CSL

CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES

National longitudinal cohort study
of primary schooling in Ireland

CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES: EQUALITIES IN CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES – THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL BACKGROUND

UCD SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, DUBLIN REPORT NO. 8A 2024

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An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
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CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES

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CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES: EQUALITIES IN CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES – THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL BACKGROUND (2019 TO 2023)

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SUPPORTED BY

CONTENT

THE CENTRALITY OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORLDS TO THEIR LEARNING

A key focus of the *Children's School Lives* (CSL) longitudinal study is to understand the factors which shape children's experiences of their learning and ultimately their capacities to flourish both in the here and now as children, but also in their future lives as adults. Our previous report into the wellbeing of children (Report 7) highlighted attributes related to children's feelings about themselves and their lives in school – levels of happiness, worry, interest in learning as well as sense of accomplishment and meaning in life. In this report we locate children's flourishing within the wider social context of differences in wealth, poverty, social status and belonging in the society at large. It is children, including those in primary school, who are at greatest risk of poverty[1] (CSO 2024) in Ireland. While all children have a right *to* education, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (Assembly, U. G. [1989]. Convention on the Rights of the Child. United Nations, Treaty Series, 1577[3], 1–23.) children's capacity to realise these rights *within* education is influenced by the social, material and economic conditions of their everyday lives. This is especially important with respect to the earlier years of education, including in primary schools, where the foundations for children's educational trajectories are established.

Previous reports have considered how children experience their learning with respect to Pedagogy (Report 5), Curriculum and Assessment (Report 6) and Wellbeing (Report 7). We have also considered the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Report 2), in addition to transitions into the primary school (Report 4). A central thread has been the conceptualisation of learning as a social process, influenced, shaped and informed by the relationships children have with their teachers, their peers, their parents and more widely between primary schools and their local communities. It is through these relationships that children come to know themselves and their place in the world. Understood as children's social worlds, these are influenced by their socio-economic status - experiences of wealth and poverty including markers of social status and belonging; their access to good food, adequate clothing, warmth and housing; local communities which are safe and which provide opportunities for fun, play and wider community engagement; family and support networks that provide children with the love, care and nurture they need to thrive. In this report we delve more deeply into these social dimensions of children's everyday lives, exploring how these influence their primary school lives.

Central to educational success is having the resources which equip and support a child to engage with their learning. Such resources not only include income and material wealth but also knowledge and understanding of how the education system works as well as having access to social networks of support and information to ensure educational success. Combined, these resources position children with the confidence, readiness and overall dispositions to engage with their learning. This is where issues of poverty and wealth are especially important as they set the conditions through which children's everyday lives support or detract from the tasks of living and learning. Care and nurture are central conditions that support children to thrive but are challenged in contexts of high-stress and social deprivation. In the absence of economic, cultural and social resources, children struggle, coping not only with the impact of economic insecurity (that increasingly includes food and housing insecurity) but also with the experience of social life on the margins. A sense of confidence and pride in oneself and one's place

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[1] By age group, children have the highest risk of poverty in Ireland, most especially those aged 6-17 years CSO 2024, Roantree et al 2024).

in the world, alongside a positive sense of one's social status are key to how children navigate their educational journeys. Shame and social stigma are powerful indicators of misrecognition and feeling 'less than' and as outsiders in a wealthy society. Social, economic and educational policy intersect in everyday life in schools. The negative impacts of social, economic and educational policies are most pronounced in communities experiencing high levels of poverty. Where there is a clustering of children in a local community or school in a context of high poverty the negative impact tends to be most pronounced. Over time this can give rise to a sense of disconnection between the child's life at home/in the local community and that of the school, culminating in intergenerational experiences of trauma, school absenteeism and early school drop-out. These structural social class dynamics can also influence practices in schools – in the opportunities created for children's learning, in the climate for learning in classrooms and in expectations for children's learning in schools.

Schools are in many ways mirrors to the wider society, reflecting processes of wider social and economic change through the children that attend daily. Shifts in opportunity brought about through economic and social development permeate into the lives of local communities, in families and schools. This report considers how these shifts structure children's experience of primary schooling and if children are positioned differently to realise their potential, by virtue of their social background. Investment in children and childhood is often framed in terms of tackling wider structural inequalities – and education perceived as a key mechanism through which a desired 'future' can be obtained. While common sense suggests that education is always a good thing, a key question is the extent to which the system works in favour of those who are already advantaged and can engage with it to the maximum effect, drawing on the range of resources at their disposal.

In this report we conceptualise these dynamics through the lens of children's social worlds. We consider issues of prosperity and privilege, as well as poverty and stigma in children's lives as they transition through primary school. Factors related to participation in extracurricular activities, future aspirations and expectations, academic self-concept and children's engagement with learning are explored through the lens of children's social background (reported levels of family affluence and being in a school designated as DEIS/non-DEIS). Findings from the CSL national study are integrated with more in-depth analysis in case study schools drawing on the voices and perspectives of the key actors in children's lives (parents, grandparents, teachers and principals, peers) providing a holistic and inter-generational window into the centrality of social context to children's school lives.

KEY FINDINGS

The social context of primary schools

- Children attending primary schools reflect the social diversity in Irish society at large. This diversity is mirrored in our CSL national study sample; 54% of children are classified as medium affluence, 20% of children can be classified as high affluence (well-off), and 26% as low affluence (poor).

- These patterns are reflected in the profile of schools classified as DEIS which comprise 40% of CSL schools in cohort A,[2] and 30% of schools in cohort B.

- Although there are more children living in poverty (i.e of low affluence[3]) in DEIS schools, both DEIS and non-DEIS schools show a variation in levels of wealth and poverty among children. 13% of children in DEIS schools are considered well-off, while 18.5% of children in non-DEIS schools are considered poor. Social disadvantage is not confined to DEIS schools.

- There is a greater prevalence of minority group children (children with a range of additional learning needs) in DEIS schools including children of immigrant and Traveller backgrounds.

Children's contrasting social worlds

Interviews with children highlighted their understanding of poverty and wealth, which drew on experiences within their families and local communities. Older children were more aware of how this influenced experiences in education.

Poverty and stigma

- Levels of poverty and wealth strongly interconnect with children's sense of place and space in their local communities.

- In the most marginalised communities, issues of social stigma, urban degradation and constraints on children's movements (space) emerged in the accounts of children and their parents. However, a strong sense of attachment to place and inter-generational family networks was also evident.

- Teachers and principals in the most socially deprived case study schools referred to the impact of drug addiction, food poverty and trauma in what they identified as 'forgotten' communities.

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[2] Cohort A refers to children tracked from Junior Infants (2019) through to 2nd class (2023), while cohort B refers to children tracked from 2nd class (2019) through to 6th class (2023).

[3] Socio-economic status of participating children in the *Children's School Lives* study was measured in two ways – through the DEIS classification of the school and through a family affluence scale (FAS). The FAS has been widely used as a relatively valid and reliable measure to identify high and low income households, as well as 'an alternative measure of total parental earned income in studies using self-reported socioeconomic status' (Corell et al., 2021, p.10).

- The key role of schools in these communities in safeguarding the welfare and wellbeing of children and their families was referenced by both parents and educators, and came to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Across case study schools in both rural and urban communities, the increasing cost of living, combined with homelessness and housing insecurity, was noted as a challenge in supporting children's learning by parents and educators alike.

- These experiences of structural inequality in the earlier years of children's lives were identified by educators as foundational to their educational trajectories.

Prosperity and privilege

- A parallel world was identified for children who came from more well-off homes, with increasing gentrification noted across some communities due to wider social and economic development.

- Children's access to space (such as parks, gardens, rural settings) was notable, alongside a confident assertion by parents of what was needed to support their learning. Constraints on time in busy, bustling lives was identified as a challenge.

- Teachers and principals commented on the benefits of children coming to school well clothed, well fed and rested, but noted some concerns about the high expectations parents had for their children's performance in school.

Extra-curricular activities

- Participation in extracurricular activities is influenced by wealth and poverty. In 2nd class, children from well-off families are significantly more likely to participate in extracurricular activities such as going to movies, museums, visiting the library, taking music, dance, art, swimming lessons and playing team sports.

- Children in non-DEIS schools are more likely to participate in music, dance, art, and swimming lessons.

- Interviews in case study schools highlighted the 'added value' to children's learning through these experiences, but also the challenges in managing time and costs associated with them.

Anxiety and wellbeing

- Children's views on 'feeling good about who you are' was not significantly influenced by either attending a DEIS/non-DEIS school or levels of family affluence.

- In cohort B, levels of anxiety (feeling worried about things/that something bad is going to happen) reported by children was not influenced by levels of wealth and poverty or being in a DEIS/non-DEIS school.

- However, in cohort A, significant differences were identified in levels of anxiety, with children in DEIS schools expressing higher anxiety than children in non-DEIS schools. Children from poorer families in cohort A were also significantly more likely to 'worry about what is going to happen'.

The impact on children's learning

Future aspirations

- Children in well-off families (the high affluence group) and in non-DEIS schools are more likely to agree that they plan to attend higher education, while children in DEIS schools are least likely to agree.

- Interviews with children highlighted how their aspirations were influenced by role models within their families, and levels of knowledge and understanding of the steps to be taken to progress through the education system.

- Teachers demonstrate higher levels of certainty that children from well-off (higher affluence) families, and children in non-DEIS schools will attend higher education. These patterns are evident with respect to children in both cohort A and cohort B.

- Interviews with teachers in case study schools expressed concerns about retention of children from the most marginalised communities in the education system. This was especially notable as children entered the later stages of primary school.

- Parents across all case study communities referred to their ambitions for their children to attend higher education but also their concerns about the financial costs of doing so.

Academic self-concept

- Levels of wealth and poverty influence children's academic self-concept. Children from well-off (higher affluence) families have a higher academic self-concept, with a persistently lower and decreasing academic self-concept among children from poorer families. Being in a DEIS/non-DEIS school did not make a difference.

- There is a significant association between children's estimated level of affluence and their placement in ability groups. Children from poorer families are most likely to be placed in the lowest ability groups for both reading and mathematics. Differences are especially pronounced in the earlier years of primary schooling, including following the pandemic. This applied in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

Engaging with the curriculum

- Levels of wealth and poverty and being in a DEIS/non-DEIS school did not influence children's liking of school.

- Attitudes toward the curriculum were similarly not influenced by social background.

- A significant difference was identified however between children in DEIS and non-DEIS schools in children's levels of boredom with different subject areas. Children in 2nd class (cohort A) in DEIS schools were more likely to feel bored learning Irish, Reading/Writing and Drama. In cohort B, children in DEIS schools are slightly more likely to be bored doing drama, while those in non-DEIS schools are more likely to indicate they are bored doing Maths and SESE.

Engaging with learning

- Systematic observations of children in cohort B highlighted relatively high levels of engagement of children with their learning (whether they were working alone, or co-operating with a friend or the teacher) with no significant differences between children in DEIS and non-DEIS schools in levels of engagement.

- No significant differences in levels of disengagement (being distracted and/or engaging in disruptive behaviour) were observed between children in DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

- Teachers in DEIS schools in cohort B were significantly more likely to engage in disciplinary behaviour management (intervening if children are talking during lessons; limiting chatter) than teachers in non-DEIS schools. No such differences were identified in cohort A.

- Interviews with both children and teachers in case study DEIS schools in cohort B highlighted greater prevalence of more overt disciplinary strategies including surveillance, correction and reprimands.

NATIONAL STUDY SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

The Children's School Lives national study sample involves two cohorts of primary schools (Cohort A and B) who were sampled and recruited over Autumn/Winter 2018. The schools were sampled so that each cohort was broadly similar to the profile of primary schools nationally, with respect to specific characteristics (school designated disadvantaged status, school size, and school gender mix).

Data collection began in 100 cohort B schools, with 2nd class children (and their parents, class teachers, and school principals) in Spring 2019, and continued annually for five waves, until the children reached 6th class in 2023. Data collection began in 84 cohort A schools in Autumn 2019, with children who had just entered Junior Infants, and were subsequently followed until they reached 2nd class in 2023. The numbers of schools and children participating in each wave is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Description of the national study waves, timing of data collection and sample size

COHORT A	CHILD AGE	DATA COLLECTION	SCHOOLS	CHILDREN		
			N	N	BOYS	GIRLS
Wave 1 (Junior Infants)	4–5 years	Autumn 2019	84	1,773	51%	49%
Wave 2 (Senior Infants)	6–7 years	Spring 2021	78	1,696	49%	51%
Wave 3 (1st Class)	7–8 years	Spring 2022	79	1,880	50%	50%
Wave 4 (2nd Class)	8–9 years	Spring 2023	78	1,641	48%	52%
COHORT B						
Wave 1 (2nd Class)	8–9 years	Spring 2019	100	2,114	49%	51%
Wave 2 (3rd Class)	9–10 years	Spring 2020	90	544	48%	52%
Wave 3 (4th Class)	10–11 years	Spring 2021	99	2,112	49%	51%
Wave 4 (5th Class)	11–12 years	Spring 2022	98	2,189	49%	51%
Wave 5 (6th Class)	12–13 years	Spring 2023	96	2,013	50%	50%

Each year, trained fieldworkers visited the schools to administer a child questionnaire with children who had parental consent to participate and who assented to participate themselves. Child questionnaires were administered on a one-to-one or paired basis with children in Junior and Senior Infants, and on a whole class basis with children from 1st class onwards. Fieldworkers read the questions and response options aloud to the class and children completed the questionnaire booklet independently, although some children with additional support needs were given help by school staff as needed. Principals, teachers, and parents were also invited to complete online questionnaires at each wave.

Questionnaires were designed to capture a range of factors relevant to the thematic areas of the study: equality, voice and inclusion, school and teaching cultures, wellbeing and engagement, learning outcomes, and school transitions (see www.cslstudy.ie; D'Urso et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2023; Martinez-Sainz et al., 2023; Tobin et al., 2023).

Fieldwork was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that it was not possible to conduct the Spring 2020 data collection planned for 3rd class children in cohort B and children coming towards the end of Junior Infants in cohort A. Instead, an alternative questionnaire was designed and administered online (with cohort B only, as cohort A were aged 4-5 years and too young to participate in this way). This wave of data collection with cohort B yielded useful and unique insights into children's, parents', teachers' and principals' experiences of remote learning, teaching, and leading during the pandemic (see CSL Report 2; Chzhen et al., 2021; Crean et al., 2023; Gleasure et al., 2023; Murphy & Devine, 2023). However, the specific context and the nature of the questions asked meant that most of the data collected during that wave is not comparable to the other waves. As such, much of the data presented in this report examines trends over time for cohort B when they were in 2nd, 4th, 5th, and 6th class.

Similarly, with cohort A, the ability to present trends over time is mainly limited to the data collected with children in 1st and 2nd class, as many of the questionnaire items would have been too complex and not validated for younger samples.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the study successfully retained a high proportion of the original sample, with 97% of cohort B schools and 93% of cohort A schools participating in the final wave of fieldwork in 2023.

Systematic observations of classroom interactions

During fieldwork with cohort B in 2nd class, 5th class and 6th class, children's behaviour during lessons was recorded at 30 second intervals using the Observational and Research Classroom Learning Evaluation (ORACLE) Pupil Record (Galton & Hargreaves, 2019). The observation order was determined by children's last names (sequential) and gender (alternating). Children's main behaviour at each interval was coded as one of five forms of engagement: cooperating alone, cooperating with friend, cooperating with teacher, cooperating on routine tasks (e.g., sharpening pencils), and waiting for the teacher; or three forms of disengagement: distracted passive, distracted active, horseplay/disruptive. Engagement and disengagement forms were summed to give overarching indicators of on task and off task behaviour. Fieldworkers observed selected children's behaviour during 10 time intervals.

CASE STUDY SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

A particular strength of the Children's School Lives Study is the mixed methods design. This combined data collection across 189 primary schools with intensive immersion in 13 classrooms annually (with the exception of the period during COVID-19 school closures when data collection moved to remote methods (see Donegan, Devine et al., 2023) to capture everyday life in primary schools. This included a focus on 28 case study children (who were selected from each of the participating case study schools), and interviews with their parents annually, focus group work and participatory activities with the entire case study class, and extended periods of in-class observations, alongside interviews with class teachers and school principals annually. Interviews with principals, teachers and parents typically lasted from 50–75 minutes. The number and length of focus groups with children varied across cohorts and waves of data collection in response to children's evolving capacities. Research sessions varied from 20 mins - 60 mins and included multi-modal participatory methods such as roleplaying, play-based activities, graffiti walls, drawings and board games (see Martinez-Sainz et al., 2024).

