meet in their subject and that's obviously going to be their focus. They didn't set out to be wellbeing teachers.* (Principal, fee charging school)

> *The wellbeing thing angers me because I see what it is, it's an extension of SPHE* [social, personal and health education]*, it's not what wellbeing should be. Plus, the teachers aren't qualified to do it. Yet it's going to take up a third of the time.* (HSCL officer, DEIS school)

> *It's a holding process right now in schools. And the teachers don't have the skills to hold. There is no general adolescent counselling, it's really really bad. There's nothing … for anyone.* (Guidance counsellor, Fee-charging school)

The wider importance of building resilience and equipping young people to meet challenges through life was also raised:

> *In relation to anxiety, sometimes I feel we are feeding it to a certain extent, it's almost become if I don't have anxiety now I am the odd one out … I think we need to look more at, 'well what makes you happy, keep doing it' … We have all become the snowplough and we don't let the kids experience a friendship fallout without rowing in and trying to fix it for them … You are not always going to win the race, I think you have to accept that. We need to step back in order to give the children more resilience, that is part of the problem. I think social media is a huge part of the problem and I think COVID has contributed in some way, but it is not entirely responsible.* (SEN co-ordinator, non-DEIS school)

Academics have pointed to a growing interest in school-based 'positive education' programmes which focus on helping young people to flourish in life using best practices in education. Socio-emotional learning curricula that aim to explicitly teach coping skills and resilience, and raise awareness of the importance of students' strengths, self-determination, positive relationships and emotions, are becoming more mainstream within schools (Rickard et al., 2023). A review by Weare and Nind (2011) identified school-based mental health programmes that were embedded within a whole-school approach as most likely to be effective, with changes to school culture, teaching skills, parental education and community involvement all crucial. Murphy et al.'s (2017) review of large-scale school-based mental health interventions in the US further reveals that successful school-based

interventions require easy access, relevance to local settings, penetration and adoption, alongside an effective evaluative framework aligning implementation and outcome measures. In a European context, Cefai et al. (2022) highlight the importance of adequately trained, resourced and mentored teachers for implementing an effective school-based mental health promotion programme. They identified significant increases in social and emotional competence, and prosocial behaviour, and a decrease in mental health issues (externalising and internalising problems) among students exposed to school-based interventions, irrespective of their social background.

In Ireland, various school-based programmes, guidelines, and initiatives have been established to support student wellbeing.[60] For instance, NEPS has developed several wellbeing guidance documents to assist teachers and school staff in understanding and managing stress or school refusal behaviours. NEPS has also created school-based anxiety prevention and resilience-building programmes known as Friends programmes, comprising Fun Friends, Friends for Life, and My Friends Youth, all of which are aimed at helping students develop resilience through effective coping strategies, problem-solving, and emotional distress management. Another NEPS programme, Setting Up a Social Skills Training Group, offers guidance for primary and post-primary schools in teaching and enhancing students' social and behavioural skills. The HSE initiative Mind Our Minds outlines how young people can advocate for the importance of mental health in their schools and local communities.

9.6 PLANS AND OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

9.6.1 Post school plans

Fifth year students were asked about their post-school plans, with the majority planning to go to university (including technological universities) (75%). Significant differences were observed based on individual, family and school characteristics. Girls are much more likely to plan to pursue higher education than boys (80% girls vs 69% boys), while students with SEN are much less likely to plan for higher education (53% vs 79%). Moreover, students from more affluent family backgrounds (i.e., those with degree-educated parents, not experiencing any economic difficulties, attending a non-DEIS school, especially a fee-charging school) are also more likely to plan to attend higher education.

Other post-school pathways include enrolling on a further education and training course or an apprenticeship programme, getting a job, taking time out or travelling,

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60 Retrieved from Department of Education webpage, 'Catalogue of wellbeing resources for post-primary schools', https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a9118-catalogue-of-wellbeing-resources-for-schools/.

or taking on caring responsibilities at home. However, the numbers are too small to report differences across student groups.

School personnel and students alike spoke of the extent to which they felt prepared for life after school. While many were looking forward to the next step, concerns were raised by staff regarding the emotional readiness of students, particularly students with additional needs:

> *Looking at the emotional kind of support to students with SEN that we are preparing them for life after school. There is a focus on literacy and numeracy. I get all that, but it is not just about that. It is preparing them with the skills and the confidence so that when they leave us, they can go on and feel comfortable in an area that they are confident in. I just feel that for students with SEN, their Leaving Cert programme as it stands is overloaded.* (SENCO, non-DEIS school)

Parents too raised concerns about how well-prepared young people are for life after school:

> *Things are getting tougher for kids out there in every respect. There's always a challenge on schools to try and prepare kids for the future. Everything* [is getting tougher], *God. It's tougher to have the confidence to make a go of it themselves, taking responsibility for themselves, be punctual, account for their own money. A lot of life lessons have to be learnt in school, it's a big world out there.* (Parent, DEIS school)

9.7 SUMMARY

Chapter 9 offers a comprehensive overview of broader social and personal development within schools, including student citizenship education and awareness of key global issues, extracurricular activities, overall wellbeing and life satisfaction, as well as post-school plans and outlook for the future (for fifth year students). Students displayed a high level of respect for different cultures and awareness of global issues. Gender and SEN status played a prominent role, along with school climate, in influencing cultural and social awareness. Despite strong environmental awareness, students' reported engagement in related activities remained low, emphasising the need for a school culture that values diversity and structured programmes to promote social awareness and involvement.

This chapter also examines activities outside of school that impact young people's wellbeing. It is concerning that many students devoted very limited time to leisure reading but had excessive screen time (although some online activities may have

educational benefits). While most students actively participated in sports and physical activities, engagement in activities such as breakfast or afterschool clubs, youth clubs or community/charitable group volunteering was less prevalent. Gender disparities persisted, with boys favouring sports and girls engaging in arts-related activities. Socioeconomic factors, along with school characteristics, further influenced student's participation in these activities, underscoring the importance of offering inclusive extracurricular activities.

The development of various skills at school was also explored. Students were broadly positive in terms of how their schools contributed to different aspects of their development, especially in terms of their personal and interpersonal skills such as making new friends, developing teamwork, communication, language and problem-solving skills. However, they were somewhat less positive regarding their school's role in building self-confidence, promoting reading for pleasure and making friends of the opposite sex.

When examining perceptions of the extent to which their school benefited them in terms of sports participation, girls in fee-charging schools are substantially more likely to perceive school benefits in sports participation, as are girls in single-sex settings compared to those in coeducational settings. These findings align with earlier research showing inequalities experienced particularly by girls who attend coeducational secondary schools where specific male sports dominate school life (McSharry, 2017).

This chapter also explores students' overall wellbeing and life satisfaction. While students reported positive general health, they were less positive about their mental wellbeing and exhibited average life satisfaction levels. Notable differences emerged in relation to gender, SEN status, socioeconomic factors and school climate. However, we don't find any school context effects, unlike in other countries. The relatively low level of mental wellbeing might be attributed to the lasting impact of COVID-19, increased academic pressures and a perception of inadequate wellbeing supports at school. The potential detrimental impact of increased technology use is also noted here, particularly smartphones, on students' wellbeing, along with insufficient professional development for teachers to deliver effective wellbeing programmes.

This chapter examines fifth year students' post-school plans and their outlook for the future. Girls, students without SEN and those from more affluent family backgrounds are more likely to plan to pursue higher education. Gender, SEN status and socioeconomic factors also influenced their outlook, with higher levels of worry and lower levels of excitement among girls and those with SEN. Notably, positive school engagement helped foster excitement and reduce worry about the future.

CHAPTER 10

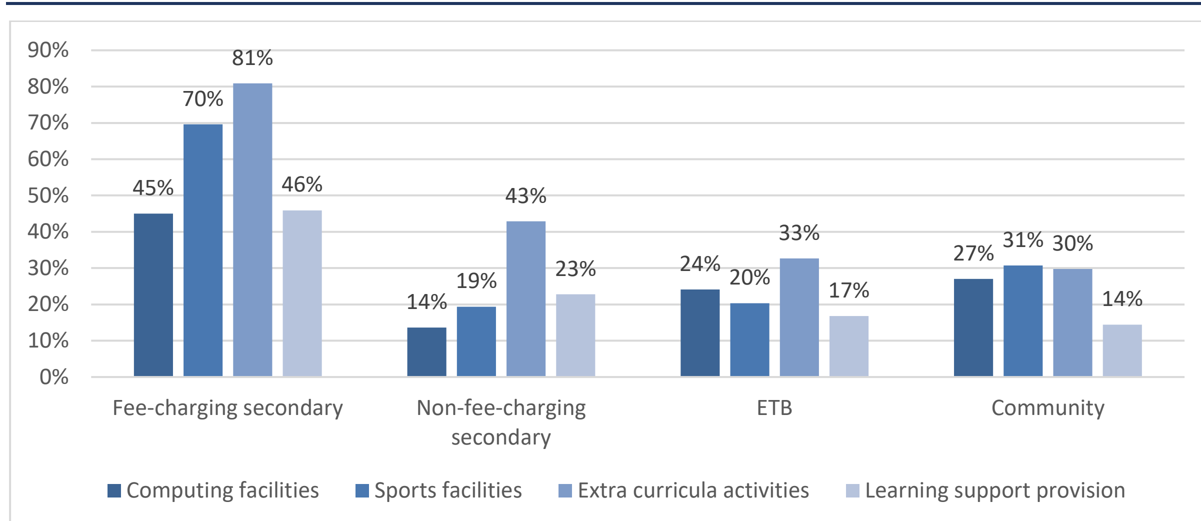
Key challenges and strengths

We started this study with a number of core research questions to guide our work. One of the key questions is: What major challenges are these schools facing? While a diversity of challenges, both within and outside the classroom, have been explored over the course of this report, this chapter addresses a number of over-arching challenges facing schools in the voluntary secondary sector. The most significant challenges currently relate to funding and leadership demands. The chapter concludes with some key strengths within these schools and with wider stakeholders that emerged during the research, providing an optimistic note with which to conclude the presentation of results.

10.1 RESOURCES AND FUNDING

As part of the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study, school principals were asked to rate the quality of a diverse range of facilities at their school. As with earlier analyses, the data allow a valuable comparison of the experiences of schools in the voluntary secondary sector with those in the other sectors. The results show stark differences in the perceived adequacy of facilities within and across the sectors. In terms of computing facilities, just 14% of students in non-fee-charging voluntary secondary schools are in schools where principals rate the facilities as excellent. This compares to 24% in Education and Training Board (ETB) schools, 27% in community and comprehensive (C&C) schools and 45% in fee-charging voluntary secondary schools. Non-fee-charging voluntary secondary schools are also lowest in terms of the percentage in schools with excellent sports facilities – just 19% compared to 31% in C&C schools and 70% in fee-charging schools. Despite the relatively poorer facilities, principals in non-fee-charging secondary schools are more likely to rate the extracurricular activities as excellent – 43% in non-fee-charging voluntary secondary schools, 81% in fee-charging schools, 33% in ETB schools and 31% in C&C schools. More students in the voluntary secondary sector attend schools where principals indicate the learning support facilities (for students with additional needs) are excellent: 23% and 46% in non-fee-charging and fee-charging voluntary secondary schools, compared to 17% and 14% in ETB and community schools, respectively.

FIGURE 10.1 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS WHERE FACILITIES ARE RATED AS EXCELLENT BY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS



Sources: Survey in voluntary secondary schools, as reported here; GUI 08 'Cohort, Wave 6.

As noted in Chapter 1, capital investment in the voluntary secondary sector since 2020 has totalled €850 million out of a total of €1.9 billion provided at post-primary level. However, in our interviews, a number of areas of investment have been criticised as lacking policy rigour and adequate investment. Education stakeholders and school personnel repeatedly raised concerns over the system of funding for the different school types, and the persistence of inequities therein. Differences in the allocation of resources were seen to have a very direct impact on the day-to-day running of schools in the voluntary secondary sector. Despite the significant level of investment, more needs to be done in relation to both capacity and modernisation.

> *I do think that fee-paying schools are a different category and should be treated differently, very differently. But* [for] *everybody else there should be a flat equation about what you get, when you get it and how you get it. … That affects allocations, specialisms, finances and even facilities. We will always be fighting for better facilities. … There's not parity, there's a problem there.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *It is just shocking how the difference between the systems where it's such a disadvantage. I used to have it broken down what the difference is per student. I don't anymore, I just get so upset over it. … It is frustrating to see the difference in funding.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

This sentiment is echoed in stakeholder interviews, emphasising the need for greater state funding due to the responsibilities shared by trusts in the voluntary secondary sector.

> *A lot of the work that we do in different jurisdictions would actually be done by the Department of Education. So we would feel that there certainly should be some contribution to the running costs of the trusts by the Department.* (Stakeholder interview)

These differences were seen to impact student experience, and the provision of a range of facilities and resources, including relating to information and communication technology (ICT), despite the funding allocated to support the Digital Strategy for Schools (DSS, €210 million through an ICT infrastructure grant fully delivered since 2016):

> *It's unequal, it's unfair … it's definitely an impediment to the development of our school … I'm introducing a school lotto, to ty to fund school development … for example, student social seating so they can sit somewhere at lunchtime and talk and meet … for that not to be funded by the State is disgusting … There is an impact on the student experience, ICT in the classrooms, particularly for the teacher and their use of ICT and their access to tools that would enhance their teaching.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

While the capitation grant is intended to cover school day-to-day running expenses, interviews with school leaders have revealed ongoing concerns regarding meeting daily expenses such as heating and insurance, especially in light of recent cost increases.