TABLE 2. Case study sample

SCHOOL	DEIS	LOCATION	GENDER	BOYS	GIRLS	PRINCIPALS	TEACHERS	SNAS [4]	PARENTS	GRAND PARENTS
COHORT B										
A1	Non-DEIS	Urban	Girls	-	23	1	6	2	6	3
A2	Non-DEIS	Urban	Boys	28	-	2	7	1	4	1
A3	Non-DEIS	Rural Town	Co-Ed	11	16	1	7	2	4	3
A4	Non-DEIS	Rural	Co-Ed	5	3	1	6	1	3	1
A5	DEIS	Urban	Boys	16	-	2	7	1	3	-
A6	DEIS	Urban	Girls	-	21	1	6	2	4	3
A7	DEIS	Urban	Co-Ed	12	11	2	9	-	3	3
COHORT A										
B1	Non-DEIS	Urban	Co-Ed	8	18	1	7	1	3	-
B2	Non-DEIS	Rural Town	Girls	-	25	2	7	-	4	2
B3	Non-DEIS	Rural	Co-Ed	1	2	3	7	-	3	3
B4	DEIS	Urban	Boys	15	-	2	8	1	3	-
B5	DEIS	Urban	Co-Ed	7	9	1	9	1	2	1
B6	DEIS	Rural Town	Co-Ed	8	15	1	8	-	3	-
Total				111	143	20	94	12	45	20

[4] SNA's are Special Needs Assistants

Teachers, interviewed annually, include class teachers who often changed yearly as children transitioned from one classroom to another, in addition to special education teachers and Home School Liaison teachers in some schools. Principals were interviewed annually. In some instances, new principals were appointed to a case study school adding to the number of principals in the total sample. Case study children (28) were interviewed annually in addition to participatory focus group activities with all the children in each case study class. Over the five waves of the study 541 interviews were conducted in the case study schools.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Socio-economic profile of children in CSL schools

Socio-economic status of participating children in the *Children's School Lives* study was measured in two ways – through the DEIS classification of the school and through a family affluence scale (FAS). The FAS has been widely used as a relatively valid and reliable measure to identify high and low income households, as well as 'an alternative measure of total parental earned income in studies using self-reported socioeconomic status' (Corell et al., 2021, p.10). The short version of the FAS used in the study consists of five items: 1) Do you have a dishwasher at home? 2) Do you have your own bedroom to yourself? 3) Does your family own a car, van, or truck? 4) How many bathrooms are in your home? 5) How many computers does your family own?

The FAS indicators were calculated based on children's responses and were measured in waves 3 and 4 for cohort A and in waves 3, 4 and 5 for cohort B. For the purpose of this analysis, children were grouped in high, medium and low affluence based on their scores in the most recent wave where FAS was measured[5] (Chzhen et al, 2022), taking account of strengths and limitations as a scale (Corell et al., 2021)[6]. This categorisation allowed us to capture the distribution of social class within the CSL sample.

When we relate family affluence with DEIS status, as in Figure 2 below, we find that the poorest children (i.e. low affluence group) are most likely to be in DEIS schools, although these schools also contain 12.9% of children who could be categorised as high affluence.

FIGURE 1. Aggregate percentage of family affluence (Cohorts A & B)

HIGH AFFLUENCE 20%
LOW AFFLUENCE 26%
MEDIUM AFFLUENCE 54%
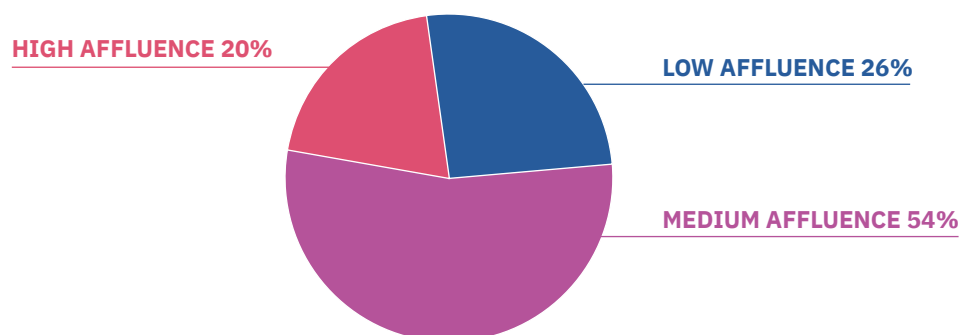
[5] Chzhen, Y., Symonds, J., Devine, D. et al. (2022). Learning in a Pandemic: Primary School children's Emotional Engagement with Remote Schooling during the spring 2020 COVID-19 Lockdown in Ireland. Child Ind Res 15, 1517–1538 https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-022-09922-8

[6] Corell, M., Chen, Y., Friberg, P., Petzold, M., & Löfstedt, P. (2021). Does the family affluence scale reflect actual parental earned income, level of education and occupational status? A validation study using register data in Sweden. BMC Public Health, 21(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11968-2

When we relate the two, as in Figure 2 below, we find that children in the low affluence group are most likely to be in DEIS schools, although these schools also contain 12.9% of children who could be categorized as high affluence.

FIGURE 2. Aggregate percentages of family affluence and DEIS status (Cohorts A & B)
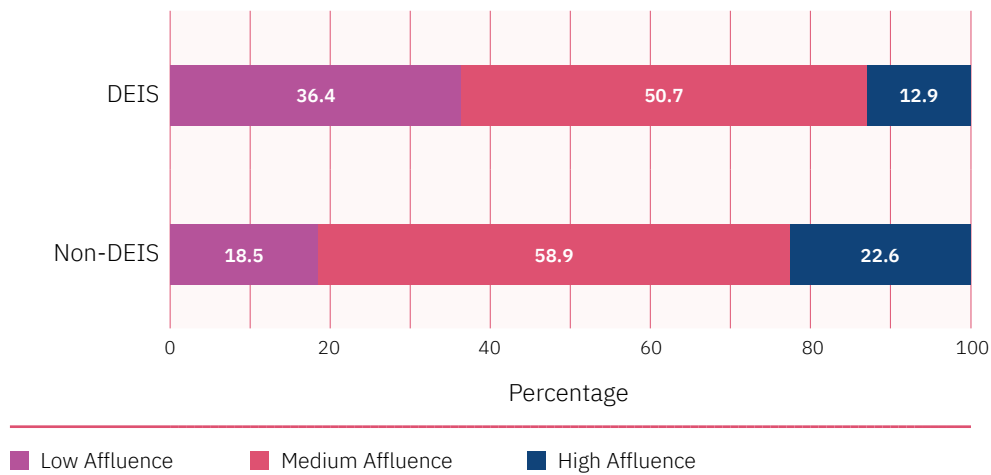
We also looked at the current DEIS classification of CSL schools. Table 3 and Table 4 shows the composition of our sample that took part in the national study by family affluence and school type (i.e., DEIS, non-DEIS) over each wave of the study.

With regard to DEIS classification over the waves of the study, our sample included on average 70% non-DEIS and 30% DEIS schools in cohort B; and a slightly higher proportion of DEIS schools in cohort A with 60% non-DEIS and 40% DEIS schools.

TABLE 3. National study sample by DEIS status

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
COHORT A	JUNIOR INFANTS		SENIOR INFANTS	1ST CLASS	2ND CLASS
DEIS	714 (40.3%)	-	714 (42.1%)	524 (39.6%)	501 (41.3%)
Non-DEIS	1,057 (59.7%)	-	982 (57.9%)	798 (60.4%)	711 (58.7%)
COHORT B	2ND CLASS	3RD CLASS	4TH CLASS	5TH CLASS	6TH CLASS
DEIS	700 (33.1%)	141 (27.1%)	552 (31.6%)	537 (31.9%)	518 (31.9%)
Non-DEIS[7]	1,414 (66.9%)	379 (72.9%)	1,193 (68.4%)	1,148 (68.1%)	1,106 (68.1%)

Levels of reported family affluence across the waves in both cohorts indicate a slight increase in children reporting poverty (i.e. low affluence) from wave 1 to wave 5. With respect to wave 2 in cohort B, this was the period during school closures and so the numbers of participants are smaller.

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[7] This aligns with national data in relation to increasing deprivation rates among children (CSO 2024, Roantree et al 2024)

TABLE 4. National study sample by family affluence

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
COHORT A	JUNIOR INFANTS		SENIOR INFANTS	1ST CLASS	2ND CLASS
Low Affluence	281 (23.3%)	-	315 (24.4%)	411 (26.5%)	449 (30.1%)
Medium Affluence	603 (50.1%)	-	650 (50.4%)	767 (49.4%)	811 (54.3%)
High Affluence	320 (26.6%)	-	325 (25.2%)	374 (24.1%)	234 (15.7%)
COHORT B	2ND CLASS	3RD CLASS	4TH CLASS	5TH CLASS	6TH CLASS
Low Affluence	364 (20.9%)	79 (16%)	424 (21.8%)	467 (24%)	474 (24.4%)
Medium Affluence	1,022 (58.6%)	305 (61.6%)	1,135 (58.3%)	1,067 (54.9%)	1,079 (55.6%)
High Affluence	358 (20.5%)	111 (22.4%)	388 (19.9%)	410 (21.1%)	389 (20%)

We also asked teachers (1st class and 5th class) to indicate the level of economic disadvantage that presented in their classrooms. Figure 3 below shows that in cohort A (1st class) 28% of teachers indicated that half or more of children in their classrooms were economically disadvantaged while in cohort B (5th class), 17% of teachers did so.

FIGURE 3. Percentage of 1st class and 5th class teachers reporting that half or more of children in their class are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Cohorts A & B)
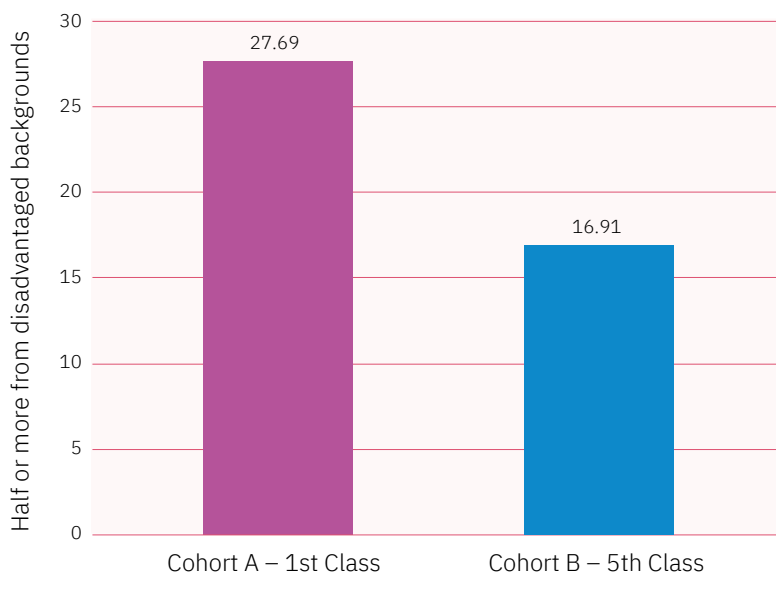
Variations in composition across primary schools

Our sampling of primary schools also highlights how schools differ not only in their assignment as 'DEIS' but also in the profile of children with a range of different learning needs within them. We asked principals to estimate the percentage of children present in their school from immigrant backgrounds, from refugee families, from Traveller families, with English as an additional language, requiring learning support, identified as gifted, children who are homeless, children on reduced timetables and children classified as economically disadvantaged. What we term 'minority group prevalence'. Figures 4 and 5 below highlight principals' estimates of the profile of children in their schools by DEIS classification. The Figures indicate a diversity of children in all schools but differences in the profile between school types.

According to school principals, in addition to economically disadvantaged children, there is a substantial difference in the prevalence of children of immigrant and Traveller background in DEIS and non-DEIS schools, in addition to children with English as an additional language. On average one in five principals of DEIS schools (22%) indicate that in their schools more than 40% of students are children who are immigrants or with migrant background, or have language proficiency difficulties, while in non-DEIS schools this figure is 13%. Similarly, over a quarter of principals in DEIS schools (29%) indicate over 40% of children are attending learning support compared to less than one tenth (7%) of principals in non-DEIS schools. One tenth of principals in non-DEIS schools estimate that some children in their schools (less than 5%) are homeless compared with just under half of principals in DEIS schools indicating likewise, and a further 16% of these principals in DEIS schools estimating that between 5–10% of children in the school were experiencing homelessness.

FIGURE 4. Percentage of minority group prevalence in **non-DEIS** schools (Cohorts A & B, 2023)
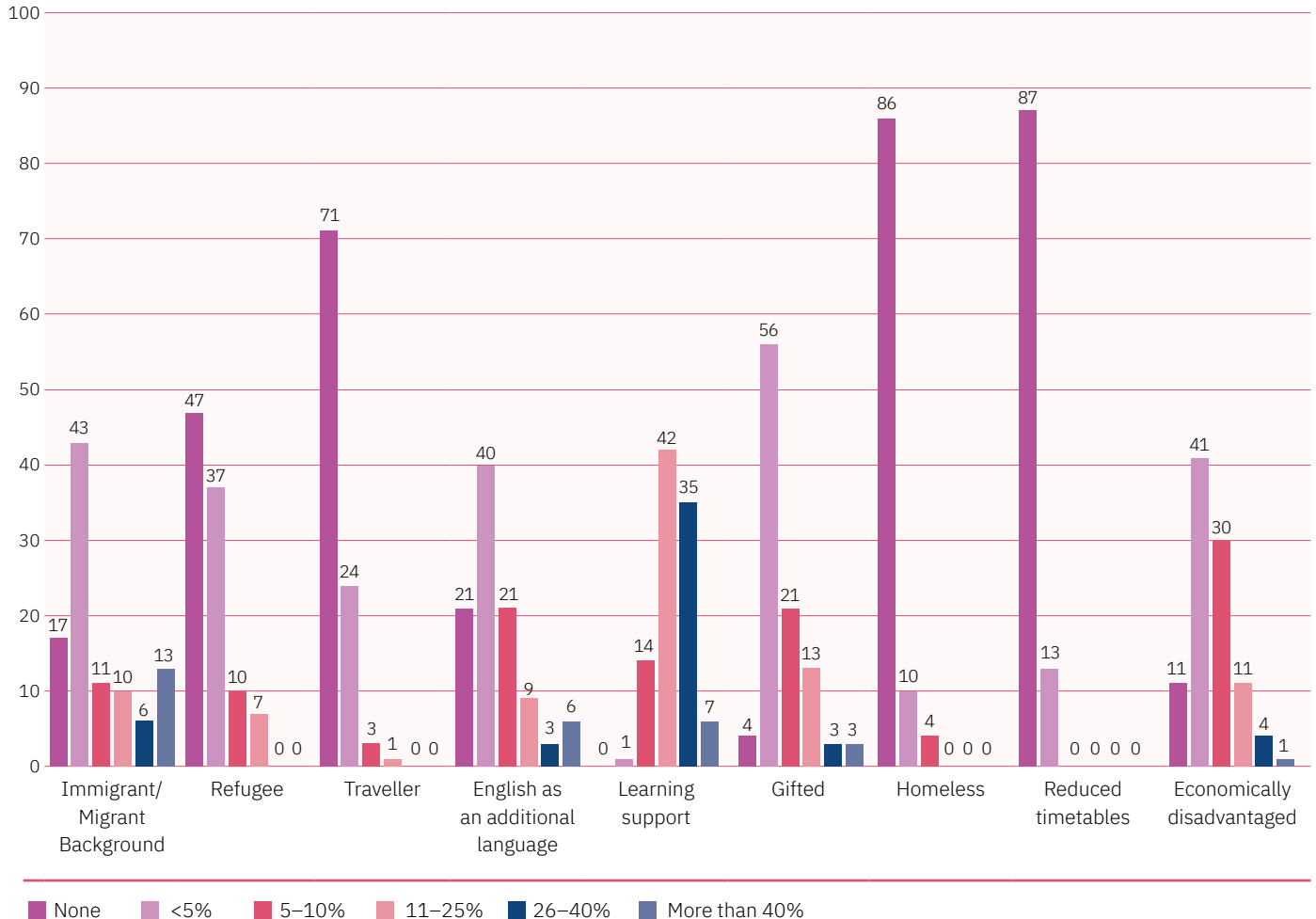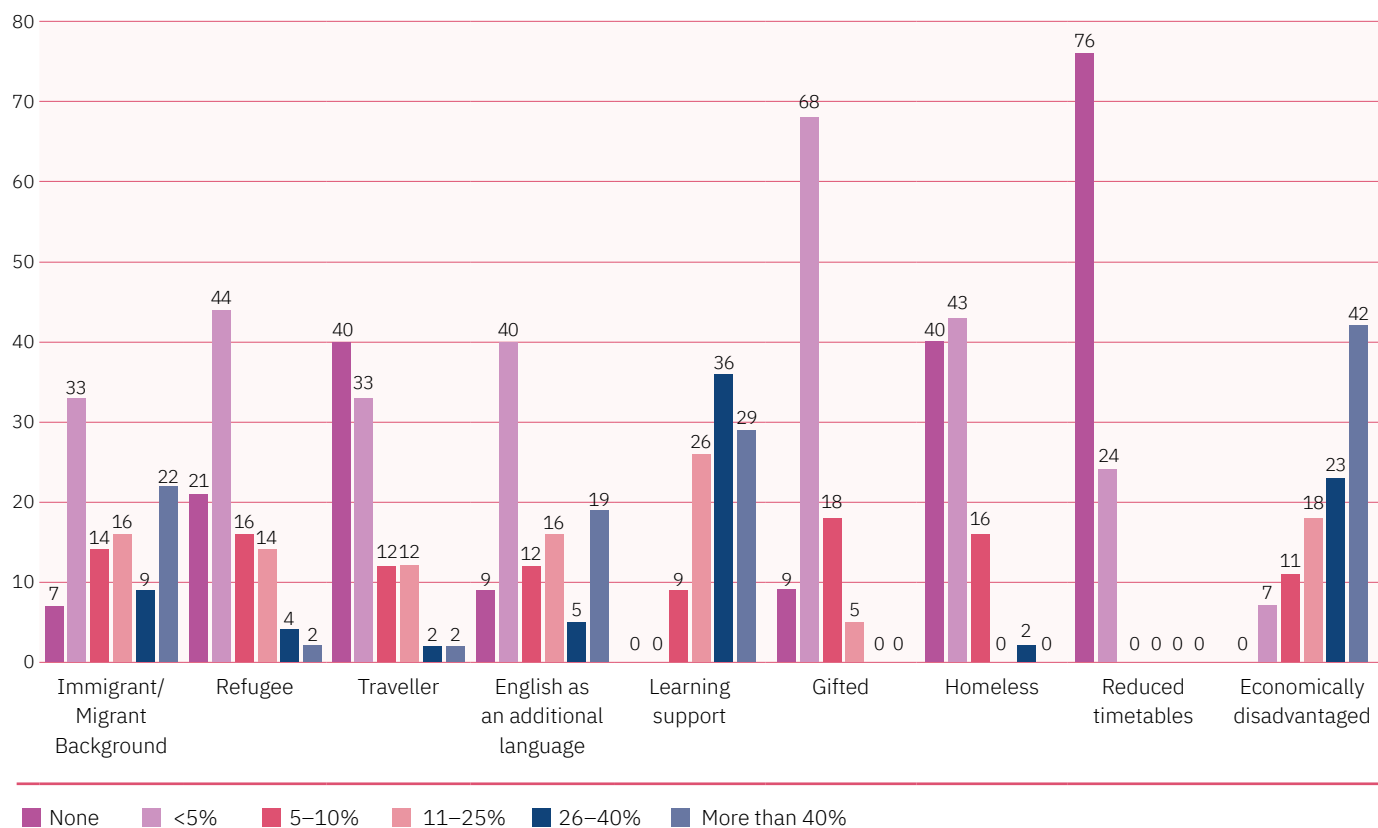
FIGURE 5. Percentage of minority group prevalence in **DEIS** schools (Cohorts A & B, 2023)

Legend: ■ None ■ <5% ■ 5–10% ■ 11–25% ■ 26–40% ■ More than 40%

THE CONTRASTING SOCIAL WORLDS OF CHILDREN IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

In exploring the impact of social background on children's school lives we consider this through the impact on their everyday lives especially in their wider communities. Interview narratives are replete with references that convey the periods of economic and social development in Irish society over the period of the study and how this becomes mirrored in the primary schools that are often the heartbeat of local communities. Urban regeneration, sits alongside urban decline; economic growth and opportunity sits alongside rises in the cost of living and homelessness, with consequent impacts on the opportunities and life chances of children and their families within them.

In the case study schools, we sought children's own perspectives on poverty and wealth and their awareness of differences in social class. Children's experiences were relative and related to what they experienced within their own families and local communities. For younger children, poverty for example was associated with visible impacts on individuals including begging and sleeping rough. There was also an emphasis on charity and a desire to give money to 'poorer' people if they themselves became rich as adults.

> Interviewer: *So, if you think about a poor person, how would you know if you were poor?*
> Child 1: *You wouldn't have money and you would live outside.*
> Child 2: *Wear the same clothes every day.*
> Child 1: *Or wear a rubbish bag.*
> (Children, 1st class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

> Interviewer: *How would you know if somebody was poor?*
>
> Child 1: *Homeless?*
>
> Interviewer: *Homeless person, okay? How would you know? [Child]?*
>
> Child 1: *Because their blankets are ripped.*
>
> Child 2: *Because of their clothes.*
>
> (Children, 1st class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

> Interviewer: *Is there a [Girl] in your class?*
>
> Girl: *[Girl].*
>
> Interviewer: *Oh [Girl]? Okay.*
>
> Girl: *And she's rich ... [I would like to be] rich, because I would buy a nice house ... and the next thing, I would like you to be help poor people with the money.*
>
> (Girl, 2nd class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

Older children also made reference to social markers of distinction in terms of accent, size of house, as well as reputation of different neighbourhoods:

> Boy 1: *Yeah, the [Place] is more like kind of higher class than the [Place].*
>
> Interviewer: *How do you know that? Just out of interest.*
>
> Boy 1: *So, my cousins are in the [Place] and they've got one heck of a big house.*
>
> Boy 2: *Yeah, all the houses there are really big!*
>
> Boy 1: *And all the people there wear nice clothes and stuff like that.*
>
> (Boys, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Child 1: *[Place] is a kip.*
>
> Interviewer: *Really?*
>
> Child 2: *Yeah.*
>
> Child 2: *It's shocking.*
>
> Child 1: *It has a reputation for being ... the people there being a bit crazy.*
>
> Child 2: *Drugs and stuff.*
>
> Child 2: *Yeah, it's known for like, a lot of bullying and drugs and stuff.*
>
> Child 1: *Yeah, it hasn't had the best reputation.*
>
> (Children, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

When referring to their own socio-economic status, children were inclined to indicate they were 'normal'- neither 'rich' nor 'poor':

> Boy: *That's what my ma says. We're not rich but we're not poor but we're kind of in the middle. We have enough money just to survive.*
>
> (Boy, 1st class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Girl: *Because if they didn't have any money, it would be really not fair on them, and they would be asking for food and that's not nice on the rich people. So, I think they should really be like a normal person, like my mom, and my dad and my aunty and my grandma and my grandpa.*
> (Girl, 1st class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

They also referred to the importance of money for school, querying some of the costs that supported their learning:

> Boy 1: *It's very hard for my ma to buy [eye] glasses.*
> Interviewer: *Is it?*
> Boy 1: *Because they're a lot of money.*
> Interviewer: *They're very expensive.*
> Boy 1: *It actually costs money to come to school as well.*
> Boy 2: *Really?*
> Boy 1: *Yeah, they do have to buy your uniform.*
> (Boys, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Girl 1: *I think that we shouldn't have to buy our uniforms because people have to buy it every single year because people keep growing, and the school already has a lot of money, so I think it's unnecessary.*
> Girl 2: *And people say school is free, but then you have to buy the uniform and the runners.*
> (Girls, 5th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town)

Poverty, stigma, and social change

Case study schools, in both rural and urban communities reflected the full diversity of wealth and poverty in Irish society. It was notable however how older children especially in some of the most marginalised communities referred to the spaces and places in which they lived. Evident was a strong attachment to place and sense of social connectedness to family and friends alongside an awareness of the 'othering' of these communities in the society at large:

> Interviewer: *Do you like living here?*
> Girls: *[Both] Yeah.*
> Girl 1: *I know that this area has a bad reputation....*
> Interviewer: *Okay, so it's still nice ... it's your home?*
> Girl 1: *Yeah.*
> Girl 2: *I've lived here my whole life, so yeah.*
> Interviewer: *Yeah.*
> Girl 1: *Same.*
> Interviewer: *Would you go somewhere else if you could?*
> Girl 1: *My ma has told me so many times that if she ever won the lotto or something she'd move to Spain, and I was just telling her 'No, there's no way. I'd rather be homeless living here than living in a good house in Spain.' I don't think I'd ever like to go somewhere that's posh.*
> (Girls, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

This sense of community solidarity and social connectedness was also referred to by grandparents with some reference to this lessening over time:

> Grandfather: *I wouldn't change it [living here] for the world … I like the people themselves. [In previous times] … everybody was involved, but it seems to be, now I'm not knocking it or anything like that, but now the people are drifting away to their own little cubby holes, if you like to call it. They don't want to be involved. They want their own life and that's the way I feel about it, but … having said that, I never had any problems with anybody around and if I knew that I needed something, or needed help, just have to knock on the door … And it's always there, you know?*
>
> (Grandfather, Junior infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

Evident in these children's accounts was a sense of wider community degradation and constraints on where the children could go, in addition to a sense of competency in navigating more 'risky' social spaces:

> Girl 1: *It feels like you need to be more mature in this area.*
> Interviewer: *Okay. Why do you think that is?*
> Girl 1: *I don't know. It's kind of like….*
> Girl 2: *Because everyone around here is just, they seem really mature for their age.*
> Girl 1: *Probably. Like there's just a lot … like a lot of things would add up to it, falling in with the wrong crowd is a big one.*
> Girl 1: *Yeah, there's not much to do around here. They've burned down all the playgrounds.*
> Girl 2: *We live quite close to each other, but I'm not allowed in her estate.*
>
> (Girls, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

Children were aware of social class differences between themselves and their teachers – especially in terms of accent and self-presentation - what they termed as 'posh'. Their discussions highlighted their appreciation when teachers connected with their everyday lives, including those who came themselves from the local community:

> Girl 1: *Like the teachers from here come from all different counties, but it's like the ones that seem like they had the most similar upbringing to us, it's like … I don't know [that we like the most].*
> Girl 2: *One of the teachers, she's from a posh area….*
> Girl 1: *I don't like posh people … they're just nothing like me. [Giggles]*
>
> (Girls, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Interviewer: *So, what's it like having a teacher [from here] … like that must be pretty cool?*
> Boy 1: *Our teacher is a manager for the [local football] team that….*
> Interviewer: *Oh really?*
> Boy 2: *Yeah.*
> Boy 1: *I know our teacher since he's … like 19, when he was in college, because when I was younger I only joined [club], and he was doing the babies, he was coaching the babies, and he was my coach there.*
>
> (Boys, 6th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

Our interviews with the children's families highlighted both continuity as well as change over time in our case study communities. Interviews with grandparents for example highlighted the impact of poverty on their own life chances, reflected in feelings of inadequacy and negative social stigma, that remain until this day:

> Grandfather: *I left school at 13. I left school, there was no such thing as going onto secondary school or what do you call it. You were told 'you're finished school. Get out, earn your living.'*
> Interviewer: *Who told you that?*
> Grandfather: *[Laughing] Oh your mother and father! Yes, 13, you did.*
> (Grandfather, Junior infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Grandmother: *I think because the area gets such a bad name ... and they are not encouraged enough because they haven't got the belief in themselves.... But it's people that give the place a bad name because once you mention, like if I met someone say from [Affluent suburb] and they'd say, 'Where do you live?', and I'd say, '[Local community]'.'Oh', and they turn. Like I'd be as good as they are.*
> (Grandmother, Junior infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Grandmother: *It's such a long time ago ... Small rural school where my father, all those years ago, bringing silage up to school because there was no heating, you know.... In our class only about three of us as far as I know went to secondary school at all ... it's not like now ... I'd an aunt in America who kind of, I don't know what you'd say, she kind of sent money all the time to keep us alive.*
> (Grandmother, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

Yet also evident in case study family narratives were the opportunities that were more present for young people today, alongside a sense of greater recognition and understanding by teachers around the needs of children:

> Grandmother: *I can't really remember that much of school.... The teachers stood at the top of the room and everything was just off by heart, everything. That was it.... They [teachers] just seem more involved with the children and more understanding. I just feel it is different nowadays and if we have any concerns, I feel that we can talk to teachers more and parents can talk with teachers more, they are so understanding. I think it is great that if children are worried, they can talk to a teacher if there are any problems. They can express how they feel, and they are listened to.*
> (Grandmother, Senior infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

> Grandfather: *Well I'll tell you. I have to be honest with you, from what I see in the school there's more involvement with the kids from start to finish than when we were going to school. And I have to be honest about it ... my [bad] memories I threw away ... but from what I see now kids are being well treated, well looked after.... Everybody is given a chance to learn how to play music, how to express themselves. Where in our day that didn't happen! There was no such thing.*
> (Grandfather, Junior infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

Our interviews with parents in lower income families highlighted the challenges they encountered in trying to support their children as best they could in often challenging circumstances. The cost of education in terms of books[8] and uniforms, in addition to extracurricular activities was especially noted:

> Mother: *School is not cheap.... They say that there is a clothing grant or something that you get but you don't if you are working. My husband works and we find it expensive, especially when you have kids in secondary school. It cost us nearly €2,000 to send the kids to school this year. I think all schools should do away with brand names.*
> Interviewer: *Do you think that pressure is there on kids?*
> Mother: *Oh God, yeah. I have seen it first-hand with kids ... the parents don't have it, don't feel that, that they are putting themselves in debt to go out and try to keep up with the Joneses as such, you know that way.*
> (Mother, Junior infants, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

> Father: *It's difficult for everybody like there's nobody that hasn't felt what's going on [cost of living increases] ... there's always something that they want to do and you're not going to say no to them that because they're good and they deserve it if it's a school trip or something there as well ... you kind of, you take away what you have yourself and you just give all to them.*
> (Father, 5th class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town)

> Mother: *To me their education is a priority.... We don't live an extravagant life, we don't have big jobs. We don't have big wages coming in. We just find it. I don't know what corners you cut so it comes from somewhere.*
> (Mother, 5th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

In very marginalised communities, parents also referred to concerns around urban degradation and social change, and especially the impact of drug addiction and a breakdown in community connectedness, re-iterating also the comments noted previously by some children in relation to the curtailment of their movements:

> Mother: *There's a lot of people living in poverty. We have a huge unemployment rate. All these knock-on effects that kind of I suppose lead somebody to be susceptible to use drugs. That's the community that we're coming from.... We make sandwiches and we give them to homeless people ... I want to instil that caring element to her.*
> (Mother, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

[8] These interviews were conducted prior to the extension of the free books scheme to all primary school children in 2023

> **Mother:** *Now, when we grew up, we had a great community. Everyone was out for everyone. It was a great place to grow up in. There is no community spirit anymore. It is just you go in, you close your door and that is it … I mean everyone used to meet. I can remember my mam when we were kids and they would all meet in the shopping centre and they would go in and have a cup of tea in one of the little cafes.*
> (Mother, Junior infants, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

> **Mother:** *At home he's not allowed to play with whoever outside my garden, and I know … he's nearly ten and whatever else, [but] if I can't see him, he's not allowed, wherever he is … there's a few of them gone … like little wild ones that you know are going to get in trouble….*
> **Interviewer:** *Okay that's difficult.*
> **Mother:** *I am kind of real protective of who he does be with and who he doesn't be with.*
> (Mother, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

The structural impact of poverty and inequality is also clearly reflected in the narratives of principals and teachers. Building on those of some of the parents we interviewed, issues of stigma, trauma, drug addiction and low self-esteem came to the fore in a number of the case study schools located in the most marginalised communities:

> **Principal:** *I would say the number one challenge is addiction and it's not that there isn't addiction in other communities as people would think, there are probably massive levels of addiction in other communities. But there's untreated addiction. So, whereas in a more affluent community you might have the money for the rehab, you might have the money to cover it up, the money to feed your addiction and all of them things don't necessarily exist here. And that's when addiction issues get worse and forgotten communities.*
> (Principal, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> **Principal:** *We'd have awful issues with drug abuse in families, and you're trying to support the parents as well as you can, and you're seeing the damage that's being done to the children.*
> (Principal, Junior infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> **Teacher:** *I grew up [not far from here] playing football … there would be a stigma attached around the area, that it's working class. The people here are great, but people from the outside don't know, they just see the drugs, the crime … people would be jumping to conclusions.*
> (Male teacher, 6th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

The impact of homelessness was raised as an issue and noted across most case study schools in the study, in both rural and urban communities, highlighting also the central role of schools as frontline services for these families:

> **Principal:** *We've a number of homeless children…. We find that their nutrition is a real concern for us. If they come to school with no lunch, as they often do, or if they come with a very nutritionally limited lunch.*
> (Principal, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

> **Principal:** *Last year I would have had two children who became homeless and the year before, one, and really nobody knew about it, but we supported the parents by … making sure the kids had breakfast … obviously making sure all the books and all that, giving them a [travel] card to make sure they could come, offering the washing machine in the morning and that sort of thing. And, two mothers in particular, have managed to sort themselves out now.*
>
> (Principal, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

> **Teacher:** *Let's say … if mam is dealing with other issues that she may lose her home, there's a lot of that at the moment actually, a lot of the landlords are selling, they're going to lose their home, they're going to be homeless … they have that fear, education is not on their priority list at the moment and it's very important for me as home school to explain that to teachers … a child may come from a house where there's no kitchen table … they had no table, they had a tiny kitchen. If you could imagine, oh god, if you could imagine a bedroom, that's the space they were living in, your average sized bedroom, their kitchen, their living area, and then two bedrooms off that, and 37-steps to get up to this little tiny space where they live.*
>
> (HSCL[9] teacher, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

This focus on the challenge of engaging with education in the context of wider poverty and inequality was a persistent theme by educators in schools. Food poverty, and the insecurity of daily life undercut children's (and their parents) capacities to engage, within a wider context of social stigma and intergenerational poverty:

> **Principal:** *[These] parents love their kids and they want the best for their kids and that's never any doubt, but a lot of our parents feel undervalued, and they feel like ; "I don't have a value to add to my child's education. I didn't do well in school. School wasn't good for me". So, they kind of feel like well there isn't really much they can add to this.*
>
> (Principal, 2nd class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

> **Teacher:** *The child from [place A] will probably go to bed at night and they'll be wrapped up in lovely cosy pyjamas and they'll get a story read to them and they'll wake up in the morning and they'll be asked what they'd like for breakfast, would they like granola, or would they like a variety of cereals, would they like berries on top, and then they get dressed and supported and dropped to school whereas the child in [place B] may not have slept in a bed that night, may not have slept because of antisocial behaviour in the community or within their home, they may have gotten up the next morning, probably would not have received a breakfast, and they come into school and they're expected to complete the same curriculum as the child on a parallel in [place A]. And that is a fact.*
>
> (HSCL teacher, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

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[9] Home School Community Liaison

> **Principal:** *When you have very young, traumatised children who have seen things through open drug use, those children, that manifests itself in school … and not every school is equipped or willing to deal with children who are as deeply, deeply traumatised as some of these children are.*
> (Principal, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> **Principal:** *I think there's an awful high level of anxiety at home … sometimes children pick up on that and come into school having had, say, some, you know, some anxiety, either they experienced it, or they've witnessed it on behalf of parents … I think parents are put to the pin of their collar [with the cost of living] to meet additional costs across the board. And I think children are seeing that.*
> (Principal, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