> *School funding is becoming particularly difficult; it's difficult under the energy heading, it's becoming ever more difficult under the insurance heading, because of construction inflation in our economy in the last two years has left many places undervalued in terms of insurance, and therefore the averaging clause in all of our insurance policies is sitting out there like a grenade with the pin out.* (Board of management member, non-DEIS school)

> *We tend to go from one emergency works project to another, because we're not in a position to fund this ourselves. I suppose a lot of parents don't understand that either, because they think that the nuns have plenty of money and they don't realise that so much has changed from 1965. We have a responsibility to make sure that the building is safe and warm, and yet costs are phenomenal, the running costs.* (Principal, DEIS school)

The maintenance of safe and well-equipped school buildings was also discussed. As mentioned in Chapter 1, approximately 300 projects are under construction in the school building programme to expand and modernise the school estate,

addressing urgent school place requirements. Many schools in the voluntary sector have benefited from significant capital investment over recent years, including new school buildings. Yet some school leaders highlighted shortcomings given ageing buildings and sometimes unsuitable designs:

> *Enrolment would be a challenge, buildings can be a challenge. The school is 160 years old, maintaining those buildings is a challenge. Really it is just sticking plaster on it, that's the tragedy of it. Parts of this school are listed so you are restricted in what work can be done.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *Something is wrong, you've to keep with the wrong thing and build around it. All the expensive jobs are seen in isolation. The yard was tarmacked in the 1970s – it is broken up. They are going to fix it with a layer of tarmac costing 250 grand. They could fully fix it with 400 grand, but we won't get that. They don't finance buildings looking at longevity – which leads to massive waste of time.* (Principal, DEIS school)

Many of the comments from school leaders and teachers related to the provision of appropriate facilities, particularly sports facilities (including sports halls) and serious shortcomings in this regard. This was seen to have a very direct bearing on the provision of curricular and extracurricular activities for students:

> *The Department … want you to look out for wellbeing, they want PE* [physical education] *as an exam subject. For minimal costs they will not come out of their entrenched position that we're not doing PE facilities. We need a sports hall, a multipurpose facility, because what we have is not big enough. … They're entrenched until 2040 … What were before luxuries are now essential in a modern school. … It's not good enough to be told to go outside. Because it rains.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *The PE hall is fit for 450, the school will be 590 students next year. We can't even play a championship basketball game in it. The Department are fighting me … saying, 'no, we don't build PE halls, you have one'. We have a half of one. It's not fit for purpose. … There is a commitment under the 2024 programme that every school should have full size PE hall and here we are having a fight in a perfect opportunity to put their own espoused values into reality.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *Facilities would be a part that would be frustrating. We lost our astroturf* [the space being replaced with extra classrooms] *and will not be getting it back. A pity because it was something used in PE weekly,*

> *teams used them, boys played there at lunch. The lads said, 'sir I'd rather keep the astroturf if it meant not having a new school'. It's a big loss … there is no replacement, the site is tiny so there's nowhere to put it.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *We don't have proper size gym, football pitches, green spaces. A lot of windows need to be replaced … We haven't enough communal spaces either – students have lunch in the classroom or outside. … We got a new extension by accident – the prefab over the river had the culvert fall in, the insurance refused to continue insuring so Department of Education had to give funding. Thank god for the culvert falling in.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

According to the Department, PE halls are not included in additional accommodation briefs due to limited capital funding priorities for ensuring every child has a school place. However, approximately 5% of post-primary schools have upcoming building projects that will include a PE hall. Progress in PE hall provision will persist through the rollout of new schools and large-scale projects in the existing pipeline.

In terms of curricular provision, teachers raised concerns over classrooms being unsuitable for meeting the changing needs in different subject areas:

> *Because of that then we have to limit the students coming in. We have to limit everything really … the woodwork room that we have, it's probably a third of the size of what it should because … it was built in the 1990s, the early 1990s, which was probably standard at the time. But now time and technology has changed so much. Like you'd barely swing a cat in there really with the stuff that you'd need.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

Digital technologies were highlighted too, both in terms of the importance of innovations for teaching and learning, but also in terms of the costs for parents in meeting these requirements. According to the Department, the next tranche of ICT grant funding, along with the initial €50 million tranche issued in late 2021, was allocated to all recognised primary and post-primary schools, with an additional €50 million secured from Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan to support students with educational disadvantage through the digital divide (see Chapter 1 for details). Overall school leaders commended the provision of digital grants for schools, particularly in the context of COVID-19:

> *Digital grant is* [a] *massive benefit, wouldn't manage without it at all. Using OneNote, Microsoft, kids buy into it. If you were to take that away in the morning we'd be in trouble.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *We're getting good grant funding, I have to say, around ICT. I believe we're getting more this year; I hope we are. The Digital Divide grant was super.* (Principal, DEIS school)

But pressures on parents to meet these growing costs were also highlighted:

> *Students buy their own devices* [iPad/laptops]. *They're pumping money into schools for this, why don't they subsidise parents? Take that grant and look at subsidising parents and schools and look at rolling out that model of 1:1* [device per student] *across all schools.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *Same for technology, the facilities here compared to other schools are not at the races. Especially when we're trying to promote women in STEM* [science, engineering, technology and maths]*, we would like to have the facilities. But at the moment we're dealing with … Fisher Price stuff.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

School leaders were vocal on the challenges in meeting the costs of secretarial and caretaker support and the inadequacy of the allocations here, although as noted in Chapter 1 some of these costs now fall under the Department of Education payroll:

> *The amount of money that comes to pay a school secretary and a caretaker is €9,000 or €12,000 a year … you couldn't get somebody to work for it. … So the board* [decided] *that's coming out of our capitation funding. … I would say we're paying three times in secretarial. I've been doing the caretaking for a huge number of years and this year we got somebody in. It just got too much. I couldn't unlock all the doors myself.* (Principal, DEIS school)

In 2024, a secretary grant rate of €66.5 per pupil and a caretaker grant rate of €54.5 per pupil is to be provided by the Department to voluntary secondary schools (see Table 1.1 in Chapter 1 for details).

Although schools may request voluntary contributions, it is essential to clarify to parents that payment is optional and entirely voluntary, with no obligation to contribute. However, the lack of alignment of the national Budget with the school year, such as delays in the payment of the school support services grant this year and the non-payment of the ICT grant last year, contributes to increasing uncertainty and leaves schools relying on parents and fundraising activities. Across many of the case study schools, school leaders spoke of the heavy reliance on voluntary contributions or, increasingly student registration charges.

> *We are exceptionally reliant on the voluntary contribution – we wouldn't be able to continue without it. The cost of infrastructure, the fire alarm is prone to going off – the callout charge is €200. Costs have gone through the roof. Cleaning costs. Anything you buy now – the capitation just won't cover our needs*. (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *Money is an issue for an awful lot of voluntary secondary schools. As a DEIS school … Not all families would be able to afford a full large contribution. We would never ask for the full amount, but we would encourage parents to pay what they could. I don't think* [the voluntary contribution model] *is a way forward.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *We ask for a contribution of €150 and the vast majority pay it or make an effort to pay it. Normally over €30,000 from families in a small DEIS neighbourhood, which speaks to me of the support. The TY* [Transition Year] *programme has various people in and activities organised for them; it doesn't cost them anything. We don't use it to pay the electric bill, we use it to nurture and enrich the experience.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *The parental contribution to balance the budget is huge. It's for licences for computers, lockers (repairs, key replacement), there's a list of things. We don't call it a voluntary contribution; we call it a parental contribution. Sixty per cent pay it – we don't force them to pay but we do encourage them to pay it. Parents are fairly good. It's €150 for the year and they get all the services.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

In Budget 2024, a permanent increase of €21 million in capitation funding was secured, bringing the basic rate of capitation grant to €345 in voluntary secondary schools and restoring to levels pre-2011, as detailed in Chapter 1. But school leaders highlight a continuing tension in terms of policy advice, with the Department of Education advising that no school should have voluntary contributions:

> *There's a message going out from the Department of Education specifically from the Minister for Education saying no school should be charging voluntary contributions … Okay, so if we're getting the mock exams from outside, that's going to cost €40 per student. We want to get them to have Studyclix, that's a tenner. These things all add up. … But because* they [parents] *keep hearing that there should be no fees and we don't even charge a voluntary contribution … they're saying, 'Well, I don't have to pay that'. So the school is left out of pocket … So what ends up happening is you've got some parents covering all parents.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

Finally, a number of school leaders highlight particular funding challenges for developing schools, an issue also highlighted in the study of Educate Together schools (Mihut and McCoy, 2020):

> *I won't see Phase 2 built … And it just makes me so angry, which is why they have to keep the prefabs here. … There's no joined-up thinking in the Department.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *Transport is a massive cost in a developing school. If we want to send a school team out, it costs us a fortune.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

10.2 LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

On the one hand, school leaders acknowledge that they have more autonomy than school leaders in other school sectors:

> *My experience of working in an ETB is that they're exceptionally bureaucratic – you can't buy* [a] *box of pens without five quotes. There is very little autonomy for leadership in those schools to make decisions for their students. That is one of the reasons you wanted to work in voluntary rather than ETB schools.* (Principal, fee charging school)

However, there were repeated concerns over the demands placed on school leaders, the adequacy of supports provided and the widespread implications in terms of burnout and retention:

> *The job of principal is very, very demanding, very challenging emotionally draining.* (Stakeholder interview)

> *Schools are being asked to do more and more and more. … I'm 54, I'm not going to be principal when I'm 60. I do that and I'll be dead by 61 … It's not the workload per se, it's the absolute bombardment of workload … this job will kill you if you stay too long.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *It's the multiplicity of the principal's role* [in voluntary secondary schools]*. Human resources for example, there is a human resource*[s] *department at the local ETB, you are sitting across the desk from the human resource*[s] *department here.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *Just the workload is phenomenal. … I leave my house before 7.00 am. Every morning I try to get in at between 7.45 am and 8.00 am … But*

> *on any night this week I haven't got home until after 8.30 pm.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

One emerging challenge is the declining number of applications for school leadership roles, particularly among deputy principals. This decline may be attributed to factors such as the emotionally draining nature of the principal role, increased responsibilities and insufficient leadership development. According to Oide, 89 newly appointed post-primary principals (NAPs) took part in Misneach (personal and professional development programme for NAPS) during the academic years 2022/2023 and 2023/2024.[61] This figure includes 41 from the voluntary sector, 35 from ETB schools, and 13 from C&C schools. Of these NAPs, 86 had previous posts of responsibility. Notably, all 41 NAPs from the voluntary sector had prior posts of responsibility, and those who had previously served as acting principals had been deputy principals beforehand. Concerning prior leadership preparation of NAPs at the post-primary level, the majority possessed either a masters in education leadership or a post-graduate diploma in education leadership (non-PDSL), with a significantly higher percentage of NAPs in the voluntary secondary sector having post-graduate qualifications compared to NAPs across all sectors (95% in the voluntary secondary sector versus 72% across all sectors).

A stakeholder interview highlighted deep concern over the shrinking pool of applicants, with instances where the number of applications for principalship positions dropped significantly, sometimes to as low as one. This trend has forced schools to readvertise and struggle with appointing suitable candidates.

> *We would be very, very, very concerned about the drop in or the small number of applications for senior leadership positions … particularly for principalship … We haven't yet reached the stage where we couldn't appoint, but we've become very close to it. We've had to re-advertise on a number of occasions. … From experience we would have had for principalship 7 to 15 applications, whereas now we could have anything from 2 to 5 or 6, depending on the location. We have had situations where we've had one* [application]. (Stakeholder interview)

The necessity for greater support in senior leadership, notably in the form of deputy principals, was repeatedly emphasised. Principals highlighted the increasingly demanding nature of their roles, emphasising the need for additional support to address issues such as staff wellbeing and the management of HR matters.

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61 This information was obtained through personal communication with Oide.

The leadership role is 100 per cent getting more involved and demanding. … An extra deputy principal would be fantastic. The current cutoff is too high – and we don't have space for that many students. A second deputy would be fantastic, particularly in boarding setting. HR things are huge as well. … And there's a huge piece to be done on staff wellbeing. We're seeing feelings of burnout, despair sometimes. (Principal, DEIS school)

More posts is not the answer – any school over 600 should have two deputies. Over 700 or 750, three deputies. You need to expand the senior leadership team, don't expand the middle leadership team. Middle leadership team can only do so much … There's only a certain amount of responsibility you can put on post holders, the rest comes back to the principal because you can't expect people at that level to take on that level of responsibility. (Principal, non-DEIS school)

The absence of deputy principals poses a more acute challenge for smaller schools. Suggestions were made to lower the threshold for deputy principal appointments, ensuring that every school has at least one deputy, with additional deputies allocated based on student numbers to address the varying needs of different institutions.

The biggest problem is actually in the smaller schools. I think it's 400 [students] *for one deputy principal. That's the biggest problem. I think every school should have a deputy. Maybe just bring the barriers down a little bit. Maybe every school gets 1, over 500 gets 2, over 750 gets 3.* (Stakeholder interview)

Expanding the senior management team is essential, yet it is equally crucial to provide adequate and appropriate professional development for school leaders, particularly structured training specifically tailored to leadership roles, to prevent principals getting overwhelmed by their increased responsibilities. It is important to equip leaders with the skills to efficiently manage their teams and delegate tasks rather than taking on direct responsibility for everything. As noted above, recent data from Oide suggests that many newly appointed principals are now completing leadership development programmes.

Department needs to look at principal succession. There are aspiring leaders but preparing the next set of leaders is key … JMB [Joint Managerial Body for Voluntary Secondary Schools] *give support to deputies, you get two days continuing professional development (CPD), and the rest is learning on the ground … You go to NAPD* [National Association for Principals and Deputy Principals] *things or*

> *specific ones, you found yourself* [dealing with] *child protection, bullying, but what about leadership?* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *We now have a senior leadership team as opposed to just the principal – and that was a wonderful development … So the question then is why is that not working? In my opinion, the answer is because people were not trained. That you had a school of maybe 800 students with the principal and the deputy principal. And all of a sudden, there's two deputy principals and there's ten AP* [assistant principal] *ones or whatever it might be … Nobody trained the principal as how to manage these teams. A principal who used to have one deputy and now has three said it's the worst thing ever happened, because she doesn't know how to manage it. That was a major, major mistake … you don't change your structure without training people into how to use that structure.* (Stakeholder interview)

Stakeholders also advocated for a shift in focus towards ongoing leadership development, starting from the very beginning of a teacher's career.