The impact of early years experiences was also identified as key, setting the foundation for future learning. For younger children coming to school with motor and social skills was crucial in adjustment and readiness for school and relatedly the importance of attendance at pre-school to support children's readiness:

> **Teacher:** *They've settled in very well now. At the start it took a long time … it was just really weak fine motor skills was the thing that kind of stood out most to me. It's funny because you could see certain girls that did two years of preschool in specific preschools had perfect pencil grips and knew how to use a scissors, really neat colouring, they were at totally different stages to other children.*
> (Female teacher, Junior infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

Parents we interviewed in these contexts, recognised the importance of school as a community and welcoming space for their children and of the additional support provided. In some schools this included breakfast clubs, play therapies, and the sensitivity by the school to financial challenges, but also evident was parents' pride in terms of reluctance to ask for assistance:

> **Mother:** *If it wasn't for the schools the kids would be nowhere. They would have nothing.*
> (Mother, Junior infants, DEIS, All-boys, Urban, Catholic)

> **Mother:** *I think [the school] it's fantastic…. I know some of the kids have been introduced to play therapy because there have been issues. The breakfast mornings they have available, moneywise like we were going in at the start of the year and there was a list you know, of uniforms that are available.*
> **Interviewer:** *Yeah.*
> **Mother:** *You know, they're aware of an underprivileged area and they're very much aware of money issues for a lot of people. So, I suppose.*
> (Mother, Junior infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> **Mother:** *I'd never go down and say: "Listen, I can't… I'd always try my best for my kids, I'd give them what I can, but I'd never go down and beg it off anyone". I'd do without, without, instead of begging off anybody.*
> (Mother, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

The impact of poverty and inequality was especially experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed. As detailed in Report 2 the role of schools in supporting the welfare as well as education of children became especially acute, as did the inequalities that arose in terms of access to digital technologies, parents' own knowledge of how to support their children's learning and having the space required to support children's learning:

> Principal: *We found out that one of our families is living in a homeless shelter in a hub and that through communication with the teacher she said that they had a phone but she didn't have access to the internet and then that they had a television but they've no television in the hub. So, the next computer is going out to them.*
> (Principal, 3rd Class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

> Teacher: *We work with [Company] in school and they provided the non-perishable packs that the parents get every week, that helps with the food at home, and then there's the 'Good Grub' initiative too, which helps with healthy fruit and veg … because if that wasn't there it would be an absolute disaster for those families that would really rely on the food in the schools.*
> (Female teacher, Junior infants, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

> Mother: *It's just the longer it's going on, the boredom is setting in, she's missing her friends. If there's work that she needs to do and I don't know how to do it, like do you know what I mean as well? There's stuff I actually don't even know how to do myself.*
> (Mother, 3rd Class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

Here too, during COVID-19, issues of access to gardens, safe green spaces to play and explore in lower income families was alluded to in the context of further reinforcing structured inequalities for children in poverty:

> Teacher: *Obviously, with job losses and not being in stable accommodation … like there's some children, they wouldn't be living in proper accommodation. And then there's nowhere for the children to go, there's not even a patch of grass near them.*
> (Female teacher, Junior infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

> Principal: *I would say that there are children that it has impacted negatively on, definitely, beyond a shadow of a doubt … I would say the same for families who are living in the centre of the town in flats and don't have access to gardens or that sort of thing. I think it can't be good for their wellbeing.*
> (Principal, 3rd class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town)

Prosperity and privilege

Structured inequality is also reflected in the parallel reality of prosperity and privilege in other children's everyday lives, that underpins their capacities to engage with school. Our case study schools also reflected communities across Ireland – rural towns and villages as well as city suburbs that were characterised by mixed communities as well as new zones of gentrification arising from social and economic development, sometimes altering the demographic profile of schools.

> Interviewer: *Would most of the families here be from middle income families?*
> Principal: *More so now than before. I think it's changed the status of the families that are coming to our school. And probably even this area because those houses there for example would have all been council houses at one stage ... now that they're being sold for nearly €400,000! ... I think more and more middle-class people are just moving into this area because the housing is more affordable.*
> (Principal, 2nd class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Interviewer: *Would there be much differentiation in the area in terms of poverty or anything like that?*
> Teacher: *There isn't really like ... one time there was a place that was kind of a very council kind of ... you know nowadays you'd be very lucky to have a house there.*
> (Female teacher, 1st class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town)

> Interviewer: *Can you tell me a little bit about the area of [town] as an area, as a locality?*
> Mother: *It is a lovely place to live, especially for kids growing up. And comparing it to the likes of [city] where I grew up, I think there is an awful lot of involvement in after-school activities for kids here. Like there is the GAA, I suppose that is big in a lot of localities in Ireland.... I think it is an easier way of life because you don't have the whole hustle and bustle and traffic like you do in [city] and you know, the distances to get to places. So, yeah, I think [town] is nice. A nice place to live.*
> (Mother, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

For children in wealthier families, access to resources and experiences that supported their learning was a generally taken for granted aspect of their everyday lives. This was evident from children's knowledge of what was required to go to college and the role models within their families they drew on, in their access to additional learning supports outside of school, as well as strategic choices regarding secondary school noted by a number of children in our case study schools:

> Girl: *Yeah, I have a tutor for Maths on Monday, so in school, say if I learnt something... and I wouldn't know how to do something that they taught us to do. And then, my tutor comes over to my house to help me with my Maths.*
> (Girl, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Child: *I mean, if you're going to do something like, your Leaving Cert or your Junior Cert, they're really important tests and it's important to get good marks because they give you points and those points determine what subjects or what courses you can do in college. They kind of determine the job you're going to have.*
> Interviewer: *That's true.*
> Child: *And like, if you do good all the way through the six years of secondary school then it will set you up for college. And like, if you say you wanted to be like a teacher, you'd have to know.... Or like a mathematician or something.*
> (Child, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Interviewer: *How do you become a DJ and what training do you think you're going to need?*
> Boy: *Probably the only training I'm going to need is how to use the board.*
> Interviewer: *The mixing board?*
> Boy: *Yeah, I already know sound design and music theory cos I got lessons.*
> (Boy, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Child: *Well, there was [school A], but I just decided that I didn't want to go there. A lot of my friends are going there, but I just didn't... it's walking distance for me, but I just felt that [school B] had better standards.*
> (Child, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

> Boy: *I mean my dad and my granddad, and all his brothers went there.*
> Interviewer: *Really?*
> Boy: *Yeah, so, that's the reason I'm going. But I also kind of want to go because it'll probably get me higher in rank in rugby.*
> (Boy, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

Parents in more affluent contexts in general spoke relatively confidently about their children and their own capacities to support them with what was needed in their education. Their knowledge of the education system ensured they could make strategic choices in the best interests of their children and advocate clearly on their behalf:

> Mother: *And then we are coming to it from a position of privilege.... So, if our kids are willing to do anything, they will always be able to make money in society as we have it now.... I know that I am really privileged to be able to say, listen, you can just.... You can study whatever you want to study because you can always pay the bills ... if you've got a secure home environment that can always back you up, we're going to be OK. So, we're coming to it from a point of great privilege.*
> (Mother, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Interviewer: *What made you pick this school for your older boy? Had you heard about it?*
> Mother: *He didn't start in that school. He started in another one. We moved home and we were not happy in the old school, so we were looking for another one closer home. And our neighbours suggested that they were very happy there.... I like that it is small and well-managed. I think it is very well thought out, the approach to children to accommodate their needs. My eldest is exceptionally able ... He really fitted in well in this school.*
> (Mother, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

> **Mother:** *So, we have had some things that we wouldn't agree and we were able to talk to the principal and she was very understanding and listened.*
> (Mother, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

> **Mother:** *But some of that onus [for education] is also on my husband and myself. Because you have to provide everything you possibly can for the children for that [success] to happen. And that's what I mean about providing books, providing sport.... We have a lovely girl who comes in and tutors the kids with the Irish.*
> (Mother, Senior infants, Non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

This sense of confidence in navigating the education system, and having the resources – cultural, material and social – to support their children in doing so was also evident during COVID-19 and the period of remote schooling (see also Report 2). Here the strain of support was not related to not knowing what to do or not having the resources to do so, but rather often having the time to do so while simultaneously working remotely:

> **Mother:** *So, we do [lessons] and then it's lunchtime and then they're kind of free to go outside or play you know ... we have plenty of space outside the house here and that. So, you know, they have been lucky enough. There are loads of green areas and space so, yeah, they're outside a bit...*
> (Mother, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

> **Interviewer:** *And do you find that it's good, as in, the home-schooling in general?*
> **Mother:** *Oh, I do like home-schooling. I mean, it's not my ideal, because I think there is some part, a social part that, especially during lockdown....And I have seen him actually flourishing, and he's now reading, where he was struggling before.*
> **Interviewer:** *And you're very equipped, as you said, you have your room and you have all the areas laid out for this, for the home learning and that.*
> **Mother:** *Yeah, because I also did ... I have done some courses in nonviolent communication, and also a one-year course, a masters.*
> (Mother, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

> **Interviewer:** *And for you personally, I suppose, as a parent, how do you find the home learning? What do you think of it?*
> **Mother:** *I think we manage it and I think I think he's still keeping up well with all the school learning. I mean if this lockdown goes, say, for three years, I still think that my kids will be fine.*
> (Mother, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

When referring to communities that were more affluent, teachers referred to the benefits for children in terms of arriving to school well fed and ready to learn, with a strong focus on and understanding of education, that also stood them well during the remote learning period of the pandemic:

> **Teacher:** *They stay on task as much as possible but definitely you can see they're read to at home, a lot of them. An incubator. There is a lot there ... they're very lucky in that sense. Healthy lunchboxes, they're coming in and it definitely all makes an impact.*
>
> (Female teacher, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

> **Principal:** *So, if we were to, in general, look at the school on some social hierarchy...there are people who are well-versed in education, and well-disposed to it. It does give rise to issues....*
> **Interviewer:** *Could you tell me more about that?*
> **Principal:** *It creates its own challenges in the need for middle class people to reinforce the position they have in society ... not wanting to lose pace either, or even a step on the stair.*
>
> (Principal, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

> **Teacher:** *We have quite a good catchment I suppose ... I suppose also it is how their parents' wellbeing is as well. It really impacts on how they are doing and whether their parents are working.... There is so much baking and one day we shared all our baking and gardening photos. From what I am getting back from them, their wellbeing seems to be quite good and quite positive.*
>
> (Female teacher, 3rd class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

> **Teacher:** *Because our children are so lucky ... there's no shortage of technology, there's no shortage of laptops, their parents are there to support them. They live in like, you know, really solid, stable homes and they don't worry about what they have to eat or yeah, I just think they're so lucky. So, I just think it's very, very hard for some children.*
>
> (Female Teacher, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

However, teachers and principals also noted the stresses that these children often experienced in terms of high expectations, in addition to varied after-school arrangements:

> **Teacher:** *I'm second class and I've the younger kids. Some parents feel that their kids are behind even though they're literally learning this for the first time. They're not behind, they'll get it like with reading and stuff... I think [it's important] if they're not feeling under pressure. Like if kind of between parents and teachers if we're constantly like, you have to do this and you have to be able to do that and you need to get this question right to get that right, they feel more pressure to get it right and then.*
>
> (Female teacher, 2nd class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

> **Principal:** *There's a lot of privilege, and there's a lot of interest in education, amongst the school community. But we do also have experience of various kinds of need, but we also have difficulties at times with the au-pair phenomenon, and children being picked up at the end of school day in silence with au-pairs ... who are on the phone. It's a very sad picture for me; it's the most important part of the day.*
>
> **Interviewer:** *The pickup.*
>
> **Principal:** *So that's one kind of need, the language enforcement there wouldn't be great at the end of the school day.*
>
> **Interviewer:** *Yeah*
>
> **Principal:** *But the majority of the parent body here, you'd say, have thrived socially and economically, because of education.*
>
> (Principal, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

Extra-curricular activities

While formal learning takes place in schools, children also acquire social and academic skills through the range of informal learning activities that take place outside of school. We asked children in 2nd class how often they participated in different kinds of activities and identified significant differences related to levels of family affluence. In 2nd class, children from well-off families are significantly more likely than those in poorer families to participate in extracurricular activities such as going to movies, museums, visiting the library, taking music, dance, art, swimming lessons and playing team sports.

FIGURE 6. Children's participation in informal learning activities by family affluence (Sometimes/Often) (Cohort B, 2019)
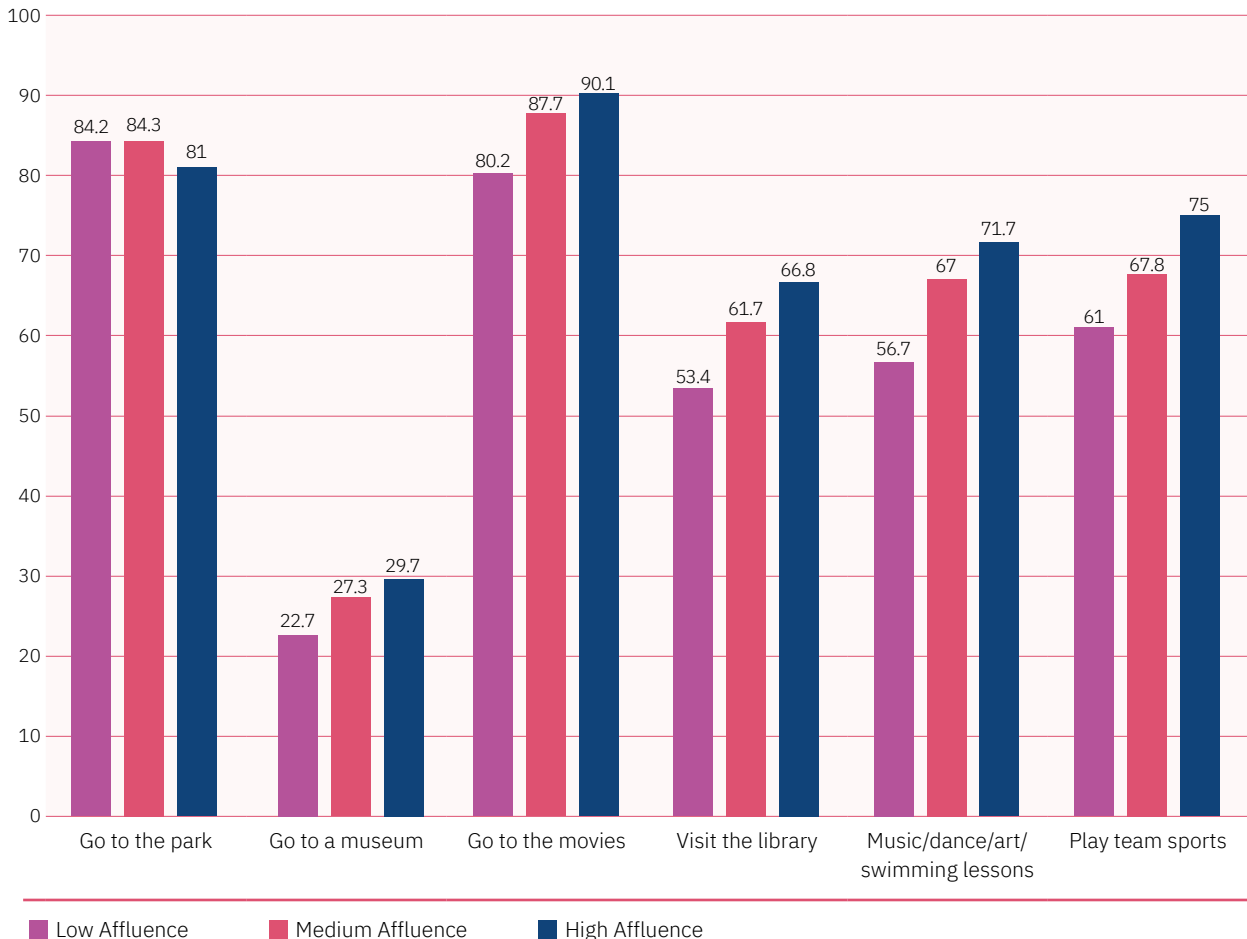
	Low Affluence	Medium Affluence	High Affluence
Go to the park	84.2	84.3	81
Go to a museum	22.7	27.3	29.7
Go to the movies	80.2	87.7	90.1
Visit the library	53.4	61.7	66.8
Music/dance/art/swimming lessons	56.7	67	71.7
Play team sports	61	67.8	75

Interviews in case study schools highlighted the 'added value' to children's learning through these experiences, but also the challenges in managing time and costs associated with them.

> **Teacher:** *It's even oral language, the stuff that they're hearing or that they're being exposed to [at home]. A lot of them even today at the weekend, they're going to parks, they're meeting other children, they're out on a [local attraction].... That they're able to recount where they went and what happened and who they were with.... But I think there is a lot going on at home, that a lot of them are in afterschool activities, whether it's dancing, singing, drama, and I think that's important for oral language and stuff.*
> (Female teacher, Junior infants, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

> **Mother:** *We usually try to keep weekends for the family so we try not to have activities, just kind of not to have that structure, stress, the stress of a structure anymore, so we don't have many, maybe the scouts now and then.*
> (Mother, 4th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> **Father:** *You will be very lucky if you can pay for the activity ... say if I want to send them to the swimming pool for the day, just for a day, it costs me over €30 and it's going up next week I believe ... it could happen like this week and then next week sorry I can't send him for swimming or horse riding or football club. Nobody can afford that these days.*
> (Father, 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

Anxiety and wellbeing

We also looked at issues of anxiety and wellbeing for children to see if this was significantly influenced by their social background building on some of the analysis outlined in Report 7. There were no significant differences identified across children in cohort A or cohort B when children were asked if they 'feel good about who you are'.

However, children in 2nd class in 2023 (Cohort A) demonstrated higher levels of worry and anxiety compared to those who attended 2nd class in 2019 (Cohort B) (see Report 7). Such differences may highlight the impact of wider social change in the interim, including for example the pandemic and increases in the cost of living. Our findings indicate that worry and anxiety levels were significantly influenced by being in a DEIS/non-DEIS school for children in cohort A who are significantly more likely to indicate they worry about things and that something bad is going to happen to them.[10] Figure 7 shows the levels of worry and anxiety experienced by school type for cohort A.

FIGURE 7. Worry and anxiety by DEIS status (Usually/Always) (Cohort A, 2023)

Legend: NON-DEIS, DEIS

THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S LEARNING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Poverty and privilege structure children's readiness and capacities to engage with their learning, the struggles and strengths within families and communities, setting the foundation for how children engage with their learning in school. We explore this further by considering expectations in relation to education as well as children's dispositions to learning in the classroom.

Future aspirations

Education is fundamentally a long-term investment in the future, with the effort and progress made through primary school setting the foundation for future quality of life and wellbeing. We explored how this future was envisioned by both children themselves, as well as by their parents and teachers and how this varied relative to children's socio-economic contexts.

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[10] Returning to Figure 3 on teacher estimates of the number of children who were economically disadvantaged, this was higher in general for children in cohort A, than cohort B. It is also evident in Table 4 in variations in levels of family affluence in cohort A and cohort B.

Children's views on what they would like to do in the future drew on role models within their families, which served as blueprints for their own career aspirations. Children also associated working hard in school with getting a job that was well paid:

> Interviewer: *What do you think you're going to end up doing with yourself? What do you want to do?*
> Boy 1: *I'm probably going to work with my da.*
> Interviewer: *What does your dad do?*
> Boy 1: *He works in a prison.*
> Interviewer: *Ah, like doing what?*
> Boy 2: *He's an officer.*
> Boy 1: *Just, he's a prison officer.*
> (Boys, 6th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

> Girl 1: *So, you don't get a massive dropout out of college, and you don't get held back for a year. If you get held back a grade and you graduate … school, you won't get a job.*
> Girl 2: *You would get a job but it wouldn't be very good.*
> Girl 1: *You wouldn't get enough money to … really do anything … you wouldn't work as hard as anyone else.*
> (Girls, 2nd class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town)

> Boy 1: *You have to do your work, to get to college and then get a job.*
> Interviewer: *So, we work to get to college to get our jobs, is that it?*
> Boy 2: *Yes.*
> (Boys, 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

In the national study we asked children in 6th class if they planned to go to college/university, with children from more well-off homes most likely to indicate they plan to go to college/university, a pattern repeated in non-DEIS schools. Figures 8 and 9 show the percentage of children's responses to whether they plan to attend university after post-primary school.

FIGURE 8. "Do you plan to attend college/university after post-primary school?" by family affluence (Cohort B, 2023)

High Affluence: NO 3.6, Unsure 17.1, Yes 79.3
Medium Affluence: NO 5.2, Unsure 32.3, Yes 62.5
Low Affluence: NO 8.5, Unsure 40.8, Yes 50.8
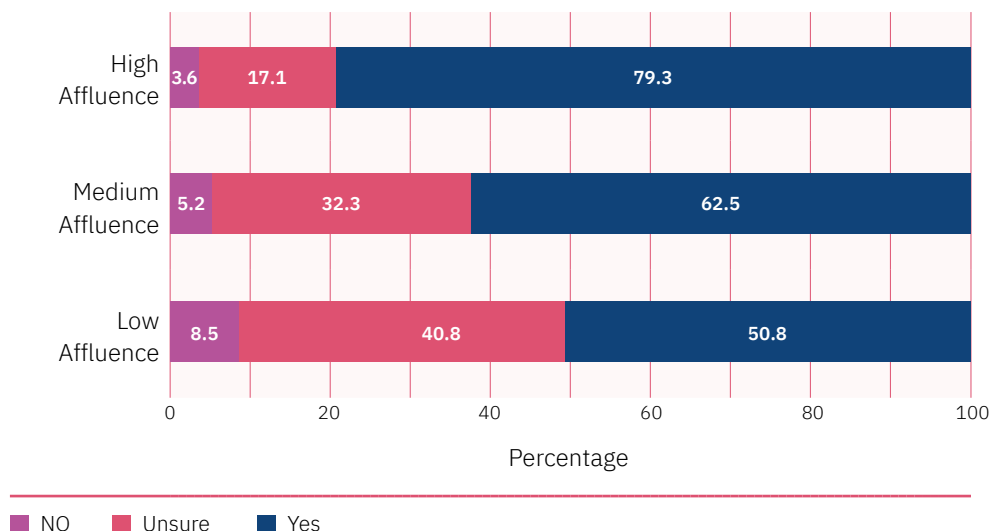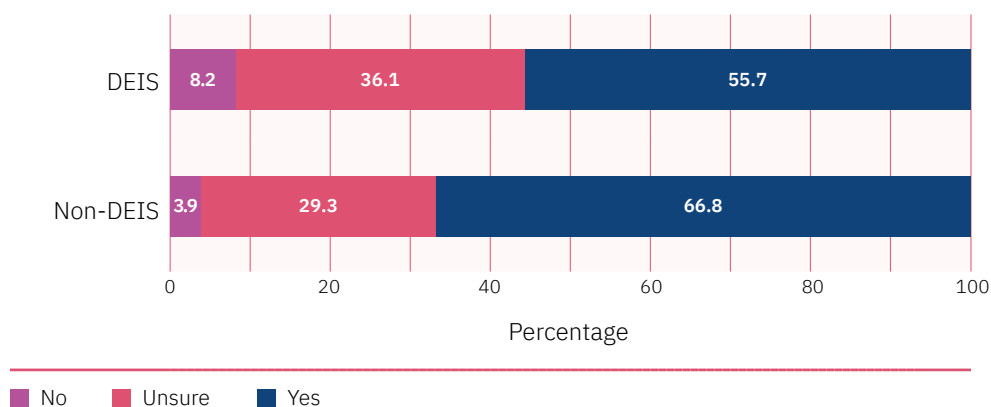
Percentage

■ NO   ■ Unsure   ■ Yes

FIGURE 9. "Do you plan to attend college/university after post-primary school?" by DEIS status (Cohort B, 2023)

In case study interviews, when it came to tertiary-level educational aspirations, children from higher income families often cited family members' own college experiences and were notably able to provide detailed accounts of the steps required to study at this level, whereas children from lower-income families seemed more often unsure. These children often expressed some ambivalence about attending college and provided less detail regarding how they wished to achieve these aspirations.

> Interviewer: *Do you know what you want to be when you grow up?*
> Boy: *Probably a mechanic.*
> Interviewer: *A mechanic, very good. And do you know how to get there? Do you know how to be a mechanic?*
> Boy: *I could ask my da.*
> Interviewer: *Do you think do you go to college to be a mechanic, or do you just go in and join a garage one day? What do you think?*
> Boy: *No, you have to go to college … to get all your papers and all first.*
> Interviewer: *Is Daddy a mechanic?*
> Boy: *Yeah.*
> (Boy, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> Boy: *Well, my mam told me that university is for people what perform a bit higher, they aim for the stars. Then in college for people, I don't want to be saying, let's say out of a test you get 100 you can aim for university or if you get 50ish you can go to college and then go to university. Because you need a bit of help in that category.*
> (Boy, 6th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

> Interviewer: *And do you know how you're going to be an animator?*
> Girl: *Yeah, probably study art in college and coding.*
> Interviewer: *Study art and coding … and do you know where you're going to go for college? Or are you not sure?*
> Girl: *[names university].*
> Interviewer: *Oh, very good. You've really thought about this.*
> Girl: *Yeah. My cousin works as a waiter, but he wants to be a mechanic and he works in [university].*
> (Girl, 5th class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town)

> **Girl 1:** *Subjects that are in college, because you choose the certain course you're going to do … and then there's subjects that go with that course, you have to do them, otherwise you won't get higher points for that. I want to be a vet … you have to get one of the highest amount of points to get to be a vet. So, I do have a back-up plan if I don't get that far, because I don't think I will.*
> **Girl 2:** *Would you need higher points if you want to be an architect?*
> **Girl 1:** *If you want to be an architect, I'd say you probably would need high points, but they wouldn't be the highest out there. But they would still be high, high, but they wouldn't be the highest.*
> (Girls, 5th class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town)

> **Interviewer:** *Have you … like do you know what universities there are?*
> **Girl 1:** *[names one university]*
> **Interviewer:** *Would you like to go there?*
> **Girl 1:** *No.*
> **Girl 2:** *I don't know. Like I've never really thought about….*
> **Interviewer:** *Why not? You're shaking your head. How do you know you wouldn't want to go there? What….*
> **Girl 1:** *Because you have to like, like physics and stuff.*
> **Girl 2:** *It seems quite posh as well.*
> (Girls, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

Across both waves of the case study, parents from all backgrounds shared their hopes and aspirations for their children, with many speaking of wanting to support them if they wished to continue studying at the tertiary-level. The cost of higher education is an issue which parents across the study flagged as a stressor. Many parents described putting money aside for their children's future university education, and that this process was a source of ongoing stress in their families.

> **Interviewer:** *Do you think she will go to university, or would you like her to go to university?*
> **Father:** *I don't know. I don't know that. She might go. It's still quite a big time to go to university. I don't know. The thing is everything is expensive, school is expensive, so I don't know.*
> (Father, 5th class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town)

> **Interviewer:** *Do you have any concerns or worries about her education or anything that springs to mind?*
> **Father:** *The biggest thing I suppose would be the cost if there was something she really wanted to do you know … but when I hear people who have kids in third-level and they talk about fees and they talk about accommodation and things and paying 12 months' rent for a nine month term and paying €10,000 whatever you know that scares me a bit, if she says, 'I really want to do a course in [City], dad', and I'm thinking, 'Could you not do one in [County].'*
> **Interviewer:** *I know.*
> **Mother:** *I'd be thinking every so often … how much is it going to cost and we've [number] of them in college at once like you know.*
> (Parents, 1st class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

The positive impact teachers can have on aspirations also emerged in our case study interviews with parents, highlighting how educational interventions can have intergenerational consequences, as this mum's daughter was clear about the expectations for her to attend college:

> **Mother:** *I actually thank a teacher ... now I had great parents don't get me wrong, but there was a teacher up in [school] that was very good to me and I think he just seen how good I was ... because he kept directing me towards [occupation]... even now I'd be still in contact with him, he's a great influence ... if you have a good teacher that has a good influence on you, you're laughing.*
> (Mother, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> **Girl:** *I have to go to college.*
> **Interviewer:** *You <u>have</u> to? Says who?*
> **Girl:** *My ma. There's no choice. I don't even get a gap year. Straight out of secondary school to college.*
> **Interviewer:** *Like would you guys like to go to university?*
> **Girl:** *I think I would like to go. My ma says that she was really jealous of her friends that went to college and stuff. Like she had me quite young, so she didn't really get that experience that her friends did.*
> (Girl, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

In contrast, this grandparent calls for greater efforts by teachers to instil confidence in children in a way which she had not experienced growing up:

> **Grandmother:** *I think the school, I mean I know you can't put confidence in people, they have to get that from themselves but just maybe encourage them a little bit to say yes you can go far, you have the brains to go far. Yeah, I think they could encourage them.*
> (Grandmother, 2nd class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

Teacher perspectives

When teachers were asked about their expectations regarding the children's future education trajectory, similar patterns arise. Teachers of 6th class children in 2023 are more likely to identify children of high affluence, and children in non-DEIS schools as most likely to attend higher education:

FIGURE 10. "How certain are you this child will attend higher education?" by family affluence (Cohort B, 2023)
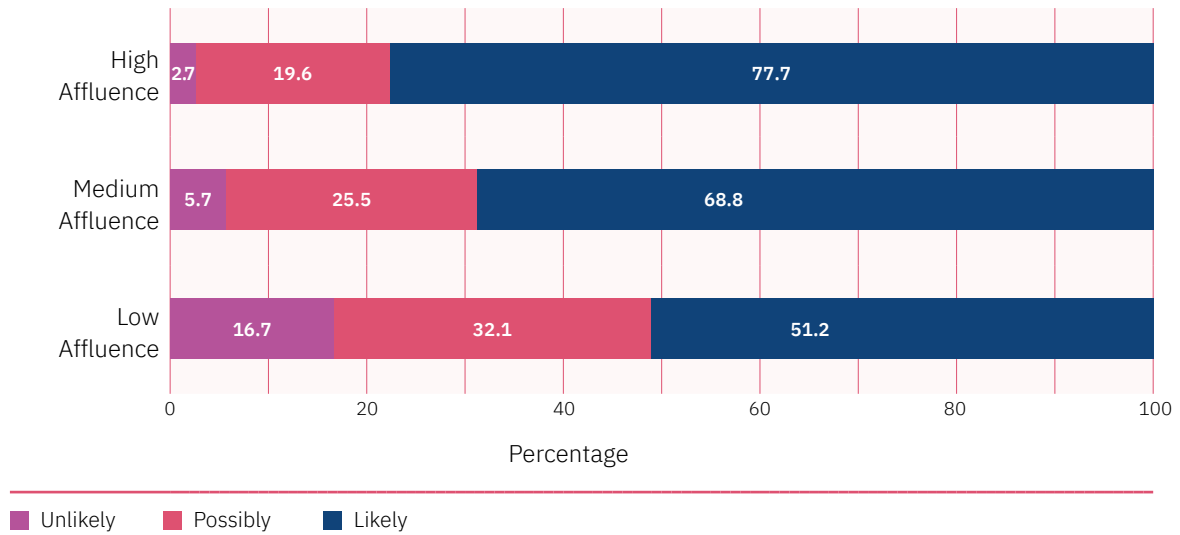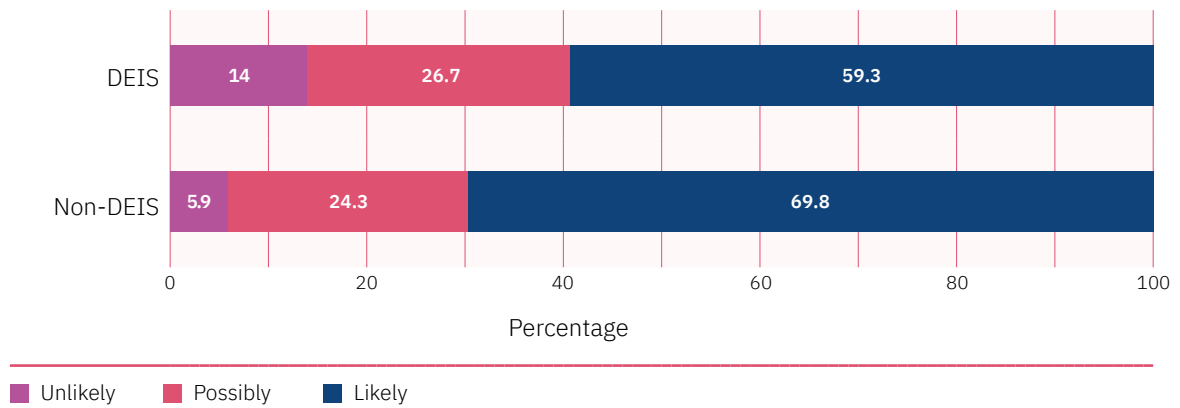

FIGURE 11. "How certain are you this child will attend higher education?" by DEIS status (Cohort B, 2023)

It is also interesting to note that these expectations are shaped from a very early age when we also consider teacher responses when children are in 2nd class.