> *They have leadership formation programme … starting for a teacher on the first day of that teacher's career. We tend to focus on when the person's being appointed, do a principalship. But growing leadership capacity, which is one of the main competencies in post primary education, should really start on the first day of a teaching career.* (Stakeholder interview)

Meanwhile, the education system needs to act as a whole with a more cohesive and coordinated approach across different organisations in preparing school leaders for their roles.

> *What I do think is important is a coordinated approach. You have the patrons, you have the JMB, you have Oide. When we appoint a new principal, we do inductions and mentoring sessions. JMB do a four-day induction. There's fragmentation there … Just working together. As you know, as a society, we tend to fragment, and education is no different.* (Stakeholder interview)

The diversity of roles, infrastructural, administrative, financial, human resources (HR), industrial relations (IR) and so on, means that school leaders feel they have no time to dedicate to teaching and learning, 'the things of value':

> *As a principal in a school like ours … because you're managing everything, the plant, HR, IR, all of that, that teaching and learning could be the last thing on your list on a day, and that shouldn't be the*

> *case, because I didn't apply for the job to be doing all the rest of it really. I mean, I knew that – I knew it was a part of it. But it can be all-consuming.* (Principal, DEIS school)

> *I'd love a PA* [personal assistant] *an administrative leadership position. … The things I should be doing, my focus should be on teaching and learning. Did I do any today? No. Will I do any tomorrow? I probably won't … We haven't done one policy review this year. … There are things that I should be doing but I spend so much time on buildings, maintenance, finance, those other things get lost. The things of value.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *I don't want to sound negative. I love my job, I enjoy doing it. But when you consider what I should be doing to what I am doing. I want to be working with students and teachers, I want to be improving student learning, I want students to have these positive outcomes … We're dealing with so many other areas which are soaking up so much of our time it's ridiculous.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

School leaders and stakeholders also repeatedly highlighted growing challenges in trying to meet diverse, and sometimes conflicting policy demands:

> *With the 900 per cent increase in the number of special classes … it also has a policy tension inbuilt to it … The policy advice from the NCSE* [National Council for Special Education] *to Government is for radical inclusion, but they are going to need, not just to invest, but to develop and grow and to be patient … you can't have school communities affirmed and encouraged and mandated to provide particular kinds of inclusion and then on a dime publish a report, put Ministers Madigan and Foley in front of microphones at a press conference and get them speaking fluent inclusion and expect schools to turn on a dime and begin to* [implement]. (Stakeholder interview)

10.3 TEACHER RECRUITMENT

Considerable challenges were also reported in relation to teacher recruitment and retention across most of the case study schools. There were particular problems in specific subject areas, including Irish, modern foreign languages (MFL), home economics and woodwork/construction studies/design and communication graphics (DCG):

> *It is difficult to fill posts – we have advertised and had no applicants for both teaching posts and posts of responsibility. We've seen a number of teachers resigning from posts of responsibility over the level*

> *of work required for €4,000 a year. They say, 'I want to come in, do my job and go home'.* (Principal, fee charging school)

> *And a lot of my staff now increased numbers are applying for career break and job sharing. They are looking at their work–life balance, it has been a nightmare trying to get teachers and hire teachers. Some of my posts I advertise four times.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

Particular challenges were identified in terms of teacher retention in the fee-charging sector, and minority faith schools in particular:

> *We are very sore about the student–teacher ratio. We are a minority faith school and we don't see ourselves as like other fee charging schools, in the Dublin area, or even other school in local area. Minority faith people come to attend the ethos, they don't have a choice to attend locally. …* [I]*t strikes us that it's really unfair that there are fewer teachers than their neighbours. We are not able to offer teachers Department of Education contracts, so they'll look elsewhere. Retention of staff is a nightmare.* (Principal, fee charging school)

Finally, school leaders raised challenges around the sustainability of the volunteerism of teachers – with the system reliant on volunteerism to provide extracurricular programmes, for example:

> *The atmosphere of teaching is not conducive to people giving of their time as they used to. … People have lives, the business model is you leave, you turn off your phone. … The likes of musicals, less and less. But then the value of that for a school and for the character of a school, the personality of a school its priceless. … There's a huge change in what teaching was and that idea of the vocational job – no it's not anymore because a vocation can also mean that you do more than you should do and you're less appreciated.* (HSCL officer, non-DEIS school)

10.4 SUPPORT FROM THE JMB

The JMB is an integral division of the Secretariat of Secondary Schools (SSS) established in 1973 to represent the interests of voluntary secondary schools in Ireland. JMB engages in discussions and negotiations, and provides specific support and services to these schools, working alongside the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (AMCSS) within the SSS framework. Many school leaders, and members of Boards of Management, spoke of hugely positive and much-needed support provided by the JMB. Their comments pointed to the availability of support and advice, the networking opportunities provided and their role in advocating for schools:

I've a very good relationship with the JMB, I could ring any of them and I have done. I find them very good. I'd never miss the [JMB] *region* [number] *meeting. Never miss the conferences, any of the training that they put on. They're here in an advisory capacity, they do meet with the minister and the DE* [Department of Education] *and put a case forward.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

It's a very positive relationship. I think JMB provide excellent support to the school. … I see them as a very useful resource. … You never feel like on your own. The opportunity is there to reach out should we need to. (Board of management member, fee charging school)

Certain [JMB] *members are exceptionally helpful at all times – always at the other end of the phone. … Capitation paid to JMB well worth it. The training is top notch. The procurement unit is a wealth of knowledge. They are very good and very professional in their job.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

I have an excellent relationship with the JMB. For me personally as a principal, I have received great support and a great network through the JMB, yes I am pleasantly surprised at the level of support available … The board would also feel supported by the JMB, they are a good landing page for us. (Principal, non-DEIS school)

It's just phenomenal, the support. If it weren't for the JMB, I wouldn't be in the job and the school would be closed. … [When] *returning to school after COVID, the support, I'll never forget the Zooms with* [JMB staff member] *… I don't know how many. One hundred people, principals and chairs had attended. There was just pandemonium in the country or in the world. But the support it was just phenomenal.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

They are very good, excellent, a great support, I would be lost without them. In terms of policy, training, allocations, they are absolutely excellent. I know they're at the end of a phone call as well. (Principal, fee charging school)

I attend anything that the JMB offer, to be honest. I just think that level of networking is hugely important. I do feel that the JMB are doing their best to represent us, to put that pressure on. … And I've had huge admiration for [name of JMB staff member] *over the years, I just think he managed COVID so well.* (Principal, DEIS school)

Across many schools, school leaders pointed to the importance of the training/professional development provided by the JMB to themselves and board members. But some suggested they would like more face-to-face training:

> *The JMB run a couple of training days or hours every year. They focus on different parts of responsibility; I've been on a few of those. They are good.* (Chair of board of management, fee-charging school)

> *A lot of it* [training] *is on Zoom. Zoom is fine but it's not as good as the face to face where you can ask the question that you need to ask. Most of us wouldn't be asking the question on Zoom. Even just having a cup of coffee afterwards – you have the official meeting but it's the incidental things that are said, that's where we learn most of the stuff.* (Board of management chair, non-DEIS school)

The development of regional support groups, providing a local network of support for principals was also welcomed:

> *One good thing the JMB have done for me personally is the JMB have set up in their various regions Balint Groups. Which are kind of support groups for principals. I've been involved in that in our area for five years and that has been a huge support as well. It's very, very good.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

On two occasions, school leaders were less satisfied, although the dissatisfaction related predominantly to the amount of information circulated by the Department of Education:

> *They have improved on sending templates on policy and that, but only in recent times … They come and meet us in AMCSS meetings, not as frequently as they should be. That connectivity is not what it used to be. .... It needs to be concrete stuff – we used to be able to survive on JMB bulletins – 20 a year, now on 38, going to get to 40, 50 to the year. Get to the point where you just don't even read them. That's maybe not the JMB's fault, the department seem to be asking more and more without giving them supports.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

The second criticism concerned the faith-based nature of the JMB organisation and ethos espoused:

> *It's all faith based. But it's an organisational, it's a sort of a top-down approach, which is very much the faith thing … You do feel a little bit isolated. I'm going to the conference … but the conference theme … they've faith on every piece of paper … And considering they're*

> *supposed to be a representative body for all voluntary sector schools, I don't know why they keep going on about that.* (Principal, Educate Together school)

10.5 POSITIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

Across the vast majority of schools visited as part of this study, students, teachers and school leaders voiced an immense positivity and pride in relation to the climate and mission of their schools. It seems appropriate to conclude the presentation of results with a flavour of some of the sentiments and views expressed across these diverse school settings.

Teachers across the schools conveyed a sense of happiness and fulfilment in their roles, stemming from strong and effective school leadership:

> *I'm not from here. I've taught in the UK. I am just overwhelmed by the way the students are treated in this school. And that comes from the top down. I know that the principal has a background in SEN. She prioritises the ones with the most need. It's great to see. They're the first people that are on the timetable, working with her. And I know she can't give all of her time, but her expertise and judgement; I am extremely happy in the job.* (SENCO, DEIS school)

> *A beautiful place to work … it's a great place to be.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

They observed students to be enjoyable, respectful and eager to learn:

> *Yeah, the students are – yeah, they're just really enjoyable. They're – they are so nice, genuinely so nice. I've always said some of the nicest people I've ever met have been wearing the uniform, d'you know, sitting on the opposite side of the desk. The teaching staff are brilliant. I think we are so lucky to have the staff that we have, and we have brilliant management.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *It's an easy school to teach in. From a discipline point of view, we have no major discipline issues, only very minor stuff. It is a lovely environment to work in, you can try different methods of teaching with them. Whereas I know in a lot of schools, in London, I found it very difficult because you're trying to manage disruption within the lesson but you really don't have that here.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

> *I mean I love being in a secondary school. I love seeing them come in as little kind of in-between people and go out as young adults. It's a*

> *really privilege to watch them grow on that journey.* (Guidance counsellor, non-DEIS school)

> *I love the students, the staff are brilliant, I've great time for management. It's a lovely environment to work in … There are great relationships between teachers and students, you can talk to them like adults, have the craic and have the conversation … especially at the senior side of the school. And show them the humane side of yourself as well, it's not just them and us. We're all in this together*. (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

Teachers in DEIS school contexts observed a huge sense of fulfilment in their work and a drive to make a difference in the lives of young people:

> *When you're in a higher needs school, it pushes you, challenges you. Makes you think outside the box, makes you work harder to engage those people who aren't engaging. … I've worked in non-DEIS and DEIS and working in a DEIS school has made me work harder as a teacher.* (Teacher, DEIS school)

> *The kid who's signing their name up for lunch and there's no money, I don't know where the money comes from, but the money is there for them and it's done so discreetly. And that's a value that comes from our sisters. … It's very subtle – there is a press that is full of cereal bars. Some kids never have food, and that's their breakfast. Other kids forget their food, they sleep in, there's no child leaving here hungry. It's the same with their uniforms or their iPad or whatever it is. There's a lovely subtle way of caring in the school that goes under the radar.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

School leaders too reflected on the positivity of teachers and their willingness to go the extra mile, as well as the students at the centre of the school:

> *The commitment* [of teachers] *to their students, the development of their students and their commitment to the hidden curriculum and the extracurricular learning opportunities that our boys are provided with. It is astounding the amount of voluntary time that our teachers give to that aspect of their learning.* (Principal, non-DEIS school)

> *This is the school my heart is with, this is where I'll finish. I love the school, I love the young people. I always take the view, without the young people, we wouldn't be here so they have to stay at the centre. That doesn't mean that we indulge them, we're still quite tough on them in terms of expectations or hopes for them.* (Principal, DEIS school)

School leaders and teachers alike highlight that every effort is made to respond to student requests and interests:

> *The goodwill of the staff is in bucketloads. I know if I need someone to cover something this minute it would not be an issue. In terms of extracurricular, sometimes it comes from the staff, we'll facilitate. The same for students – come with ten people and an idea and I'll find a teacher who will supervise it.* (Deputy principal, non-DEIS school)
>
> *We have a very young staff – the enthusiasm, it's absolutely fantastic. Our young teachers have thrown themselves into a huge range of activities- they give very generously of their time.* (Teacher, non-DEIS school)

Finally, board of management member members across many of the schools conveyed a sense of pride in their role and privilege in being part of the immense efforts of school communities:

> *From my situation as a chairperson … I would feel very, very proud of the school, and you know, all of the times when I'm invited to all of the different events that take place, I feel nothing but pride, and I do see, even at the end of the year, the celebration for the final class, the Leaving Cert class, you know, there's usually a Mass and usually an evening after for prize-giving, and it would make one feel very, very happy to be involved with the school.* (Board of management member, non-DEIS school)

10.6 SUMMARY

Chapter 10 considers a number of overarching challenges facing the voluntary secondary sector, including resources and funding, departmental support and challenges in school leadership. The chapter concludes with two areas of positive feedback that were noted over the course of the research in schools, including the much-valued support from the JMB and the positive school climates observed by those working within a diversity of voluntary sector schools.

Funding challenges persist across the education sector. A capitation rate of €316 per pupil is applied to voluntary secondary schools, compared to €276 for those in the ETB and C&C sectors (prior to the Budget 24 increase). Despite existing grants, voluntary secondary schools argue that they require further support for capacity and modernisation. Many school leaders expressed concerns about perceived inequality in the existing funding model, which continues to treat voluntary secondary schools less favourably than other schools. Interviews with school leaders also highlighted concerns related to meeting day-to-day costs such as

heating and insurance in spite of the capitation grant. Meanwhile school leaders highlighted the challenges of maintaining old and often unsuitable school buildings built for a different era, which can lead to difficult choices in terms of what is prioritised. Although the Department provides a secretary grant rate of €66.5 per pupil and a caretaker grant rate of €54.5 per pupil to voluntary secondary schools in 2024, concerns remain about covering secretarial and caretaker costs.

The evidence from GUI shows the real impact of the funding challenges, with schools in the voluntary secondary sector faring less well in terms of sports and computing facilities, for example. Although school leaders appreciated digital/ICT grants, particularly those received in the context of COVID-19, they were conscious of the burden being placed on parents to purchase personal devices for their sons and daughters. Moreover, school leaders emphasised their dependence on voluntary contributions, while guidance from the Department of Education advises that no school should rely on such contributions.

Despite facing insufficient support and challenging situations, schools made significant efforts to meet the diverse needs of students and adapt to evolving policy demands. It should be noted that some school leaders appreciated the greater levels of autonomy afforded to school management within the voluntary secondary sector.

In terms of leadership challenges, school leaders repeatedly emphasised the wide-reaching and excessive demands placed on school leaders, the inadequacy of supports provided, the levels of preparedness and professional development and the widespread implications in terms of burnout and retention. Both data from Oide and stakeholder interviews reflect the declining number of applications for school leadership roles, likely attributable to factors such as the demanding nature of the principal role, increased responsibilities and, in the past, opportunities for professional development. The diversity of roles, infrastructural, administrative, financial, human resources, industrial relations and so on, means that school leaders feel they have no time to make an impact on teaching and learning, 'the things of value'. Difficulties were also reported in relation to teacher recruitment and retention across nearly all of the case study schools.

The chapter concludes with two key strengths observed by school communities in the voluntary secondary sector. Many school leaders and members of boards of management spoke of the hugely positive and much-needed support provided by the JMB. They reflected most frequently on the ready availability of support and advice, the networking and professional development opportunities provided and their role in advocating for schools. Finally, the discussion concluded with a reflection on the pervasive positive school climate observed in many of the case study schools visited by the research team. Students, teachers and school leaders

too echoed an immense positivity and pride in relation to the climate and mission of their schools.

CHAPTER 11

Discussion and conclusion

This report began by setting out some of the significant changes underway within the voluntary secondary sector, and the Irish education system more broadly, with an eye to some of the key challenges it faces over the coming years. We will end by considering what our findings tell us about these changes and challenges. With its wide-ranging account of the experiences and opinions of stakeholders across 21 schools and the wider system, the report illuminates the distinctive character of the voluntary secondary sector, as well as the diversity within the sector. It offers a unique snapshot of the voluntary secondary sector in 2023, and the scale and scope of the study are such that it makes a strong contribution to the Irish education research landscape.

The main research questions examined in the study are:

1) Who is attending voluntary secondary schools?
2) What is distinctive about these schools?
3) What is happening in the classroom in these schools?
4) What is happening outside of the classroom in these schools?
5) What major challenges are these schools facing, including the adequacy of state funding for the sector?

The report presents findings from a large-scale mixed-method research study conducted across 21 voluntary secondary schools, which were selected based on a theoretical stratified sampling framework. The sampling framework was designed to ensure the sample reflected the diversity of the sector in terms of school location, size, gender mix, Delivering Equality of Opportunity (DEIS)/non-DEIS status and ethos. Given the focus of the study, the primary research focuses exclusively on the voluntary secondary sector, an approach that allows rich insights into this sector, and, although providing limited scope to consider the broader school landscape, allows for comparisons between experiences in voluntary secondary schools and those of other sectors, such as Education and Training Board (ETB) and community and comprehensive (C&C) schools.

The data were collected between March and May 2023. The report is informed by: a survey with second and fifth year students (N=2,243); 37 focus groups with students; and interviews with 19 school leaders, 10 guidance counsellors, 13 special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), 2 home school community liaison (HSCL) officers, 26 teachers, 10 parents, 10 chairs or members of school boards of management, and 10 key stakeholders across 8 organisations. The final

sample comprised 7 DEIS schools, 10 non-DEIS schools and 4 fee-charging schools. Where available, the survey results are compared to other national and international studies, namely the nationally representative longitudinal *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study on the cohort born in 2008 (who were 13 years old in the latest wave of available data), as well as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 study on 15 year olds in Ireland and across the EU.[62] By adopting this comprehensive approach, the study achieves a deep exploration of the voluntary sector, while also situating the experiences of these students within a broader national and international context.

This chapter summarises the key findings of the study and discusses the implications for policy development.

11.1 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The report provides a comprehensive analysis of diverse perspectives within the voluntary secondary sector across a number of salient dimensions, including: school ethos and culture; school gender mix; the student experience; teaching and learning; the impact of COVID-19 on students and schools; student wellbeing; non-academic aspects of school life; and the unique challenges and strengths of this sector.

Chapter 3 explores school profiles using historical data and characteristics of the current sample. The data collected for this study, combined with nationally representative secondary data, highlight variations in school profiles across the three sectors and, particularly, within the voluntary secondary sector, with wide diversity in size, location, gender mix, denomination and ethos. Despite the predominance of the Catholic ethos (90%) in voluntary secondary schools, there is a notable presence of other denominations, including Church of Ireland, inter- and multi-denominational schools, as well as Quaker, Jewish, Methodist Presbyterian and Educate Together schools. This contrasts with the broader secondary school landscape in Ireland, which consists of 47% Catholic, 29% multi-denominational, and 20% inter-denominational schools. Within the voluntary secondary sector, schools are distributed as follows: 1% in Gaeltacht areas; 13% designated as DEIS; 13% fee-charging; 92% day schools; and 6% offering both day and boarding services. Regarding school gender, 42% are coeducational, while 58% are single sex. While differences in intake and outcomes between the three sectors have reduced in recent decades, variations persist. The chapter also considers factors underpinning choice of school based on views from students, parents and school staff. School resources and facilities, the quality of teaching, location as well as curriculum provision were rated as the most important factors. Earlier research

62 The PISA 2018 study includes students from more than 80 countries. For this study, we have restricted the sample to the EU/UK to allow for better comparison with our study.

(Genesis, 2023) suggests that student preference, academic reputation, the range of subjects available and the school being coeducational also feature in this decision-making process.[63]

Chapter 4 explores school ethos and culture across the 21 case study schools, considering perspectives from students, parents and staff. The ethos valued by students includes community building, extracurricular engagement, balancing academic and personal development, and a commitment to inclusion and diversity. There were varying views on the religious aspect of school ethos, while an emphasis on student-centricity, diversity, inclusion and community-building emerged across schools. Students recognised the role of schools in shaping their values and appreciated schools' efforts in fostering ethos by encouraging diverse achievements, ensuring high quality teaching and learning, fostering a sense of community, and promoting fairness and justice. The chapter also examines school climate and school engagement. Students generally held positive attitudes towards their school, with individual, family and school characteristics all playing a significant role in shaping school experiences. Positive teacher interactions further enhanced students' school experiences, another phenomenon influenced by socioeconomic characteristics, as well as academic self-image, perceived teacher expectations and the presence of a student-led ethos.[64] These interactions also underscore the impact of school climate and student dynamics on teacher expectations. Regarding students' school involvement, students valued having a voice in school but sought a greater role in decision-making processes.

Chapter 5 explores school gender mix, covering the historical development of single-sex schools in Ireland, students' experiences in both single-sex and coeducational schools, and their preferences regarding school gender mix. Historical data indicate an increase in the percentage of students attending coeducational schools due to growth in second-level education and a decline in single-sex school attendance in both relative and absolute terms. Students, regardless of whether they attended single-sex or coeducational schools, strongly favoured coeducational settings, while preference varied among staff and parents. While many students were content with their school and believed their current gender mix supported learning and preparedness for the future, fewer than 20% of respondents in single-sex schools preferred their school's current gender mix, compared to nearly 90% in coeducational schools. Among staff and parents the preference for coeducational schooling was less overwhelming, but was still voiced

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63 Genesis research data collection was with parents and guardians.

64 The student-led school ethos measure is constructed based on three of the individual measures: 'I am encouraged to make up my own mind'; 'I am encouraged to express my opinions'; and 'I am encouraged to discuss the issues with people having different opinions'. Details of how this measure is constructed can be found in Chapter 2 (Methodology).

by many interviewees from single-sex settings, while no interviewee from a coeducational setting stated a preference for single-sex schooling.

Chapter 6 provides a comprehensive overview of students' educational journeys in voluntary secondary schools. Most second year students reflected positively on the transition to their secondary schools. Fifth year students generally expressed satisfaction with their Leaving Certificate subject choices and had the option to make changes if necessary. However, gender differences were notable in school subject offerings, students' subject choice, as well as in the extent to which subjects are seen as interesting or difficult, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and gender-neutral approach to subject provision.

In terms of the Junior Cycle, students were generally positive about the extensive range of courses and the assessment approaches. Yet concerns arose around an excessive emphasis on exams across many schools, the added pressure placed on students by classroom-based assessments (CBAs), the removal of foundation level papers in the Junior Cycle Framework, a perceived lack of challenge in the Junior Cycle, the large proportion receiving a merit grade,[65] and lack of preparedness for the Senior Cycle, which was to some extent driven by not sitting state exams during the COVID-19 pandemic. All of these impact student wellbeing, motivation and later educational engagement. The Transition Year (TY) programme was taken and appreciated by most of the students as offering real-world and workplace experiences. Concerns around taking the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) included its perceived low status within schools and society (usually seen as the 'second-best' option), limited programme availability across schools, and a lack of challenge for some students.

Chapter 6 also delves into students' academic self-image, which is closely related to gender, SEN status and socioeconomic background. About half of students rated themselves as (above) average compared to their peers, highlighting the need for balance between academic and personal development. Teaching and learning experiences leaned towards traditional and teacher-centred methods, even as the qualitative material emphasised the importance of integrating more collaborative and interactive approaches, which are valued by students.

Regarding schools' academic and SEN supports, students expressed concerns about their specific learning needs sometimes not being met. There is a clear preference among students for more individualised or small group supports, which is interesting given Department of Education guidance that support ought to travel to the student rather than the student to the support. Special classes were being

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[65] In the 2023 Junior Certificate exams, a 'distinction' grade was achieved by 3.9% of students in higher-level maths, 2.7% in higher-level English and 3.1% in higher-level Irish (tailored for schools teaching all subjects through English; see https://www.examinations.ie/statistics/.

introduced to more schools, requiring schools to adapt teaching methods and resources to meet the diverse needs of students. Challenges also emerged across schools, including the increasing demands placed on schools, difficulties in securing an adequate number of staff with the necessary professional qualifications and skills, unsuitable infrastructure and classroom design to accommodate diverse needs, and disconnect between state agencies and support services.

Chapter 7 explores technology use at school, where it is generally embraced by both students and schools. The use of technology can enhance teaching and learning experience, facilitate communication, support collaborative work and develop students' independent learning skills. However, its effectiveness depends on how it is used and taught at school. Striking the right balance is crucial to ensuring that technology supports, rather than impedes, the learning process. This includes more information communication technology (ICT) related professional development for teachers, and a need for caution in terms of the types of devices chosen and the role of smartphones in the classroom. Moreover, developing students' digital skills requires thoughtful design and integration into the curriculum.

Chapter 8 sheds light on students' experiences with home learning during COVID-19, and the profound and lasting impact of the pandemic on their learning, motivation, mental wellbeing and social development. Most students struggled to engage in remote learning, and experienced difficulties accessing timely teacher support and stable internet connections. Younger students struggled with basic coursework, while older students found the transition to Senior Cycle education particularly challenging. Reduced motivation persisted even after students returned to school. The pandemic was also felt to have greatly disrupted their mental wellbeing, leading to heightened anxiety levels and an increased demand for support services, particularly personal counselling. This underscores the importance of comprehensive and accessible support tailored to individual needs. Additionally, respondents believed that the pandemic had enduring effects on students' social development, affecting their maturity as well as their ability to reconnect with peers and manage stress. These challenges have continued in the form of disengagement in class and reduced student interactions even after their return to school. These ongoing issues emphasise the importance of providing continued support tailored to individual needs, especially in light of the increased dependence on technology and social media among students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 9 provides a comprehensive exploration of students' broader social and personal development within schools. This includes their education in citizenship and awareness of global issues, engagement in extracurricular activities, overall wellbeing and life satisfaction and, primarily focusing on fifth year students, their

post-school plans and outlook for the future. Students displayed a high level of respect for different cultures and awareness of global issues, albeit with variations based on individual and family characteristics. Despite their strong environmental awareness, students reported limited engagement in related activities, emphasising the need for a school culture that values diversity and more structured programmes to promote social awareness and involvement.

Regarding activities outside of school, concerning trends were observed. Many students devoted limited time to reading for pleasure while engaging in lengthy screen time. Although most students actively participated in sports and physical activities, their involvement in other extracurricular activities was less prevalent. Gender, socioeconomic factors and school characteristics all played a role in shaping students' participation in extracurricular activities, underscoring the importance of offering inclusive options. While students generally appreciated how their schools contributed to various aspects of their personal and interpersonal skills, they were somewhat less positive about their schools' roles in building self-confidence, encouraging reading for pleasure and, in particular, making friends with the opposite sex.