FIGURE 12. "How certain are you this child will attend higher education?" by family affluence (Cohort A, 2023)
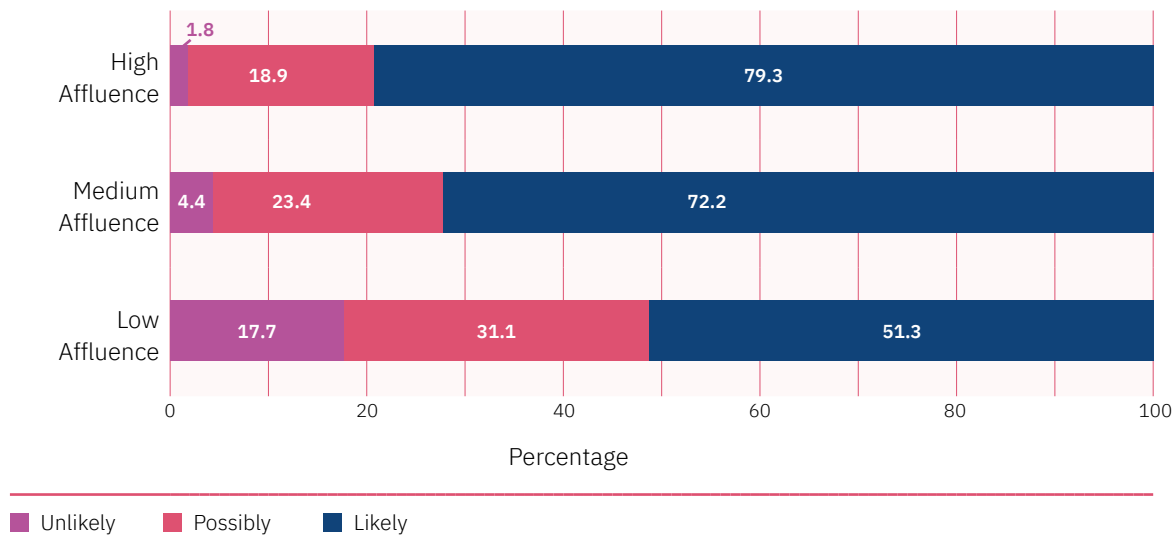
FIGURE 13. "How certain are you this child will attend higher education?" by DEIS status (Cohort A, 2023)
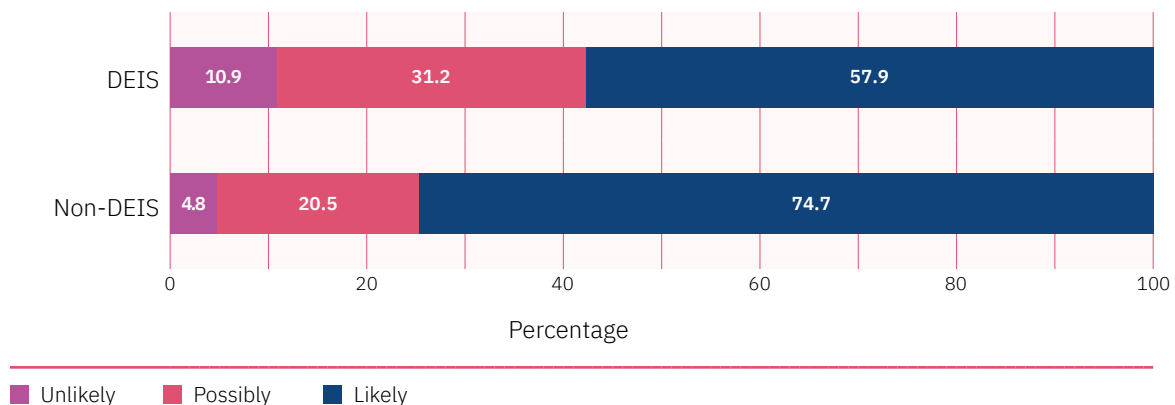
Our interviews with teachers contextualise some of these patterns. In our previous reports (Report 5) we identified the high priority teachers in general placed on love, care and inclusion for children, but especially amongst those working in marginalised communities and DEIS schools. Across all waves, it was teachers in these communities who voiced concerns about children's futures, with their main focus on ensuring that the children would remain in formal education for as long as possible, completing secondary school. Their focus was on nurture and care and the creation of inviting learning classrooms, rather than focusing too rigidly on academic outcomes:

> Teacher: *I would like them to be happy and safe really would be my main priorities. Especially in DEIS schools as I have talked to other teachers, some of the teachers who are here ten, fifteen years, and some of the kids they have taught, some of them aren't even alive [today]. So, that would be my main thought.*
> (Female teacher, Junior infants, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

Teacher: *I really hope they'll all finish secondary school, and I'd say a good few of them will go to university. But other classes I've taught, I knew there'd be some children who wouldn't finish school, because of literacy levels at home and then the child's own literacy levels and I can't imagine them finishing secondary school.*
(Female teacher, Senior infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

Teacher: *I have been quite blunt with them about that … it was like some students need a bit of a shock as to what they're going into because the dropout rate in secondary school here is not great.*
Interviewer: *Okay, what do you mean?*
Teacher: *It's high, I mean because you'd have many, they might make it as far as Junior Cert, maybe third year but after that it's just because they go from a system in primary school where we've kind of held their hand for a lot of it and then they go into an independent structure, and they can't handle it.*
(Male Teacher, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

In contrast teachers and principals in more well-off school communities referred to the assumptions that the children would progress through to higher education, their responses especially framed in terms of the 'brightness' and motivation of the children:

Interviewer: *And long-term how far do you think these children will go in their education?*
Teacher: *Well, there's going to be probably a few doctors I would say. They're going to do very, very well … I think … if they don't go into medicine wise, or education, they'll definitely be in the arts … because you can kind of see it in the classroom already. You nearly know what they're going to aim for. You know the parents' expectations obviously.*
(Female teacher, Senior infants, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

Interviewer: *How far in terms of education do you think the children in your class will go?*
Teacher: *Yeah, that's tough, because I would say … I'd like to say that a third of them will probably go to the university stage, I would say there's an awful lot more capable than that. A lot of the children … their parents … even though they're extremely bright, they probably don't even perceive that their children will go to university or go to college. And unfortunately, seeing that a lot in our school – some of the brightest and more capable children are leaving school quite young.*
(Female Teacher, 4th class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town)

Principal: *Oh, the majority will definitely go onto college, third level education and yeah. Yeah, they would, you know they'd be all sort of fairly, from families that are fairly interested in education and motivating their kids and so on, yeah.*
(Principal, 4th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

Academic self-concept

These wider structural patterns of expectation and opportunity filter into children's own sense of themselves as learners. Although children in 2nd class demonstrate a relatively high academic self-confidence irrespective of levels of reported family affluence (Cohort A, Figure 14 and Cohort B, Figure 15), as they progress to 5th and 6th class children from well-off groups (higher affluence) have a more positive academic self-concept, with a persistently lower and decreasing academic self-concept among children from the poorest (lower affluence) groups, as shown in Figure 15. These small, yet statistically significant, differences are not observed when comparing children from DEIS with non-DEIS schools:

FIGURE 14. "I do well in my classwork" (Usually/Always) by family affluence (Cohort A)
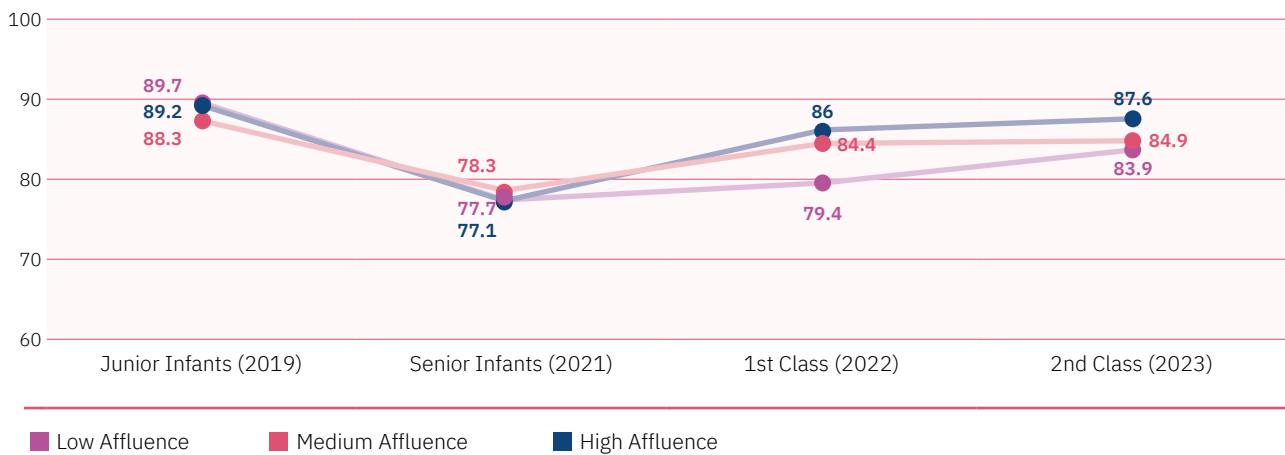
FIGURE 15. "I do well in my classwork" (Usually/Always) by family affluence (Cohort B)
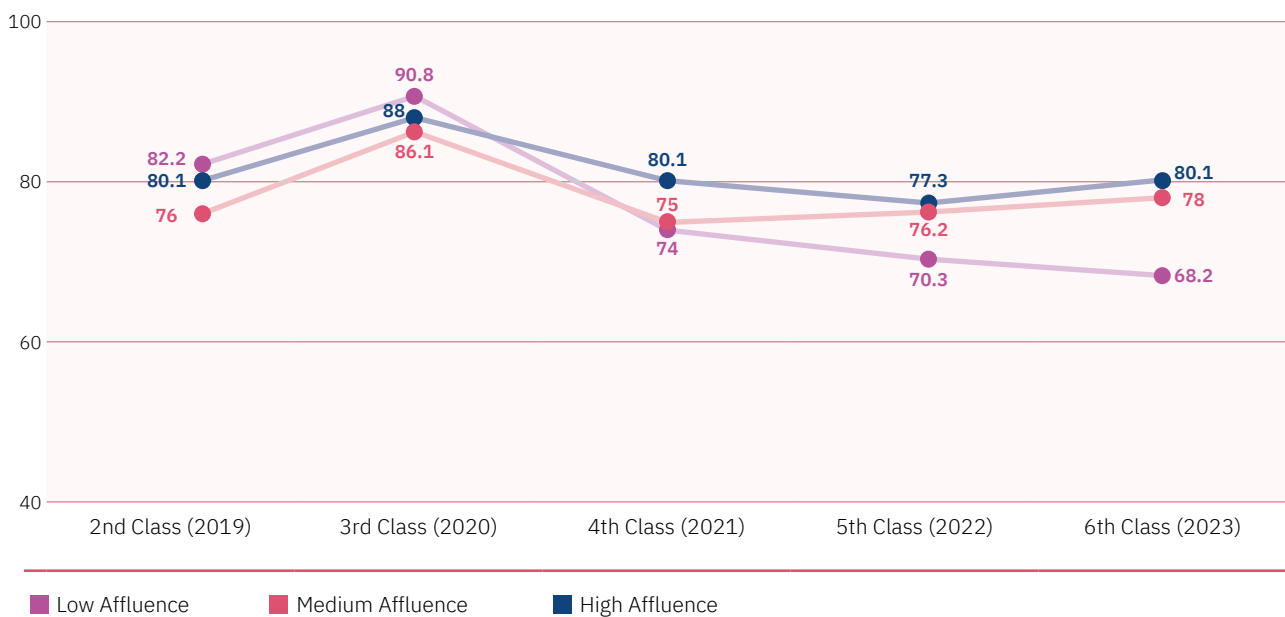
Consistently we also find a significant link between levels of family affluence and children's placement in ability groups, with children from the poorest families significantly more likely to be placed in the lowest ability groups for both reading and mathematics. Of note in cohort A is the widening gap between children in the poorest families and other children as they progress from senior infants through to 2nd class. This persistent gap is evident for both cohort A and B (Figures 16–19).

FIGURE 16. Ability grouping in reading by family affluence (Cohort A, Percentage in Lowest Ability Group)
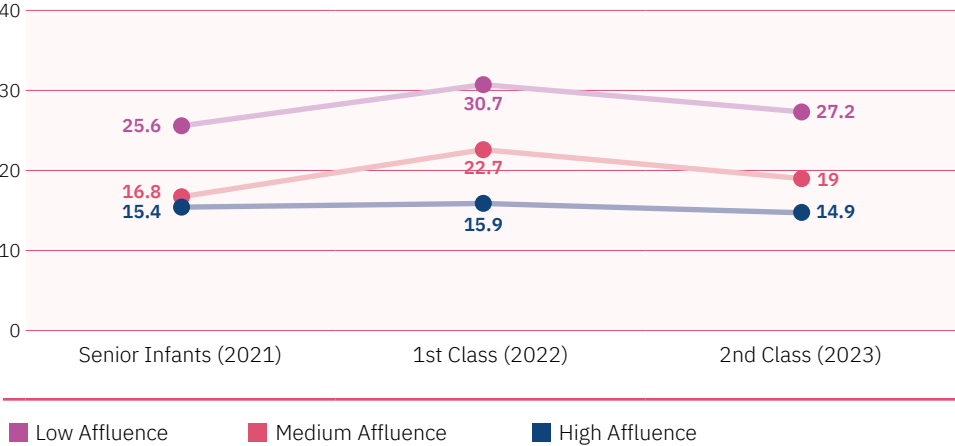
FIGURE 17. Ability grouping in maths by family affluence (Cohort A, Percentage in Lowest Ability Group)
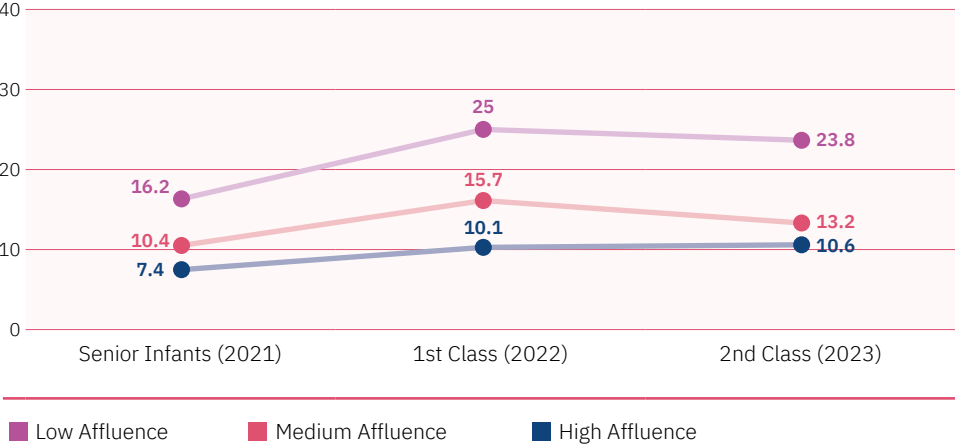
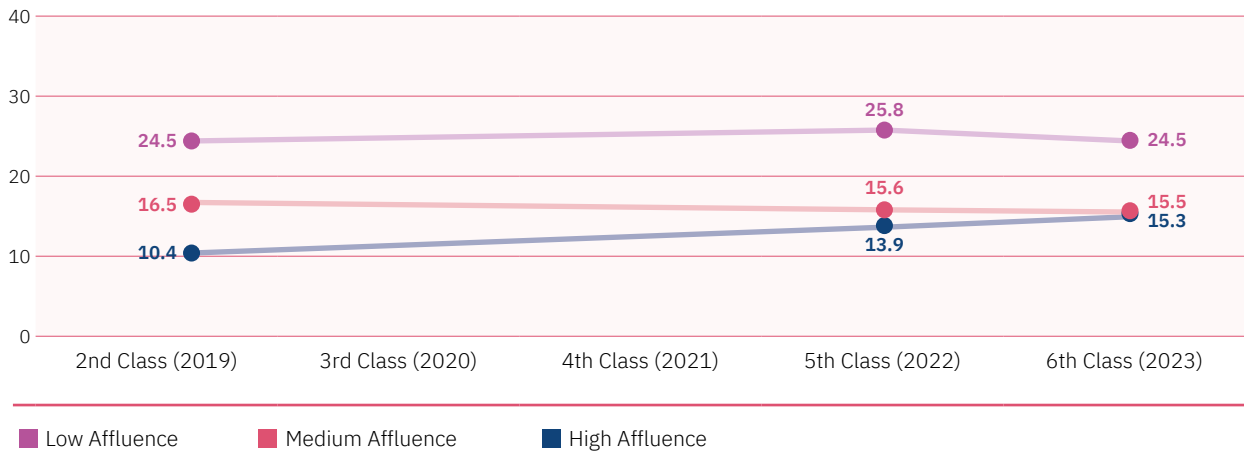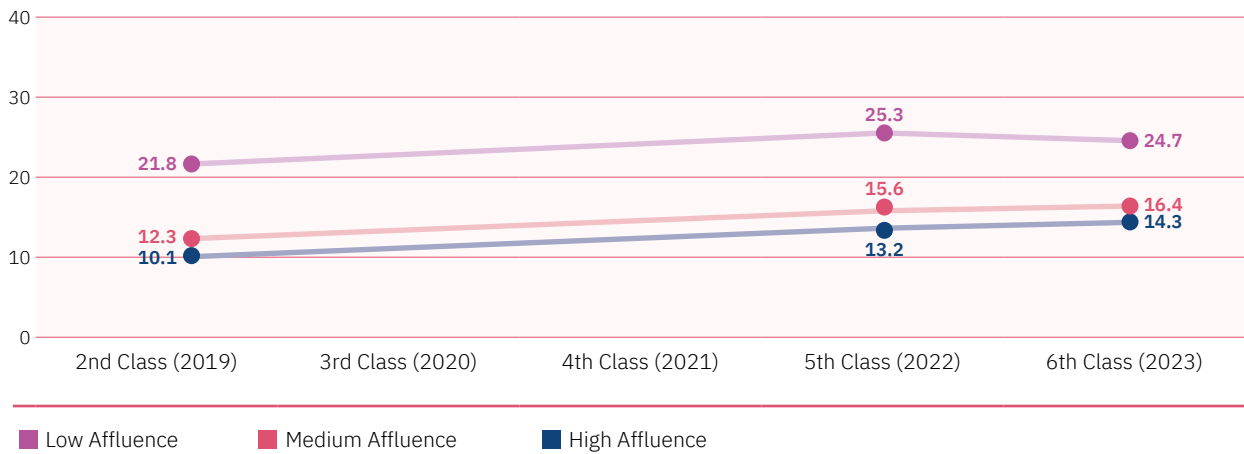**FIGURE 18.** Ability grouping in reading by family affluence (Cohort B, Percentage in Lowest Ability Group)

| | 2nd Class (2019) | 3rd Class (2020) | 4th Class (2021) | 5th Class (2022) | 6th Class (2023) |

Low Affluence: 24.5 → 25.8 → 24.5
Medium Affluence: 16.5 → 15.6 → 15.5
High Affluence: 10.4 → 13.9 → 15.3

■ Low Affluence   ■ Medium Affluence   ■ High Affluence

FIGURE 19. Ability grouping in maths by family affluence (Cohort B, Percentage in Lowest Ability Group)

| | 2nd Class (2019) | 3rd Class (2020) | 4th Class (2021) | 5th Class (2022) | 6th Class (2023) |

Low Affluence: 21.8 → 25.3 → 24.7
Medium Affluence: 12.3 → 15.6 → 16.4
High Affluence: 10.1 → 13.2 → 14.3

■ Low Affluence   ■ Medium Affluence   ■ High Affluence

Engaging with the curriculum

Liking school

Our previous reporting ([Reports 5](), [6]() and [7]()) highlighted children's changing enjoyment of going to school and how this tended to be high for cohort A but gradually reduced as children progressed through to more senior classes. Our analysis indicates that children's levels of liking school varied across all waves. Children from poorer backgrounds reported that they look forward to going to school from Senior Infants (cohort A) through 2nd (cohorts A & B) and 4th class (Cohort B). This gap was less pronounced during their first year in primary school, in Junior Infants (Figure 20), as well as towards the end of primary school, in 5th and 6th class (Figure 21).