Chapter 9 also explored students' overall wellbeing and life satisfaction. Relatively low levels of self-reported mental wellbeing can be attributed to the lasting impact of COVID-19, increased academic pressures and perceptions of inadequate wellbeing supports at school. The chapter notes the potentially detrimental impact of increased technology use as well, particularly smartphones, on students' wellbeing, coupled with the need for enhanced professional development for teachers to deliver effective wellbeing programmes. Regarding students' post-school plans, higher education remained the primary option for many students, with girls, those without special educational needs (SEN) and those from more affluent family backgrounds more likely to plan for it. Indeed, throughout these various aspects of students' academic and non-academic lives, persistent differences were observed related to students' gender, SEN status, family characteristics and school climate. While schools cannot directly influence students' personal and family circumstances, it is crucial for them to consider these factors in creating a more inclusive and supportive school environment that facilitates holistic student development.

Chapter 10 considers a number of broader challenges facing the voluntary secondary sector, including resources and funding, departmental support, as well as challenges for school leaders. Funding challenges persist across the education sector. Despite existing grants, voluntary secondary schools argue that they require further support for capacity and modernisation. Many school leaders expressed concerns about a perceived inequality in the existing funding model, which is seen to treat voluntary secondary schools less favourably than other

schools. Interviews with school leaders also highlighted concerns related to meeting day-to-day costs such as heating and insurance in spite of the capitation grant. School leaders highlighted the challenges of maintaining old and often unsuitable school buildings built for a different era, which sometimes meant making difficult choices in terms of what to prioritise. Although the Department of Education provides a secretary grant rate of €66.5 per pupil and a caretaker grant rate of €54.5 per pupil to voluntary secondary schools in 2024, concerns remain about covering secretarial and caretaker costs, the former more apparent where secretaries do not come under the Department's payroll. The evidence from the GUI study shows the impact of the funding challenges, with schools in the voluntary secondary sector faring less well in terms of sports and computing facilities, for example. Although school leaders appreciated digital/ICT grants, particularly those received in the context of COVID-19, they were conscious of the burden being placed on parents to purchase personal devices for their sons and daughters. Moreover, school leaders emphasised their dependence on voluntary contributions, while guidance from the Department of Education advises that no school should rely on such contributions.

Despite facing insufficient support and challenging situations, schools made significant efforts to meet the diverse needs of students and adapt to evolving policy demands. It should be noted that some school leaders appreciated the greater levels of autonomy afforded to school management within the voluntary secondary sector.

In terms of leadership challenges, school leaders repeatedly emphasised the excessive and wide-reaching demands placed on school leaders, the inadequacy of supports provided and the widespread implications in terms of burnout and retention. Both data from Oide and stakeholder interviews reflect the declining number of applications for school leadership roles, likely attributable to factors such as the demanding nature of the principal role, increased responsibilities and, in the past, opportunities for professional development. The diversity of roles – infrastructural, administrative, financial, human resources, industrial relations and so on – means that school leaders in the voluntary secondary sector feel they have no time to impact on teaching and learning, 'the things of value'. Difficulties were also reported in relation to teacher recruitment and retention across nearly all of the case study schools.

The chapter concluded with two key strengths observed by school communities in the voluntary secondary sector. Many school leaders and members of boards of management spoke of the hugely positive and much-needed support provided by the JMB. They reflected most frequently on the ready availability of support and advice, the networking and professional development opportunities provided and their role in advocating for schools. Finally, the discussion concluded with a

reflection on the pervasive positive school climate observed in many of the case study schools visited by the research team. Students, teachers and school leaders too echoed an immense positivity and pride in relation to the climate and mission of their schools.

11.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECONDARY SECTOR

11.2.1 Meeting diverse needs

The analysis suggests that, overall, there has been convergence in terms of the profile of the different school sectors, but that the populations in each sector remain distinct. In terms of Leaving Certificate retention rates, the gap between voluntary secondary schools and ETB schools has narrowed significantly – from almost 20% in 1995 to roughly 5% in 2015. In many ways, the gap within the voluntary secondary sector is far greater – with different voluntary secondary schools serving very different populations.

Throughout this study, the evidence has shown that students with fewer resources and those with additional needs generally compare less well to their peers across a range of domains and outcomes. While students attending DEIS schools benefitted in terms of curricular provision, a strong emphasis on literacy skills, opportunities to participate in sports (particularly for girls), their role in decision making and the nature of their interaction with their teachers, two challenges emerged. Schools serving disadvantaged communities who are not part of the DEIS programme struggled to meet high levels of student need. A second larger problem related to the capacity of schools to meet growing student and community need, particularly in a context of funding shortfalls for schools, argued to be more pressing in the voluntary secondary sector. School leaders and wider stakeholders asked the question, how much can schools realistically do?

These fundamental challenges are not unique to Ireland. In their research in England, Owens and de St Croix (2020) note that while many participants endorsed meritocratic narratives, all expressed doubts that the school could 'make up for' the significant structural disadvantages faced by many students in the schools serving disadvantaged populations they visited. They describe the challenges associated with meritocratic discourse, including: the stresses of meeting these expectations; uncertainty about attributing responsibility for 'failure'; and questions about what could and should be done in practice to enable disadvantaged students to 'succeed'. Given the clear structural barriers emerging from our research, our evidence concurs with the argument that 'meritocratic rhetoric imposes significant burdens on students, teachers and schools by holding them responsible while obscuring the role that social inequalities play in shaping

students' educational opportunities' (p. 403). This is well-stated by Peace-Hughes, 2021):

> *Schools are shaped by the world around them. Schools are not simply the single entity of a school, but they are filled with a multitude of actors, and face unique contexts, which influence, structure and contribute to the qualities of the school. Embracing this holistic understanding may help policymakers (at local and national levels) to move beyond an obsession with statistics, testing, attainment and measures of accountability, towards the promotion of greater contextual knowledge regarding the unique contexts of schools and the individual nature of young people's pathways.* (Peace-Hughes, 2021)

Regarding schools' academic and SEN supports, students expressed their concerns about their specific learning needs sometimes not being met and a clear preference for more individualised and small group support. Special classes were being introduced to more schools, requiring schools to adapt teaching methods and resources to meet the growing diversity of need from students. Challenges also emerged across the schools, including; the increasing demands placed on schools; difficulties in securing an adequate number of staff with the necessary professional qualifications and skills; insufficient infrastructure and appropriate classroom design to accommodate diverse needs; and disconnect between agencies and support services.

Our study shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and enduring impact on young people and their families and schools. Fifth year students missed out on a crucial phase in terms of their maturation, in particular missing out on engagements with school over third and fourth year, which they see as impacting on their learning now. Drawing on the national Children's School Lives study, Crean et al. (2023) noted that during the COVID-19 lockdown, the boundaries between welfare and education were especially blurred, and fully intertwined in children's school lives. For some principals, care work to address welfare needs was directly connected to their commitment to social justice and equality. To offset this inequality, schools with high proportions of children from lower income families go beyond meeting purely academic needs and extend their role to addressing food and material poverty. These findings are not unique to Ireland; in the UK Anders et al. (2022) have identified significant socioeconomic disparities. Individuals from poorer families face multiple disadvantages, particularly in home learning, school reintegration and exam cancellations, compared to their more advantaged peers.

11.2.2 School gender mix

The scale of the preference expressed by students for coeducation was a surprise, and we wonder what other surprises an open conversation across the whole school community might prompt. In this study we found students who were delighted with their schools and teachers who felt their school gender mix was optimum for learning and preparation for the future across both single-sex and coeducation schools. However, fewer than 20% of survey respondents in single-sex schools actively preferred their current school gender mix, compared to almost 90% in coeducational schools.

One issue that came to the fore in our conversations with students, and in the survey data, related to participation in sports among girls, particularly girls in coeducational settings. Students in some coeducational schools highlighted a hierarchy of opportunity, with boys' sports taking centre stage. Earlier research has also shown how girls (and some boys) experienced inequalities in obtaining recognition in sport, and discrimination in terms of access to male-orientated sports, as well as unequal opportunities, resources and support. School management, teachers and students (both male and female) were shown to often protect this male preserve by strategies that maintain the exclusion of girls through the 'normalisation of physical differences between boys and girls as the basis for unequal recognition and resourcing of girls' sport in certain [coeducational] schools' (McSharry, 2017, p. 353).

The dominance of male-orientated sport in coeducational settings has been found in other countries. A study in Germany found that in spite of policy to promote gender equality in school sport and physical education, classes continue to be dominated by activities largely preferred by boys, particularly team games and competitive activities (Kastrup and Kleindienst-Cachay, 2016). In the UK, locating competitive sport within physical education has promoted elite sporting success but it has done little to equally engage girls and boys in sport (Stidder et al., 2013). The European Commission's Gender Equality in Sport (in the EU's Strategy for Gender Equality) encourages the development and implementation of strategies to promote gender equality in sport, including school-based sport. However, by framing this policy around hegemonic competitive performance sport rather than broader physical activity, it could be said that 'meta-political mis-framing and injustice has already occurred' (Devine, 2016; McSharry, 2017; European Commission, 2014).

11.2.3 School ethos and religion

The evidence showed that schools offer different things to different students, or at least that different students value aspects of the school differently. As well as the breadth of the responses, the material also stands out in the extent to which

the different codes are interwoven in how respondents conceptualise their school ethos. Community featured strongly, with the community created through and valued because of the inclusion of all students and the relationships between staff and students. Students see respect as the driving force of the school ethos, linked to valuing students for who they are and also to students reciprocating this respect and engagement. While students in a small number of schools thought there was an overfocus on academic achievement, many students and school staff felt that their school did genuinely value students and the relationship between students and staff, or that their school was above all a caring place. In particular, diversity and inclusion were pointed to as fundamental to the mission of the school by participants across the school community. The question of how a religious ethos fits into an increasingly secular society is one which raised strong opinions on both sides, as well as a sizable contingent of people who didn't feel strongly about it one way or the other. Overall, there was a sense in many schools of the ethos developing significantly over time – softening and opening up to more religious diversity among the student population.

The role that schools should play in students' faith formation was also seen to have changed in recent decades. With students of other faiths and none attending the Catholic and Church of Ireland schools in this study, respondents generally seemed positive about their school's ability to encourage students who shared the school ethos in their faith without alienating students who did not. However, a small number of respondents did report feeling compelled to participate in faith activities they did not wish to, or that the overall ethos of their school should not centre on a specific faith. With roughly half of secondary schools having an explicit religious ethos, students and their families do have a level of choice in attending a denominational or inter-/multi-denominational school. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, school choice is a complex process, and many students attend schools without regard to or despite rather than because of their ethos. There is significant debate internationally over the place of faith formation in the education system, with Ireland something of an outlier in the European context in terms of the number of publicly funded schools with an explicit religious ethos. As the nature of faith promotion continues to develop, it is vital that schools meaningfully consult with their community about how the ethos should be lived in the school and ensure students are allowed to engage as much or as little as they wish with faith activities.

The examination of school climate reveals predominantly positive interactions, with most students feeling accepted, respected and successful, though disparities emerged in relation to family characteristics, SEN status, gender and school experiences.

Students are less positive about their voice and involvement in school decision-making processes. While over half agree that teachers listen to their ideas or

opinions, only around one-quarter believe that they have a say in what happens at school or that their views would be taken into account if they wanted to make a change to their school. Relatively more positive responses were observed among boys in fifth year, students in single-sex boys' schools, as well as schools considered to have a stronger ethos.

11.2.4 Resource and infrastructural constraints

This study highlights variations in the perceived adequacy of supports and facilities across the school sectors, with non-fee-charging voluntary secondary schools faring much less well. School leaders in the voluntary secondary sector also highlighted the considerable demands being placed on them across the multiplicity of roles they play – administrative, financial, human resources, industrial relations, infrastructural. While research prior to the pandemic showed wide variation across schools in the extent to which digital technologies were embedded in teaching and learning (Marcus-Quinn et al., 2019), this study shows wide variations persist in the post-COVID era. Some schools continue to take a more traditional approach, while others can be classed as high-technology schools. Students are acutely aware of these differences and are particularly vocal on the perceived shortcomings in teacher competencies in this regard.

Marcus-Quinn and Hourigan (2022) note that during the pandemic it became clear that there is an appetite for high-quality open-access digital teaching and learning materials. To improve the consistency and reusability of such resources they argue the education community would benefit from easy access to shared quality templates that are professionally designed and usability tested. They state that such resources need to be designed and developed, and this requires professional time and resources – something that will not happen without investment. On this point, Cheshmehzangi et al. (2022), focusing specifically on the digital divide during the pandemic, highlight the need for context-specific research and policy.

Students attending fee-charging schools benefit from additional resources, which manifest in a diversity of ways. Students report higher levels of engagement (including liking school, working hard at school and viewing schoolwork as worth doing), lower levels of school absence, higher academic self-image, greater support for higher level maths take-up, greater levels of participation in sports (particularly among girls), and school cultures marked by a stronger focus on values and student voice. While dissimilar in many important respects, it is interesting to note UK research, which shows that private schooling in England is associated with cumulative moderate advantages at every stage of education. They suggest that the private sector, which is admittedly distinct to the fee-charging sector in Ireland, presents an interesting case of what could be expected from schools that are well resourced (Henderson et al., 2020).

11.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY

11.3.1 Curriculum and assessment reform

This study highlights weaknesses in the Junior Cycle Framework, particularly in terms of CBAs not being experienced as a positive learning experience and a mismatch between Junior and Senior Cycle education. It is interesting to note that recent publications from the longitudinal study of the Junior Cycle Framework (McGarr et al., 2022; 2023) echo the results of our research in voluntary secondary schools. They note that since the introduction of the framework, there have been developments in relation to teacher collaboration, professional conversations and the language that teachers have acquired to talk about learning. They suggest that teachers' classroom practices also appear to have shifted to facilitating more student-centred learning, but there is less evidence of this in our study.

In relation to impact, two main concerns were noted. Firstly, a misalignment was reported between the Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle, with many interviewees calling for the types of learning experienced at Junior Cycle to be followed through to Senior Cycle. Secondly, while students were deemed to learn from CBAs, it was noted that CBAs do not appear to have been experienced as intended. CBAs appear to be currently experienced by many as a significant assessment instrument and as a stressor resulting in anxiety among students (and teachers). The perceived low weighting afforded to CBAs, in comparison to the workload attached, was also noted (McGarr, 2022). Teachers perceived that the efforts students put into work associated with the CBAs should contribute more significantly to terminal assessment beyond what is already provided for by the assessment task. They also raised concerns about the number of CBAs students had to complete in a short period of time and the time taken for their completion. Difficulties associated with CBAs were considered to contribute to both student stress and difficulties in management of the work. The grading bands associated with the terminal exam were perceived to be too broad with respect to the 'merit' band. Some concerns were raised about the difficulty of securing a 'distinction' (McGarr et al., 2023).

A recent publication reported on evidence gathered during subject inspections with a focus on Junior Cycle conducted by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education, during the same period as this research (April and May 2023). Inspectors were generally very positive about the overall quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed. All but a few lessons were evaluated as being good or very good in terms of both the quality of teaching and the quality of learning. There was, however, evidence of significant scope for development in the area of assessment. The aspects of teaching considered by inspectors as the most positive were classroom management, and teachers' subject and pedagogical knowledge. The two aspects of teaching and learning about which inspectors were least positive in their lessons observed were: assessment and feedback to progress

learning; and students' ownership and responsibility for learning. In contrast to our study, they report that the majority of teachers and most students reported that their experience of the CBA process and CBA outcomes was positive. In general, students were more positive about their experience of the CBAs than their teachers. In a few schools, students reported that they did not feel that they were adequately prepared for CBAs and that this too led to stress.

Finally, the ASTI (2023) report on a survey of teachers who expressed varying degrees of satisfaction with aspects of the implementation of the framework across key elements. There was a majority belief among teachers that the subject specifications, coupled with the changes to the terminal examination, do not facilitate students to be prepared for the Senior Cycle curriculum. They argue that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Department of Education must address teachers' concerns in relation to the lack of depth of content in the subject specifications. Teacher workload and the provision of adequate professional time also needs to be addressed by the Department of Education. They also contend that the wellbeing programme should revert to the initial time allocation of 300 hours. The 400 hours allocation is seen to negatively impact on curriculum time for other subjects and inhibits a more integrated cross-curricular approach to this area of the curriculum.

11.3.2 Lessons for Senior Cycle redevelopment

This study has provided yet further evidence on the need for Senior Cycle redevelopment to proceed in a timely manner. In particular, stakeholders highlighted the need for an integrated Senior Cycle programme, incorporating aspects of the LCA programme into one mainstream programme. There are plans in development for greater flexibility around LCA student access to Leaving Certificate maths, modern foreign languages and (forthcoming) social, personal and health education (SPHE), and our findings suggest that these improvements will add hugely to buy-in from students who would benefit from the LCA programme. The ongoing shift towards multiple assessment modes is largely being viewed positively across stakeholder groups, pointing to a need for progress on State Examinations Commission (SEC) moderated school-based assessment modes. In addition, Level 1 and Level 2 Senior Cycle progression modules are currently under development and are to be implemented soon – a vital component of the redevelopment plans based on the results of this study.

Students in this study were vocal on the difficulties experienced on transition to Senior Cycle education, although this may partly reflect the timing of the pandemic and implications for levels of academic and social preparedness among the participating fifth year students. However, the findings suggest a need for greater transition support, both academic and social, as part of the Senior Cycle redevelopment. Finally, the persistence of gender differences in subject access,

subject and subject level choices, as well as in the extent to which subjects are seen as interesting or difficult, is concerning and highlights the need to develop a more inclusive and gender-neutral approach to curricular/subject provision within and across schools, coeducational and single-sex. This issue should also receive consideration as new subject specifications are developed.

11.3.3 Teacher professional development

These results are cause for concern for schools, in terms of their capacity as workplaces, particularly in relation to the recruitment and retention of teachers and other vital staff, as well as to work overload and burnout across the school community. The reliance on the volunteerism of teachers to provide extracurricular programmes was also questioned widely, with genuine concerns over the sustainability of this model.

Much of the evidence presented in this report can be linked to aspects of teacher professional development. It has been noted that initial teacher education (ITE) providers' capacity to respond to policy change can be hindered by staff levels and complexity around programme accreditation (Department of Education, 2023c). Areas identified through this recent consultation process as requiring closer attention include keeping pace with curricular reform and preparedness to teach in increasingly diverse classrooms, themes to the fore in this study. It was suggested that higher education institutions should provide evidence-based content accredited by relevant expert stakeholders in the area of supporting learners with additional needs. Some felt that insufficient time was given to this area in existing initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and called for mandatory modules for student teachers on supports for specific groups of children with learning difficulties (Department of Education, 2023c). More generally, the review pointed to the need to build on and strengthen assessment literacy among the teaching profession and preparedness to support the introduction of new subject areas across both primary and second-level schools. One issue that the review did not focus on, but which is prominent in this study, is that of digital skills. While the evidence shows technology and opportunities to use technology are more embedded within the Junior Cycle Framework when compared to Leaving Certificate level, students also raised concerns over teacher competency in using technologies effectively.

It should be noted that the Teaching Council has reviewed and revised standards for ITE, placing increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy, school placement, reflective learning and research-based practice. All new primary and post-primary ITE programmes must now meet the standards outlined in Céim (Teaching Council, 2020), and existing programmes are aligned with Céim since September 2022. The standards include seven core elements, which include inclusive education, global citizenship education and digital skills. This latter area includes digital literacy; the

use of digital technologies to support teaching, learning and assessment for all learners; the integration of digital skills across the programme including opportunities for student teachers to explore new and emerging technologies. The extent to which these developments will provide the necessary professional development opportunities for new teachers remains to be seen. The results of a system-wide report on the implementation of the Céím standards (to be available in the summer of 2024) will be important in this regard. It is interesting to note that the report will include a particular focus on inclusive education and global citizenship education, two areas highlighted in this study.

11.3.4 Wider civic, cultural and climate education

Overall, students across voluntary secondary schools did not seem to be engaged in activities that promote global competence, but largely consider themselves as being respectful towards people from other cultures. Overall, the evidence supports the argument for a greater focus on civic and cultural education. We also observe a clear disparity between students' awareness of key global issues and their actual engagement. This knowledge–action gap, especially in terms of students' civic engagement, is not unique to Ireland and is closely tied to students' socioeconomic backgrounds, with low levels of engagement being more pronounced among students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Jennings, 2019; McFarland and Starmanns, 2009; Levinson, 2004).

Closing this knowledge–action gap requires targeted, relevant and carefully designed educational programmes. For instance, a study by Mooney et al. (2022) on college students in the US found that a course focused on climate change, compared to a traditional introductory meteorology course, encouraged significant behaviour changes. Action-related components can be further enhanced when combined with appropriate and democratic learning, as suggested by Deisenrieder et al.'s 2020 study on youth in secondary schools in Austria and Germany. Students' meaningful and active participation also requires programmes to: be experiential; be grounded in global knowledge in concepts of citizenship; help students understand the challenges and how they might contribute to solutions; and teach them specific techniques to address these challenges (Lorenzini, 2013; Levinson, 2004). Programmes that provide factual knowledge, along with activities such as discussion and debate of critical issues, as well as quality extracurricular and student government activities, also prove effective in encouraging students' active civic participation (Youniss, 2011).

11.3.5 Inclusion in schools

Students, staff and wider stakeholders spoke repeatedly of the importance of inclusion in schools. For many students, they spoke of their school's ethos as embodying inclusion and inclusive values. Researchers have been increasingly

debating what inclusion should look like, particularly in terms of supporting students with additional educational needs. Commentators have suggested that the proliferation of special classes creates a tension with policy objectives around inclusion (Kenny et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2016). Students themselves valued being withdrawn in small groups for extra support, rather than more fixed and larger groupings. In terms of defining inclusion, Koutsouris (2019) argues that in order to achieve inclusion in education, a top–down approach influenced by national and international policy and a rights discourse might not be sufficient; this is because inclusion processes also operate at the level of everyday social interaction where policy has less influence. Such processes though are less explored or even ignored by the inclusion literature, as they are often seen as questioning or threatening inclusion (Slee, 2018).

The lack of awareness of disability may stem from a lack of understanding regarding what constitutes a disability (Eccles et al., 2018; Abernathy and Taylor, 2009), and is usually accompanied by concerns that disclosure will negatively impact their lives, even if they are aware. Our model results consistently show that students who are unsure about their SEN status share similar negative responses with their peers who have identified themselves as having SEN in various aspects, such as school engagement and academic self-image. Those who are uncertain about their SEN status may include students who are receiving support but are unaware of their SEN status or students who need support but have not been identified as such, with the latter group being more concerning. Given the limitations of current data, we cannot differentiate between these two groups. Future research is needed to unpack this group further.

11.3.6 Ensuring access to enriching activities and positive education programmes

This study has highlighted how school infrastructural deficits and teacher supply problems are impacting on the capacity of schools to offer a diversity of curricular and extracurricular activities. Harford and Fleming (2023) note that while the issue of a steady supply of teachers has been a feature of the evolving complexion of the Irish educational landscape for decades, the problem has become more pronounced in recent years. Despite this accentuation, there has been a reluctance at a policy level to engage with meaningful dialogue and action, which risks irrevocably damaging the profession and ultimately the education system. In addition, gendering in the nature of access to extracurricular sports, in particular, and in terms of what sports are valued across the school community, means that teenage girls and boys can have different sports opportunities and recognition for their achievements. In line with earlier work, there appears to be a normalisation of physical differences between boys and girls as the basis for unequal recognition and resourcing of girls' sport in certain, particularly coeducational, schools (McSharry, 2017). These issues require a twin policy response: resources to

support extracurricular provision across schools and guidelines to support gender equality in provision and recognition within coeducational schools.

According to the Department of Education and Skills (2019), wellbeing is comprised of many interrelated aspects, including being active, responsible, connected, resilient, appreciated, respected and aware. The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (Department of Education and Skills, 2019) recognises that wellbeing does not necessarily mean the absence of stress, or negative emotions in life, and that people's experience of wellbeing may vary, with everyone experiencing vulnerability at some stages in their journey through life.

There has also been a growing focus on the role of affective factors in school leadership, and in the change-management process in particular. A focus on areas such as processing emotional self-regulation, capacity to build trust, relationship-building, communicating effectively and managing conflict, can support affective capacity-building for school leaders (Redmond, 2016).

High levels of anxiety and stress among students were repeatedly reported in this research. Stakeholders and experts continue to emphasise the impact of COVID-19 on young people's mental health,[66] highlighting dramatic increases in referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), as well as questions over the capacity of agencies like the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), CAMHS and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to respond to need. Similar levels of psychological distress are evident in other countries (Allen et al., 2023; Nolan and Smyth, 2021). High levels of unmet demand for child and adolescent health services in Ireland have been clearly documented (Brick et al., 2020), with waiting lists likely to have grown considerably over recent years. Additional supports were provided in Budget 2023 to alleviate the cost of living for students, as well as €5 million for mental health supports for the 2022/2023 academic year. However, it is likely that much greater funding will be required to provide adequate preventive and early interventions as well as treatment in schools and other settings.

To better support student wellbeing at school, educationalists have pointed to growing interest in school-based 'positive education' programmes, which focus on helping young people to flourish in life using best practices in education. Socioemotional learning curricula that aim to explicitly teach coping skills and resilience, and raise awareness of the importance of students' strengths, self-determination, positive relationships and emotions, are becoming more mainstream within schools (Rickard et al., 2023). The wellbeing programme at

[66] Twohig, A., E. Barrett, F. McNicholas, K. Moore and M. O'Sullivan (2023). 'Young people and the mental health crisis', Letters, *Irish Times*, 6 January, https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/2023/01/06/young-people-and-mental-health-crisis/.

Junior Cycle level also has an important role to play and we saw evidence of the benefits across the case study schools. Various school-based programmes, guidelines and initiatives have been established to support students' wellbeing at both primary and post-primary level.[67] Examples include the *Friends* programmes developed by NEPS to help students manage anxiety and develop mental resilience, the Setting Up a Social Skills Training Group programme, which facilitates schools in enhancing students' social and behavioural skills, and the Health Service Executive (HSE) initiative Mind Our Minds, promoting mental health among young people in their schools and local communities.

What this study has showed more than anything is the importance of social connectedness within and beyond the school community in fostering student wellbeing and development. Students attending schools with a stronger ethos, and those with positive school engagement, report higher levels of life satisfaction. High levels of participation in sports and cultural activities and active participation in school-organised afterschool and lunchtime activities are central to student belonging and engagement. What happens in the classroom is just as important, with greater self-confidence reported among students experiencing more interactive teaching approaches, and positive Transition Year (TY) and LCA experiences carrying a host of benefits in terms of self-awareness and personal development. But constraints are clearly apparent, ranging from outdated facilities that 'don't lend themselves to change' in (cross-)curricular and extracurricular terms, and the lack of key facilities (like sports halls, home economics rooms) and resources to support schools in offering a diversity of activities. The social structuring of participation in youth clubs, arts and cultural activities also raises questions over the adequacy of resourcing for community facilities in socially disadvantaged communities.

While the experience during COVID-19 and since has highlighted the urgent need for professional, therapeutic supports for children and young adults, the results from this study also highlight the importance of resourcing all school communities to provide a diversity of enriching activities within and outside the classroom to support young people as they develop.