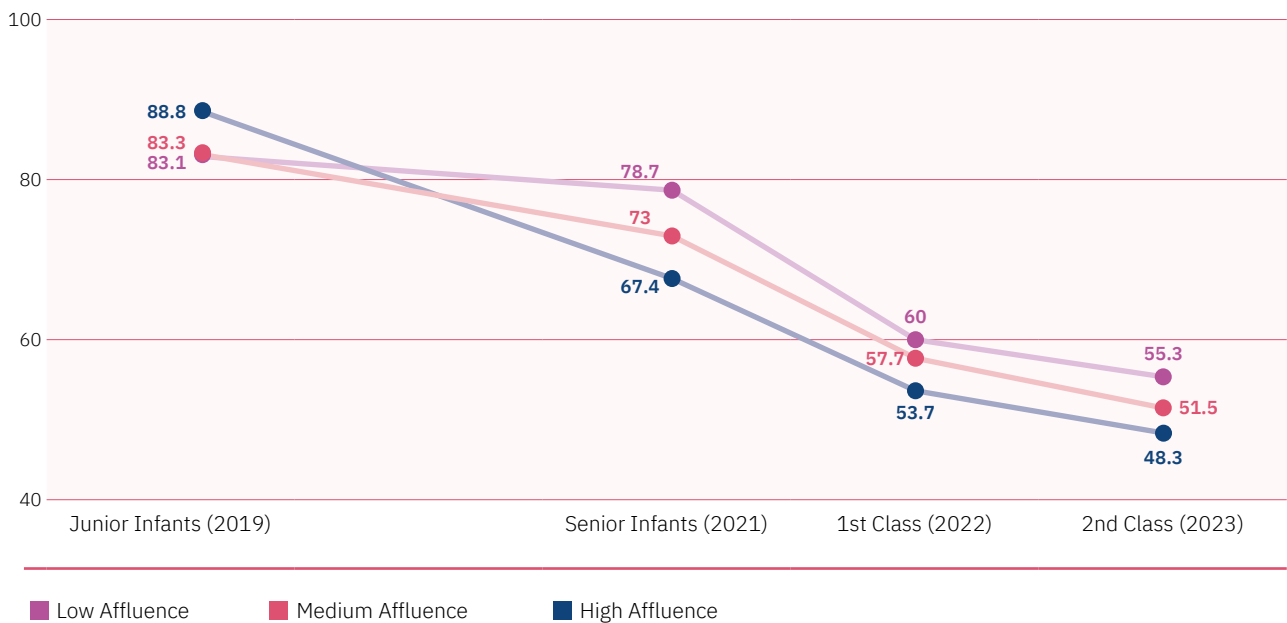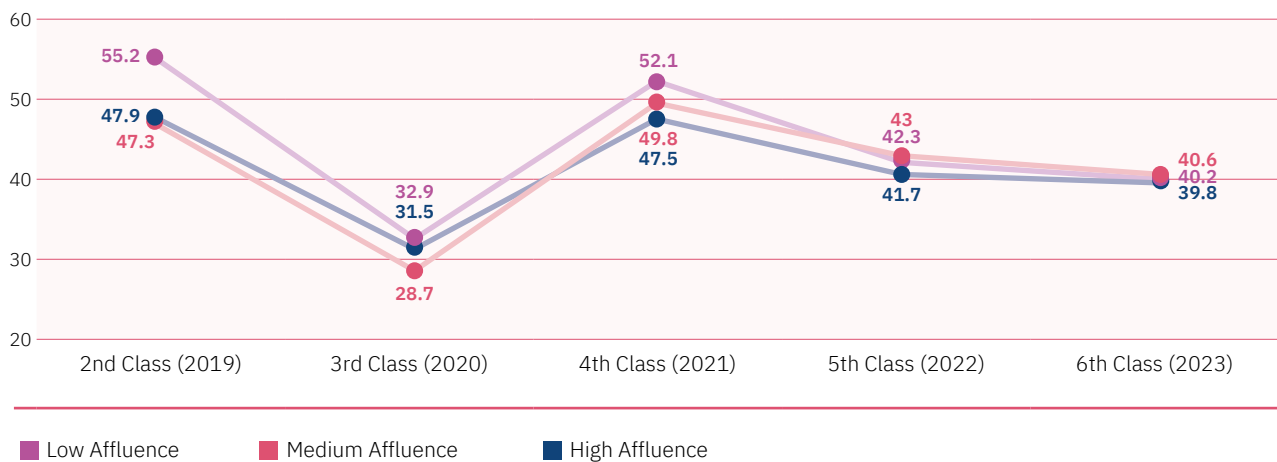**FIGURE 20.** "I look forward to going to school" by family affluence (Usually/Always) (Cohort A)

FIGURE 21. "I look forward to going to school" by family affluence (Usually/Always) (Cohort B)

Curricular preferences

Our analysis across both cohorts did not yield significant differences between children on the basis of family affluence and liking/disliking different aspects of the curriculum (Figure 22). There was no statistically significant difference between children in DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

FIGURE 22. "I am interested in…" by family affluence (Usually/Always) (Cohort B, 2023)
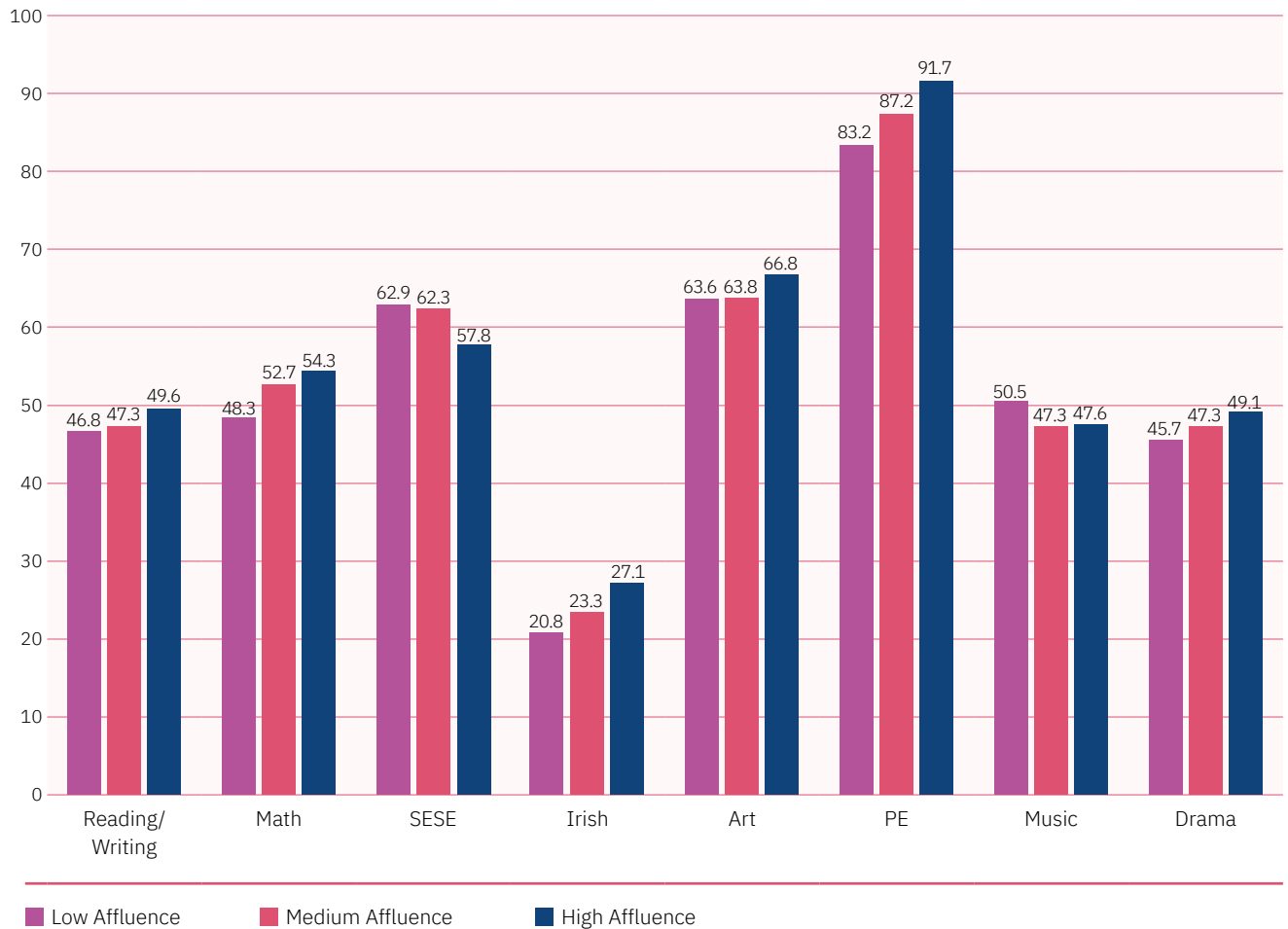

One area of difference however related to feelings of boredom in school – a clear indicator of dis/engagement. Our analysis in the National Study indicates a significant difference between children in DEIS and non-DEIS schools in levels of boredom across different subject areas. As Figure 23 shows, children in DEIS schools in cohort A (2nd class, 2023) are more likely to indicate they are bored across more subject areas, but especially reading/writing, Irish and Drama.

FIGURE 23. "I feel bored when I am learning…" by DEIS status (Agree/Strongly Agree) (Cohort A, 2023)
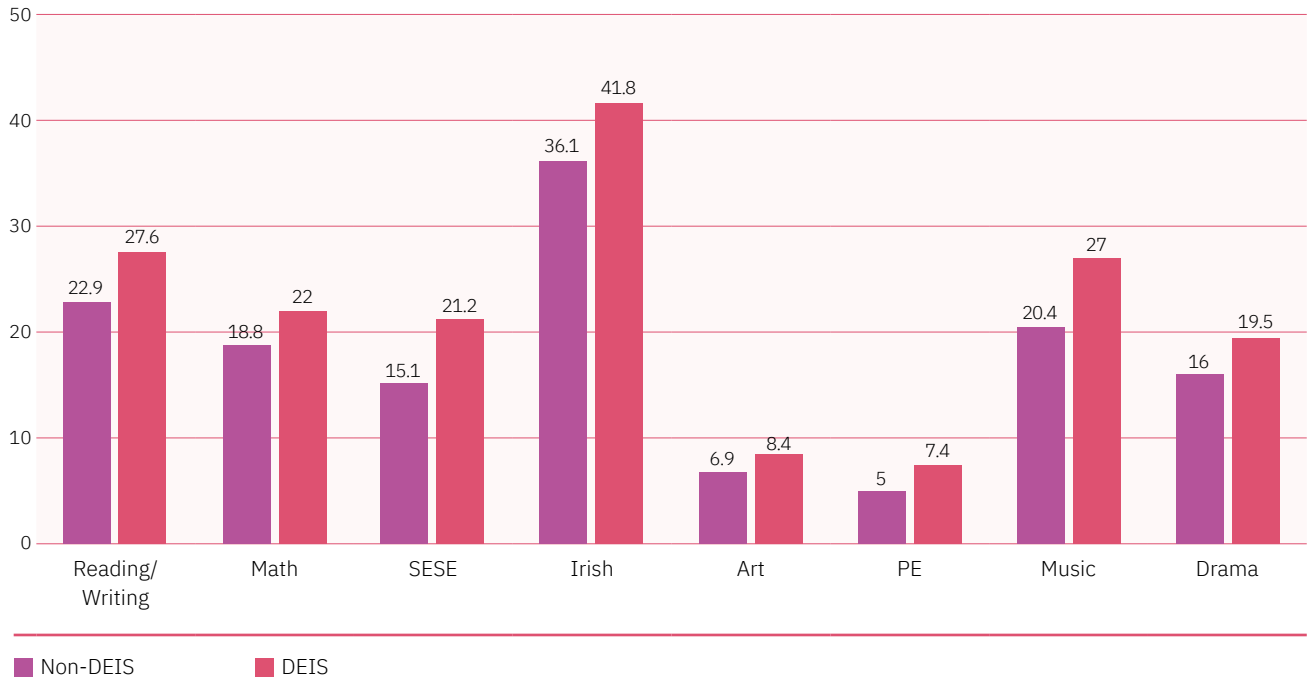
In cohort B, children in DEIS schools are slightly more likely to be bored doing drama, while those in non-DEIS schools are more likely to indicate they are bored doing Maths and SESE.

FIGURE 24. "I feel bored when I am learning…" by DEIS status (Agree/Strongly Agree) (Cohort B, 2023)
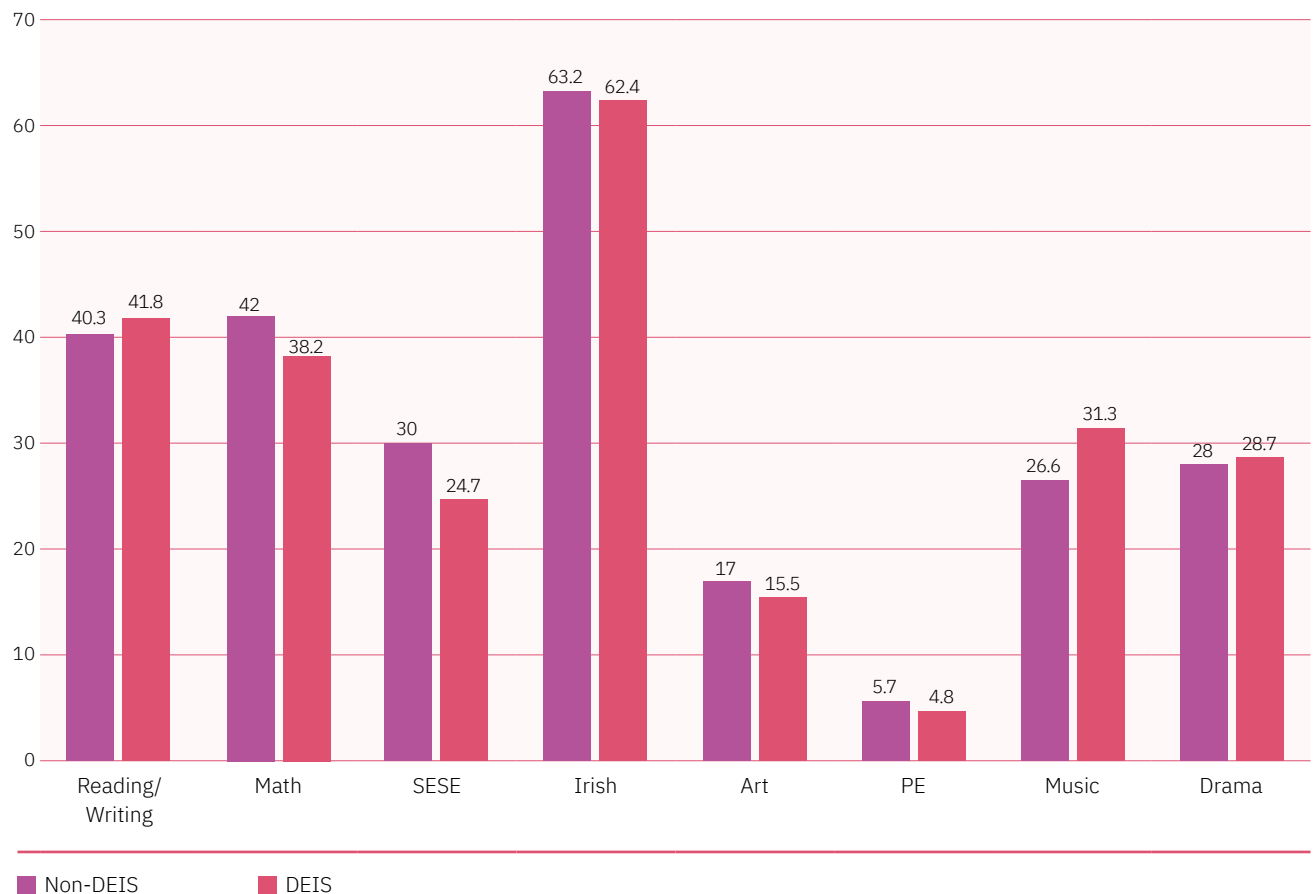
Engaging with learning

When children experience stress in their out of school lives, this influences their capacities to cope with the demands of school. In addition, the lack of certainty or conversely the clear pathways evident to them, creates the context for differing levels of engagement, which become more notable as the children progress through the primary school system.