11.4 CONCLUSION

One thing that struck us as researchers during this project was the level of change underway within Irish voluntary secondary schools, especially in relation to the seismic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic but also evident in longer-term developments in Irish education. Considering even the last 20 years, or the space of a single generation, there have been massive shifts in how students with SEN

67 Department of Education. 'Catalogue of wellbeing resources for post-primary schools', webpage, https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a9118-catalogue-of-wellbeing-resources-for-schools/.

are included and supported in mainstream schools as the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act is implemented and inclusion becomes a genuine priority. There have been huge and positive developments in supports for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds over the same period, most notably with the introduction of the DEIS programme. On the day-to-day level, classrooms have been transformed by technology use and evolving curricula, among other things. Within the voluntary secondary sector specifically, the number of students in single-sex schools has continued to fall and the proportion of Irish schools with a religious ethos has dropped as new schools have been almost exclusively coeducational and inter- or multi-denominational.

Yet among all this change, much has remained the same. On a negative note, significant parts of the LCA curriculum have not changed at all over this period, simply growing more outdated each year. While Leaving Certificate curricula have evolved and assessment has diversified in many subjects, the focus on this high-stakes state exam has only intensified over time. More positively, the ethos of respect and service that guides schools across the voluntary secondary sector has strengthened over time, even as the place of religious orders within schools has faded. We believe that the findings of this report show that in many ways schools are doing what they have always done, but more so, in terms of teaching and learning, care and wellbeing support and extracurricular provision.

There is no reason to think the scale of change over the next 20 years will be any less significant than that of the 20 years past. It is vital that the same ambition that underpinned the DEIS programme and EPSEN Act guides continued efforts to build a genuinely inclusive school system for all students, and that the potential of technology to support learning is harnessed. This report has highlighted the support within schools for single-sex and denominational schooling, but also the extent to which many students, parents and staff disagree with their school's gender mix or specific ethos, suggesting the need for genuine conversation around these areas in schools across Ireland.

Within this evolving system, however, this report shows some strengths of voluntary secondary schools which should be preserved. In particular, in a time of increasing focus on international standardised assessment measures – like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) PISA study or the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) scores – as the measure of an education system, the commitment of voluntary secondary schools to the holistic development of students as part of a school community is more important than ever. Schools are not just places where young people learn testable subject matter, they are a dense web of educational experiences and social relations where children are shaped into adults. We hope this report has given a

sense of how voluntary secondary schools are going about this work at the moment, and how they might continue doing so in the future.

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APPENDIX – ADDITIONAL TABLES

TABLE A1 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF HAVING POSITIVE SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Variables		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.23 ***	0.19 ***	0.10 ***
Girls (Ref: boys and other[68])		0.63 ***	0.60 *	0.45 **
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education[69])		1.01	1.01	0.99
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty[70])		1.69 ***	1.69 ***	1.34 *
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.63 **	0.62 **	0.75
	Had SEN	0.61 **	0.62 **	0.66 #
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		1.11 **	1.11 **	1.04
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.24	0.94
	Fee-charging schools		1.11	0.94
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		1.31	1.25
	Boys school		1.26	1.02
Missed over 10 days (Ref: missed 10 days less[71])				0.71 *
Always missed friends during COVID-19 (Ref: sometimes/never missed friends[72])				1.66 ***
Positive school engagement (Ref: less positive)				1.96 ***
Positive teacher interaction (Ref: fewer positive interactions)				1.35 *
Positive teacher expectation (Ref: lower expectation)				2.43 ***
Strong value emphasis at school (Ref: weaker value emphasis)				1.45 #
Stronger school ethos (Ref: weaker ethos)				2.73 ***
N		1,844	1,844	1,673
Pseudo R2		0.03	0.03	0.19

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, school absence and their COVID-19 experience) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

68 The reference group here includes those who identified themselves as boys, as well as those who identified themselves as 'non-binary or other'.

69 The reference group here includes those who reported to have only parent with a third-level degree, had neither with a third-level degree or 'I don't know'.

70 The reference group here includes those who reported that it was 'fairly easy', 'easy' or 'very easy' to pay all the bills, those who 'were not sure/would rather not say', as well as those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

71 The reference group here includes those who reported missing ten or fewer days of school, as well as those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

72 The reference group here includes those who 'sometime/never' missed their friends during the COVID-19 pandemic, and those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

TABLE A2 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF MISSING OVER 10 DAYS AT SCHOOL

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.61 ***	0.59 *	0.62 #
Girls (Ref: boys and other)		1.16	1.53 *	1.36
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		0.71 ***	0.76 *	0.85
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		0.68 ***	0.70 ***	0.75 **
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	1.22	1.22	0.95
	Had SEN	1.67 ***	1.69 ***	1.26
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		1.01	1.03	0.99
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.03	1.05
	Fee-charging schools		0.81	0.76 #
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		0.66 **	0.70 *
	Boys school		0.95	1.02
Positive school engagement (Ref: less positive)				0.53 ***
Above average academic self-image (Ref: average or below[73])				0.59 ***
Always struggled to engage with study during COVID-19 (Ref: Sometimes/never struggled to engage[74])				1.52 ***
Negative teacher interaction (Ref: fewer negative interactions)				1.29 #
Positive school engagement (Ref: less positive)				0.80
Strong value emphasis at school (Ref: weaker value emphasis)				1.37 *
N		1,856	1,856	1,765
Pseudo R2		0.02	0.05	0.07

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, academic self-image and whether the student struggled to engage during the COVID-19 pandemic) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

[73] The reference group here includes those who reported to have an 'average', 'just below average' or 'below average' exam performance, and those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

[74] The reference group here includes those who 'sometimes/never struggled to engage with their study during COVID', and those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

TABLE A3 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF LIKING SCHOOL

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.43 ***	0.34 **	0.10 ***
Girls (Ref: boys and other)		0.99	0.97	1.27
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		1.82 ***	1.56 ***	1.48 ***
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.40 ***	1.35 ***	1.01
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.63 ***	0.62 ***	0.87
	Had SEN	0.65 *	0.64 *	1.04
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		1.08	1.07	1.08
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.23	1.24
	Fee-charging schools		2.26 ***	2.31 ***
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		1.27	1.17
	Boys school		1.30	1.14
Belong at school (Ref: don't belong[75])				2.72 ***
Above average academic self-image (Ref: average or below)				1.69 ***
Missed over 10 days (Ref: missed 10 days less)				0.48 ***
Positive teacher expectation (Ref: lower expectation)				3.25 ***
Positive social engagement (Ref: negative engagement)				1.48 *
Participates in arts activities (Ref: no participation[76])				1.48 **
N		1,856	1,856	1,837
Pseudo R2		0.038	0.055	0.193

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, sense of belonging at school, academic self-image, school absence and art activity participation) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group.
For ease of reading, explanations in the footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

75 The reference group here includes those who (strongly) disagreed, felt neutral, or did not respond to the question regarding their sense of belonging at school (i.e., missing values).

76 The reference group here includes those who 'did not participate in art, drama, dance or music clubs/practice', and those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

TABLE A4 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF (STRONGLY) AGREEING THAT SCHOOLWORK IS WORTH DOING

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		1.26	0.84	0.49 *
Girls (Ref: boys and other)		1.23	1.27	1.30
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		1.47 *	1.28 #	1.05
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.53 ***	1.47 ***	1.33 **
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.53 ***	0.52 ***	0.62 ***
	Had SEN	0.54 ***	0.56 ***	0.73 *
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		1.11 *	1.09 *	1.07
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.15	1.09
	Fee-charging schools		1.77 ***	1.51 **
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		1.64 ***	1.48 #
	Boys school		1.88 ***	1.57 **
Like school (Ref: dislike[77])				2.60 ***
Belong at school (Ref: don't belong)				1.65 ***
Above average academic self-image (Ref: average or below)				1.16
Missed over 10 days (Ref: missed 10 days less)				0.96
Positive teacher interaction (Ref: fewer positive interactions)				1.68 ***
Negative teacher interaction (Ref: fewer negative interactions)				0.56 ***
Student-led ethos (Ref: less student-led)				1.59 **
N		1,856	1,856	1,733
Pseudo R2		0.04	0.06	0.15

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, sense of belonging at school, academic self-image and school absence) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

[77] The reference group here includes those who reported feeling 'alright' about their school, those who did not like their school, or those who hated their school, as well as those who did not respond to this question (missing values).

TABLE A5 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF HAVING POSITIVE TEACHER INTERACTION AT SCHOOL

Variables		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.27 ***	0.20 ***	0.05 ***
Girls (Ref: boys and other)		0.80	0.95	1.34
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		1.20	1.22	1.03
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.58 ***	1.60 ***	1.26
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.56 ***	0.56 ***	0.76 *
	Had SEN	0.83	0.85	1.50
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		1.02	1.03	1.02
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.32 #	1.19
	Fee-charging schools		1.11	0.85
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		1.00	0.88
	Boys school		1.29	1.21
Above average academic self-image (Ref: average or below)				3.07 ***
missed over 10 days (Ref: missed 10 days less)				0.75 #
Negative teacher interaction (Ref: fewer negative interactions)				1.65 *
Positive teacher expectation (Ref: lower expectation)				4.05 ***
Student-led ethos (Ref: less student-led)				1.87 ***
Stronger school ethos (Ref: weaker ethos)				1.68 **
N		1,778	1,778	1,673
Pseudo R2		0.02	0.02	0.19

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, academic self-image and school absence) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

TABLE A6 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF HAVING POSITIVE TEACHER EXPECTATIONS

Variables		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.21 ***	0.16 ***	0.10 ***
Girls (Ref: boys and other)		0.59 ***	0.73	0.50 **
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		0.90	0.89	0.57 ***
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.60 ***	1.60 ***	1.25
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.53 ***	0.53 ***	0.81
	Had SEN	0.55 **	0.56 **	0.69
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		1.16 *	1.17 *	1.09
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.23	0.83
	Fee-charging schools		1.15	0.78
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		0.96	0.78 #
	Boys school		1.31	0.66 #
Positive school engagement (Ref: less positive)				4.02 ***
Above average academic self-image (Ref: average or below)				1.34
Missed over 10 days (Ref: missed 10 days less)				1.11
Positive teacher interaction (Ref: fewer positive interactions)				3.11 ***
Negative teacher interaction (Ref: fewer negative interactions)				0.38 ***
Positive social engagement (Ref: less positive)				2.46 ***
Student-led ethos (Ref: less student-led)				1.75 **
Stronger school ethos (Ref: weaker ethos)				2.82 ***
N		1,847	1,847	1,648
Pseudo R2		0.04	0.04	0.32

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, academic self-image and school absence) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

TABLE A7 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF HAVING STUDENT-LED ETHOS AT SCHOOL

Variables		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.41 ***	0.24 ***	0.10 ***
Girls (Ref: boys and other)		1.03	1.04	1.17
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		1.13	1.08	1.01
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.16	1.16	0.86
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.73 *	0.72 *	1.07
	Had SEN	0.64 *	0.66 *	0.92
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		1.02	1.02	0.98
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.79 ***	1.74 ***
	fee charging schools		1.57 ***	1.48 ***
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		1.53 #	1.56
	Boys school		1.65 ***	1.41 ***
Belong at school (Ref: don't belong)				2.27 ***
Above average academic self-image (Ref: average or below)				1.00
Positive school engagement (Ref: less positive)				1.32 #
Positive teacher interaction (Ref: fewer positive interactions)				1.78 ***
Negative teacher interaction (Ref: fewer negative interactions)				0.72 #
Positive teacher expectation (Ref: lower expectation)				1.73 **
Stronger school ethos (Ref: weaker ethos)				2.64 ***
N		1,764	1,764	1,654
Pseudo R2		0.01	0.02	0.15

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, sense of belonging at school and academic self-image) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

TABLE A8 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF HAVING ABOVE AVERAGE ACADEMIC SELF-IMAGE

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.28 ***	0.23 ***	0.24 ***
Girls (Ref: boys and other)		0.52 **	0.64 **	0.61 **
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		2.09 ***	1.83 ***	1.67 ***
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.80 ***	1.74 **	1.50 *
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.37 ***	0.36 ***	0.45 ***
	Had SEN	0.34 ***	0.34 ***	0.38 ***
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		0.95	0.95	0.91 *
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.04	1.06
	Fee-charging schools		1.81 **	1.91 ***
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		0.94	0.86
	Boys school		1.28	1.16
Positive school engagement (Ref: less positive)				2.11 ***
Missed over 10 days (Ref: missed 10 days less)				0.65 **
Positive teacher interaction (Ref: fewer positive interactions)				2.14 ***
Negative teacher interaction (Ref: fewer negative interactions)				0.55 ***
Positive teacher expectation (Ref: lower expectation)				1.59 ***
N		1,856	1,856	1,739
Pseudo R2		0.08	0.09	0.18

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty and school absence) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

TABLE A9 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF COVID-19 STILL IMPACTING OVERALL LEARNING TO A GREAT EXTENT

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.04 ***	0.04 ***	0.02 ***
Girls (Ref: boys & other)		0.94	0.74	0.72
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		0.86	0.86	0.98
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.14	1.14	1.23
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	1.40 ***	1.40 ***	1.12
	Had SEN	1.97 ***	1.96 ***	1.43 *
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		1.46 ***	1.46 ***	1.52 ***
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		0.94	0.98
	Fee-charging schools		0.89	0.78
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		1.26	1.20
	Boys school		0.92	1.00
Belong at school (Ref: don't belong)				0.66 *
Above average academic self-image (Ref: Average or below)				0.96
Missed over 10 days (Ref: missed 10 days less)				1.00
Always missed friends during COVID-19 (Ref: sometimes/never missed friends)				1.46 **
Always had internet problems during COVID-19 (Ref: sometimes/never had internet problems)[78]				1.58 **
Always had problems getting teachers' help during COVID-19 (Ref: sometimes/never had problem)[79]				2.01 ***
Always struggled to engage with study during COVID-19 (Ref: sometimes/never struggled to engage)				1.73 ***
Negative teacher interaction (Ref: fewer negative interactions)				1.79 **
N		1,856	1,856	1,789
Pseudo R2		0.05	0.06	0.12

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, sense of belonging at school, academic self-image, school absence, their COVID-19 experience) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

78 The reference group here includes those who 'sometime/never' had problems with internet connection during the COVID-19 pandemic, and those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

79 The reference group here includes those who 'sometime/never' had problems accessing teachers' help during the COVID-19 pandemic, and those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

TABLE A10 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF HAVING STRONG VALUE EMPHASIS AT SCHOOL

Variables		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		1.53 *	1.11	0.72
Girls (Ref: boys and other)		3.49 ***	2.80 ***	3.09 ***
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		1.41 **	1.27 #	1.14
No Economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.05	1.04	0.95
SEN/Disability (Ref: No SEN)	Not sure	0.69 *	0.69 *	0.76 #
	Had SEN	0.53 ***	0.54 ***	0.61 **
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		1.12 **	1.12 **	1.10 *
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.57 **	1.34 #
	Fee-charging schools		2.33 ***	2.06 **
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		1.70 *	1.49 #
	Boys school		1.27	1.06
Positive school engagement (Ref: less positive)				2.03 **
Above average academic self-image (Ref: average or below)				1.24
Missed over 10 days (Ref: missed 10 days less)				1.42 *
Positive social engagement (Ref: negative engagement)				1.59 *
Student-led ethos (Ref: less student-led)				2.11 ***
Stronger school ethos (Ref: weaker ethos)				1.71 *
N		1,787	1,787	1,668
Pseudo R2		0.08	0.10	0.15

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, academic self-image and school absence) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

TABLE A11 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF PARTICIPATING IN SPORTS ACTIVITY AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		5.21 ***	3.84 ***	2.84 ***
Girls (Ref: boys and other)		0.77 *	0.78	0.90
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		2.52 ***	2.11 ***	2.03 ***
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.68 ***	1.61 ***	1.49 **
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.68 **	0.66 **	0.78
	Had SEN	0.43 ***	0.43 ***	0.51 ***
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		0.83 ***	0.8 ***	0.78 ***
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		0.91	0.84
	Fee-charging schools		2.00 ***	1.76 **
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		1.41	1.31
	Boys school		1.63 *	1.52 *
School size (Ref: Large school)	Medium size		1.47	1.46 **
	Small size		1.07	1.20
Belong at school (Ref: Don't belong)				2.08 ***
Missed over 10 days (Ref: Missed 10 days less)				0.70 **
Positive teacher interaction (Ref: fewer positive interactions)				1.54 **
N		1,856	1856	1,778
Pseudo R2		0.07	0.10	0.13

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, sense of belonging at school and school absence) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

TABLE A12 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF STUDENTS APPRECIATING READING FOR PLEASURE

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.15 ***	0.11 ***	0.06 ***
Girls (Ref: boys and other)		1.28	0.85	0.86
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		1.32 *	1.36 *	1.28
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.23	1.27 #	0.98
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.77	0.76	1.02
	Had SEN	1.11	1.13	1.42 *
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		0.91 #	0.91 #	0.85 **
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.74 **	1.59 **
	Fee-charging schools		1.14	1.14
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		2.08 ***	2.20 ***
	Boys school		1.29	1.09
Like school (Ref: dislike)				1.41 *
Above average academic self-image (Ref: average or below)				1.13
COVID-19 still impacting on overall learning (Ref: overall learning is less impacted)[80]				1.45 #
Positive teacher expectation (Ref: lower expectation)				2.51 ***
Stronger school ethos (Ref: weaker ethos)				1.64 **
Positive teacher interaction (Ref: fewer positive interactions)				1.60 ***
N		1,856	1,856	1,712
Pseudo R2		0.01	0.02	0.10

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, school attitude, academic self-image and COVID-19 long-lasting impact on overall learning) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

80 The reference group here refers to those who reported the COVID-19 pandemic had ‘a little’ or ‘no’ impact on their overall learning now, and those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

TABLE A13.1 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF SCHOOL BENEFITTING STUDENTS IN GETTING INVOLVED IN SPORTS 'A LOT' (BOYS ONLY)

Boys		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.63 *	0.55 *	0.37 **
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		1.25	1.02	0.91
No economic difficulty (Ref: Have difficulty)		1.41 *	1.28	1.16
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.74	0.75	0.87
	Had SEN	0.82	0.93	0.93
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		0.96	0.93	0.91
School type (Ref: Non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		0.93	0.81
	Fee-charging Schools		1.89 **	1.92 *
School gender mix (Ref: Co-ed schools)	Boys school		1.94 ***	1.73 *
School size (Ref: large school)	Medium size		0.75	0.84
	Small size		0.64	0.66
Positive school engagement (Ref: less positive)				1.19
Missed over 10 days (Ref: missed 10 days less)				1.12
Positive teacher interaction (Ref: fewer positive interactions)				1.63 *
Student-led ethos (Ref: less student-led)				1.54 *
Positive social engagement (Ref: negative engagement)				1.70 **
Stronger school ethos (Ref: weaker ethos)				2.03 **
N		793	793	695
Pseudo R2		0.01	0.05	0.12

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Only boys are included in this model.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty and school absence) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

TABLE A13.2 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF SCHOOL BENEFITTING STUDENTS IN GETTING INVOLVED IN SPORTS 'A LOT' (GIRLS ONLY)

Girls		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.63 *	0.73	0.93
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		1.74 ***	1.39 *	1.18
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.25	1.20	0.97
SEN/sisability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.63 **	0.62 **	0.80
	Had SEN	0.61 *	0.54 **	0.70
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		0.79 ***	0.77 ***	0.70 ***
School type (Ref: non-DEIS Schools)	DEIS schools		2.85 ***	2.77 ***
	Fee-charging schools		2.49 ***	2.45 ***
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed Schools)	Girls school		1.64 **	1.60 *
School size (Ref: large school)	Medium size		0.66 **	0.66 **
	Small size		0.16 ***	0.14 ***
Positive school engagement (Ref: less positive)				1.57 *
Missed over 10 days (Ref: missed 10 days less)				0.63 **
Positive teacher interaction (Ref: fewer positive interactions)				1.29
Student-led ethos (Ref: less student-led)				1.30
Positive social engagement (Ref: negative engagement)				2.21 ***
Stronger school ethos (Ref: weaker ethos)				1.32
N		1,063	1,063	965
Pseudo R2		0.05	0.09	0.14

Notes: ****p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.*
Only girls are included in this model.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty and school absence) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

TABLE A14 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BEING SATISFIED WITH THEIR LIFE (LIFE SATISFACTION LEVEL AT 8 OR ABOVE)

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		1.11	0.92	0.26 ***
Girls (Ref: Boys and other)		0.56 ***	0.56 ***	0.58 **
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		1.20	1.22	1.11
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.51 ***	1.52 ***	1.31 #
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	0.61 ***	0.61 ***	0.79 *
	Had SEN	0.52 ***	0.53 ***	0.62 *
Fifth year (Ref: second year)		0.84 ***	0.84 ***	0.86 **
School type (Ref: Non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.18	1.13
	Fee-charging Schools		0.97	0.88
School gender Mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		1.2	1.2
	Boys school		1.23	1.05
Belong at school (Ref: Don't belong)				2.18 ***
Felt unhappy at school (Ref: Not feeling unhappy at school)[81]				0.64 *
Good wellbeing support at school (Ref: poor wellbeing support)				1.64 ***
Positive teacher interaction (Ref: fewer positive interactions)				1.35 **
Stronger school ethos (Ref: weaker ethos)				1.62 ***
Always had parent help with homework during COVID-19 (Ref: sometimes/never had parents' help)[82]				1.42 *
COVID-19 still impacting on wellbeing (Ref: wellbeing is less impacted)[83]				0.52 ***
Participates in sports activities (Ref: no participation)[84]				1.44 *
Participates in arts activities (Ref: no participation)				1.26 *

81 The reference group here refers to those who 'agree,' 'feel neutral,' 'disagree,' or 'strongly disagree' with the statement that they found school to be a place where they felt unhappy, as well as those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

82 The reference group here refers to those who 'sometimes/never' had parents' help during the COVID-19 pandemic, and those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

83 The reference group here refers to those who reported COVID had 'a little' or 'no' impact on their wellbeing now, and those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

84 The reference group here refers to those who did not participate in sports or other physical activities, and those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

TABLE A14 (CONTD.) MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BEING SATISFIED WITH THEIR LIFE (LIFE SATISFACTION LEVEL AT 8 OR ABOVE)

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
N		1,856	1,856	1,715
Pseudo R2		0.04	0.04	0.14

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, sense of belonging at school, wellbeing support at school, whether they had parent help during the COVID-19 pandemic and long-lasting impact of COVID-19 on their wellbeing) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

TABLE A15.1 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BEING WORRIED ABOUT FUTURE (FIFTH YEAR ONLY)

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.34 ***	0.27 ***	0.19 ***
Girls (Ref: Boys and other)		1.95 ***	3.18 ***	2.91 **
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		0.75 #	0.79	0.82
No economic difficulty (Ref: Have difficulty)		1.09	1.10	1.16
SEN/disability (Ref: no SEN)	Not sure	1.34	1.36	1.35
	Had SEN	1.74 *	1.81 **	1.93 **
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.14	1.27
	Fee-charging Schools		0.95	1.07
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		0.70	0.70
	Boys school		1.35	1.35
Positive school engagement (Ref: less positive)				0.53 ***
Above average academic self-image (Ref: Average or below)				0.75
Missed over 10 days (Ref: missed 10 days less)				1.02
COVID-19 still impacting on overall learning (Ref: overall learning is less impacted)				1.72 **
Planned to go for HE after leaving school (Ref: no HE plans)[85]				1.94 **
N		792	792	753
Pseudo R2		0.03	0.03	0.06

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Only fifth year students were included in the model as this information was only collected from fifth year students.
HE=Higher education.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, academic self-image, school absence, COVID-19 long-lasting impact on overall learning, and their higher education plans) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

[85] The reference group here includes those who did not plan to go for higher education, and those who did not respond to this question (i.e., missing values).

TABLE A15.2 MULTILEVEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF BEING EXCITED ABOUT FUTURE (FIFTH YEAR ONLY)

		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant		0.63 **	0.92 *	0.48 *
Girls (Ref: boys and other)		0.75 #	0.84	0.80
University-educated parents (Ref: lower education)		1.35 *	1.45 *	1.34 #
No economic difficulty (Ref: have difficulty)		1.33 #	1.34 #	1.11
SEN/Disability (Ref: No SEN)	Not sure	0.55 **	0.56 **	0.67 #
	Had SEN	0.53 **	0.56 *	0.63 #
School type (Ref: non-DEIS schools)	DEIS schools		1.02	0.91
	Fee-charging Schools		0.72	0.66 #
School gender mix (Ref: co-ed schools)	Girls school		1.01	0.97
	Boys school		1.21	1.07
Positive school engagement (Ref: less positive)				2.27 ***
Belong at school (Ref: don't belong)				1.4 #
Above average academic self-image (Ref: average or below)				1.49 *
Always had parent help with homework during COVID-19 (Ref: sometimes/never had parents' help)				1.61 *
Planned to go for HE after leaving school (Ref: no HE plans)				0.70 #
N		792	792	756
Pseudo R2		0.03	0.03	0.07

Notes: ***p<0.001; ** p<0.01; *p<0.05; #p<0.1.
Only fifth year students were included in the model as this information was only collected from fifth year students.
HE=Higher education.
Variables with missing values in the reference group are noted and explained in a footnote. We have checked the coefficients of missing dummy variables (i.e., the missing dummy variables of parental education, economic difficulty, sense of belonging at school, academic self-image, their access to parents' help during COVID-19, and their higher education plans) in this model, and none of these variables was found to be statistically significant at a 5% level. Therefore, missing values are included in the reference group, as they do not differ significantly from the rest of the reference group. For ease of reading, explanations in footnotes are only provided for variables appearing for the first time in the model.

TABLE A16 STUDENT PROFILE IN SURVEY IN VOLUNTARY SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND GUI 08'COHORT DATA (WAVE 6)

		Voluntary secondary schools in our sample			GUI 08 'Cohort				
		Fee-charging	Non-fee-charging	Total	Fee-charging secondary	Non-fee-charging secondary	ETB	Comprehensive/ community	Total
Gender	Female	56%	55%	55%	40%	48%	46%	50%	48%
	Male	45%	45%	45%	60%	52%	54%	50%	52%
Disability/SEN	No SEN	84%	86%	86%	71%	74%	71%	68%	72%
	Had SEN	16%	14%	14%	29%	26%	29%	32%	28%
Parental education*	No degree	24%	62%	55%	46%	77%	86%	81%	79%
	Degree	76%	38%	45%	54%	23%	14%	19%	21%
Economic difficulty*	No economic difficulty	85%	76%	78%	77%	61%	55%	56%	60%
	Had economic difficulty	15%	24%	22%	23%	39%	45%	44%	40%

Source: Survey in voluntary secondary schools, as reported here; GUI 08' Cohort, Wave 6.
Note: Parental education and economic difficulty measures differ slightly between the voluntary secondary schools survey and the GUI. In the former, 'degree' refers to those with both university-educated parents, and 'no degree' refers to those with either or neither university-educated parents, or those who did not know their parents' education level. The economic difficulty measure is based on students' reports. 'No economic difficulty' refers to those who reported that it was 'fairly easy', 'easy', or 'very easy' to pay all the bills, as well as those who had the specified list of material goods, and those who 'did not have and did not want' them. 'Had economic difficulty' refers to those who had difficulty paying bills and those who 'did not have but want[ed]' the specified list of material items. In the GUI, parental education refers to the primary caregiver's education level. 'Degree' refers to those who had a university degree or above, and 'No degree' refers to anything less. The economic difficulty measure in GUI data is based on primary caregivers' reports. 'No economic difficulty' refers to those who reported no difficulty in making ends meet, and 'Had economic difficulty' refers to those who had great or some difficulty in making ends meet.

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