Observations of engagement

Our systematic observations of classroom interactions provide an illustration of patterns of engagement in primary school classrooms. During fieldwork with cohort B in 2nd class, 5th class and 6th class, children's behaviour during lessons was rated using the ORACLE[11] observation tool. Fieldworkers observed selected children's behaviour during 10 time intervals. Five behaviours were coded as 'engagement' behaviours: co-operating alone, co-operating with a friend, co-operating with a teacher, co-operating with routine tasks and waiting for the teacher. If children displayed any of the engagement behaviours during each observation interval, they received a score of '1'. Engagement behaviours were summed to generate a total score for each child that could range from 0 to 10 (higher scores reflected more time spent engaging).

Analysis of data for cohort B in 2nd class, 5th class, and 6th class, shows that children displayed generally high levels of engagement in learning, with scores around 7 (out of a maximum of 10) at each wave. There was no difference in observed engagement between cohort B children in 2nd class in DEIS (7.28) and non-DEIS schools (7.13) in 2nd class. However, there was a decrease in observed engagement behaviour for children in non-DEIS (6.91) schools in 5th class, which was significantly lower than those in DEIS schools (7.36). By 6th class, observed engagement of children in non-DEIS schools had increased (7.35), and while engagement scores for those in DEIS schools had decreased (to 7.12), the difference between the groups was not significant. Figure 25 shows the mean scores of observed engagement behaviour by DEIS status.

FIGURE 25. Observed engagement behaviour by DEIS status (Cohort B)

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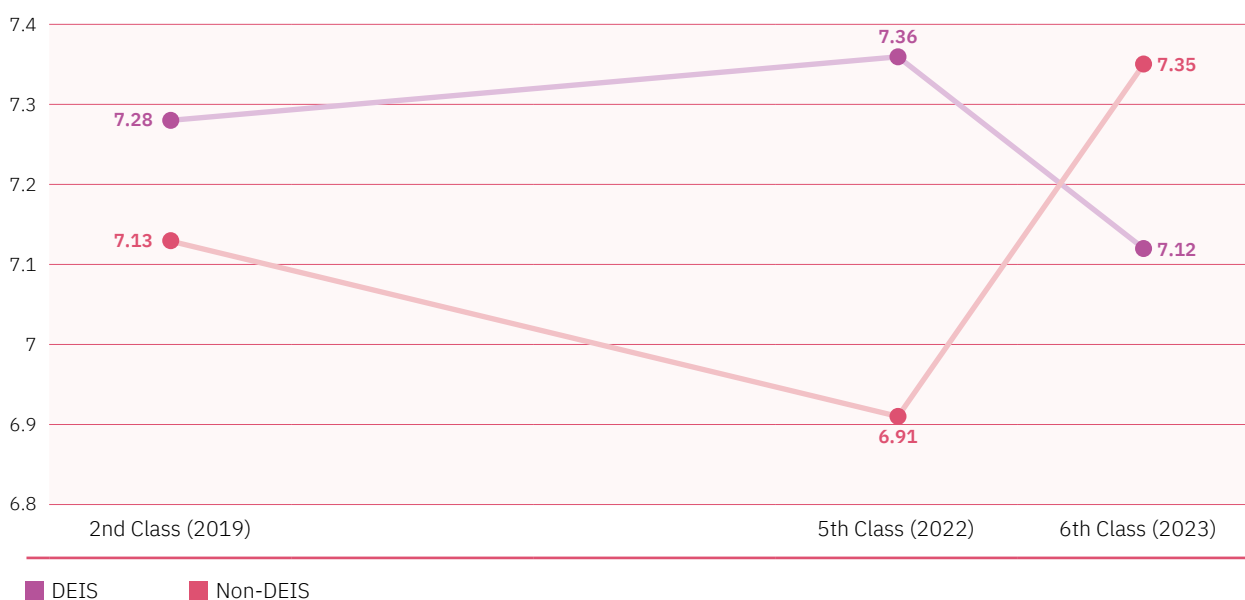
[11] During fieldwork with cohort B in 2nd class, 5th class and 6th class, children's behaviour during lessons was recorded at 30 second intervals using the Observational and Research Classroom Learning Evaluation (ORACLE) Pupil Record (Galton & Hargreaves, 2019).

We also looked at disengagement and noted slightly greater disengagement by children in non-DEIS schools in 2nd class, but little to no differences by the time children progress through the senior end of primary school. As we will show later, we did notice differences in disciplinary cultures in schools that may contextualise some of these observations. Figure 26 shows the mean scores of observed disengagement behaviour by DEIS status.

FIGURE 26. Observed disengagement behaviour by DEIS status (Cohort B)
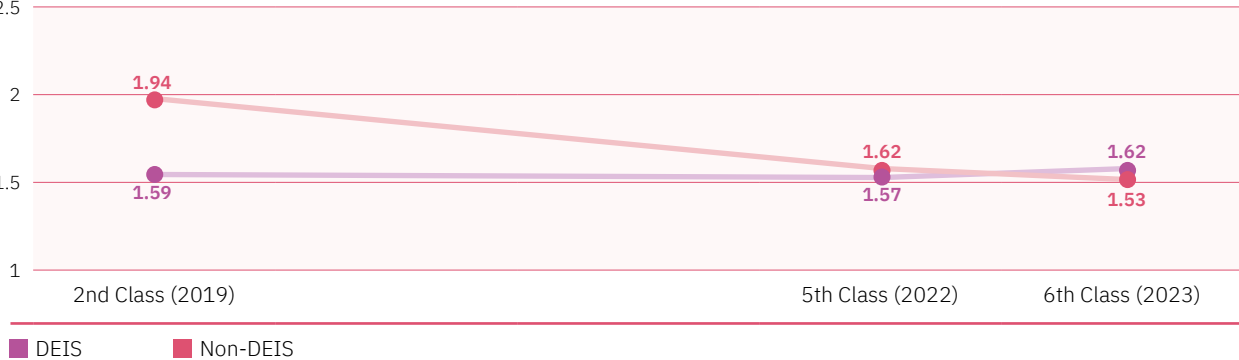

Teacher behaviour management

Teachers in the national study were asked to indicate the kinds of behaviour management they engaged in with reference to intervening when pupils talk at inappropriate times during class and strongly limiting classroom 'chatter'.

FIGURE 27. Teacher's classroom behaviour management by DEIS status (Agree/Strongly Agree) (Cohorts A & B)

Teacher perceptions of the behaviour challenges of children is also evident in their perceptions of how teachable children are. Teachability here refers to the demonstration of school appropriate behaviours. As Figure 28 shows, teachers in non-DEIS schools are more likely to rate children as very teachable than those in DEIS schools, and this is especially the case with respect to children in cohort B.

FIGURE 28. "How teachable are children in this school?" by DEIS status (Very teachable) (Cohorts A & B)
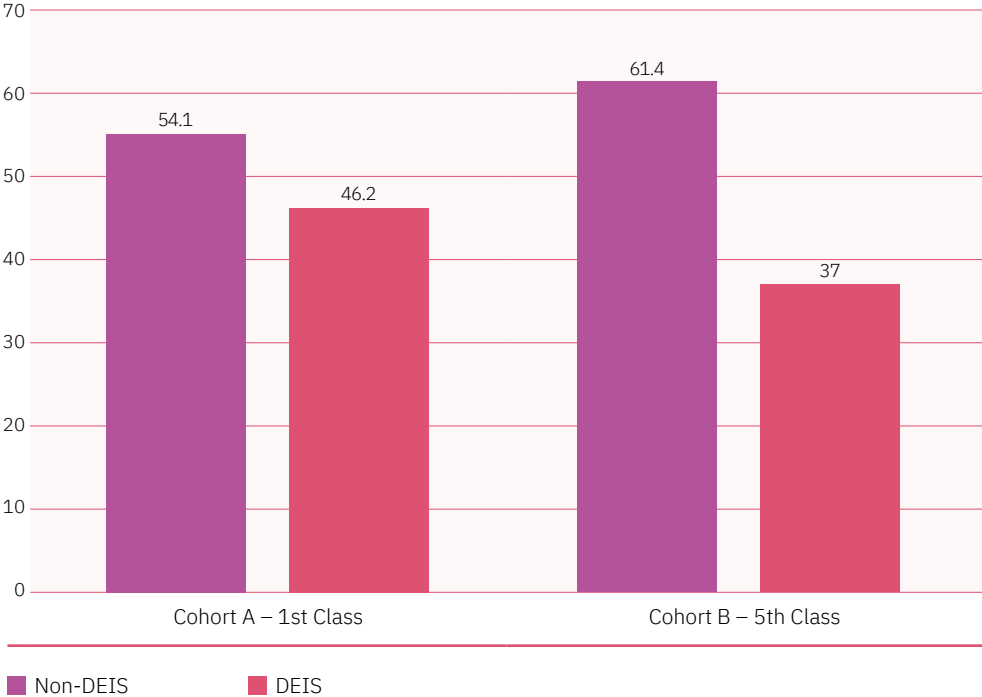
Across both cohorts our case study data interviews highlighted some incidences of more negative interactions in DEIS schools with reference by some children to detentions, parents being contacted and /or threats of suspension from school. This signalled also a growing dislike of school, most evident in the narratives of boys:

> Boy 1: *He'll give out for anything, if you just move … like if you made like a loud noise, he'd like look at you, like in a scary way.*
> Boy 2: *Yeah, he was like that.*
> Interviewer: *You guys didn't like that then.*
> Boy 1: *No.*
> Boy 2: *No.*
> (Boys, 6th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

> Interviewer: *OK. And now that you're back here, do you miss your other school?*
> Boy: *I feel better being here. I didn't have the best teachers in the other school…. They were very good at actually teaching, but they were not good at sort of connecting with the students in any way.*
> (Boy, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

> Interviewer: *Do you get annoyed when you get a yellow card or are you okay with it?*
> Boy: *I get annoyed because I have to go up to different classes all the time and I don't like going to different classes.*
> (Boy, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

Interviewer: *What happens if you don't follow the rules?*

Boy: *You get in trouble.*

Interviewer: *You get in trouble? And is that like ... he doesn't make you stand up outside the classroom, or anything?*

Boy: *No, he gives you ... warnings, warning ones, warning twos, yellow card, or red card.*

Interviewer: *Warning one, warning two, and a yellow card, and red card, okay.... And what happens if you get a red card?*

Boy: *You could get suspended.*

(Boy, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

Boy: *I didn't really get on with her.*

Interviewer: *Like what sort of things did she do that you didn't like?*

Boy: *I don't know. Like say there was ... like say that we were writing down our homework like we do in the morning, did you see the way our teacher let us have a little chat, talking to each other while we were writing down?*

Interviewer: *Okay, yeah.*

Boy: *She wouldn't. Like we weren't allowed to really talk for the whole day. It was just work.*

(Boy, 6th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

Also evident was the relative 'invisibility' of children (in this instance girls) who were not disruptive that is reflected in the conversation of these two girls in one of our case study schools:

Girl: *Like my whole time here, I've never gone past a verbal warning. I've gotten two verbal warnings my whole....*

Interviewer: *So you've never had a yellow card, you've never had....*

Girl: *No, never had a red card, a suspension, a warning one, or a warning two. I got two verbal warnings, one in third class and one in fourth.*

Interviewer: *Okay, but still you're not getting taken out for good behaviour?*

Girl: *No.*

Interviewer: *Why aren't you getting picked more?*

Girl: *I don't know, because we don't really act out like.*

Interviewer: *So you don't actually know, it's not clear.*

Girl: *Like most of the teachers I've met, they don't even remember me. Yeah.*

Interviewer: *Ah....*

Girl: *It's like we don't really stick out in the class.*

Interviewer: *Like neither in a good way, nor a bad way?*

Girl: *Yeah.*

(Girls, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

While [Report 7](#) highlighted the increasing emphasis by teachers on supporting children's wellbeing, interviews with teachers in DEIS schools connected this to creating a supportive environment around rules and behaviour. For teachers of younger children in cohort A, this focused on personalising learning experiences to maintain engagement. Reading a child's body language when entering the classroom, checking in on how children are feeling, or finding time for meditation or yoga during class to facilitate relaxation were all noted, as was the priority on safety for all:

> **Teacher:** *Having them involved in organising the class rules. So, I suppose getting them involved really early on in why we have these rules and that basically we want everybody to be safe and happy, and that is our priority. So, the first thing that we do is check in emotionally how everybody is … and then [putting] a little system that is individualised for them or that you are just making sure that you always get to that child first, if he needs any kind of differentiation.*
> (Female teacher, Junior infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

> **Teacher:** *Well, as I say I watch their body language, I greet every child individually and I ask each child as they come in the door, 'How are you feeling today?'… and I have a box we call it our message box and they can write it down on it and they put it into it and if they want me to talk to them about it they put their name on it.*
> (Female teacher, 2nd class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

For teachers in cohort B, most especially in boys' schools and in DEIS schools, as the children progressed to more senior classes, evident was a greater emphasis on more overt disciplinary strategies such as prewritten class rules, the positive reinforcement of desirable behaviour, and giving disruptive children yellow and red cards to monitor their behaviour:

> **Interviewer:** *What's the yellow card for?*
> **Boy:** *Like if you're really loud, like really … they get a yellow card and if you get a red card, you … Dojo … but [other teacher] can give yellow cards to particular people if she wants to.*
> **Interviewer:** *A yellow card is kind of leading into a red card, is that it?*
> **Boy:** *Yeah. And if you get three red cards, [Principal] has to come.*
> **Interviewer:** *Right okay and has that ever happened?*
> **Boy:** *No.*
> (Boy, 6th class, Non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

> **Girl 1:** *Whenever we do something wrong, or like we kick a ball over the fence…*
> **Girl 2:** *Yeah.*
> **Girl 2:** *When the boys do it we're usually in trouble, like red card, or…*
> **Girl 1:** *Yeah, the boys get in trouble more often than girls.*
> (Children, 6th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

> **Teacher:** *Yeah, well... I operate a system of ... it's sort of a sanction-reward system, I suppose, to a certain extent. It's part of an overall [school] system, but I have table captains every week and they wouldn't be responsible just for giving out resources. They'd also be responsible for making sure that the children acquire as many ticks as they possibly can, that they work together as a team.*
> (Male teacher, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

A core focus of *Children's School Lives* is to provide a holistic understanding not only of children's experience of primary school, but also of the factors that influence that experience. Our previous reports have highlighted how children experience specific aspects of school: during the COVID-19 pandemic (Report 4); pedagogies that shape classroom practice (Report 5), curriculum and assessment (Report 6) and the overall impact on children's wellbeing (Report 7). In each of these reports, findings have highlighted differences between children and signalled the importance of social background in shaping children's school lives. In this report we provide a more detailed overview of how the social context of children's lives outside of school influences what happens inside the school and the implications this has for social inequality both in the educational system as well as the wider society.

That Irish society is stratified by social class is evident in the demarcation of primary schools by their socio-economic status, with approximately 1/3 of schools in the CSL sample classified as DEIS, a key marker of social deprivation and disadvantage. Yet social disadvantage is not confined to DEIS schools, with approximately 1/5 of children in non-DEIS schools classified as poor. Our findings over time also highlight how primary schools are mirrors to their local community and the wider society, reflecting the structural dynamics of social in/equality through shifting and divergent patterns of poverty and prosperity. While some schools experienced deepening poverty and social isolation among their family communities over the period of the study, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, others saw increasing gentrification and affluence mediated by wider social and economic development. Case study analysis provided deeper insights into the social impact of these divergent experiences: the inter-generational impact of poverty, the trauma of drug abuse, the profound impact of social stigma in 'forgotten' communities, where family networks and primary schools were key systems of social support. These narratives were in stark contrast to communities where children had access to safe spaces to play and learn, to stability in everyday routines in a wider context of social and economic security, and where there was inter-generational knowledge and understanding of how to plan for educational success. Our previous analyses in Report 5 of teachers' strong commitment to care, especially in DEIS schools, is further borne out in this report through the accounts of both parents and grandparents of greater sensitivity and awareness by teachers of the challenges of family life in diverse contexts. While overall levels of wellbeing were not influenced by children's social background, that it was younger children in the study in DEIS schools who were significantly more likely to report feeling anxious and worried that something bad might happen, is of concern.

Our findings draw attention to the impact of social in/equality in the present on the educational trajectories of children and possibilities for their futures. From a young age, children's aspirations are informed not only by the immediate role models in their lives but also by knowledge and understanding of how to progress through the education system, and by the capacities of parents, in their access to financial as well as social and cultural resources, to support them along their way. Our findings highlight the gradual decline over time in academic

confidence among children from poorer families. This is of concern given the known impact of confidence and pride in one's achievements in shaping dispositions to further learning. While most children experience their teachers as having high expectations for them (see also Report 6), teachers were clear about the likely long-term trajectories for children in their care. They drew distinctions between children from poorer and more well-off families and expressed particular concerns about the long- term retention in the education system of children in the most marginalised communities. Such findings highlight the important distinction between rights *to* and *within* education, suggesting that the rights of children from poorer families may not be fully realised.

These patterns must also be considered in light of our findings related to children's engagement with their learning. Over time we found relatively high levels of engagement of children in their learning with no significant differences observed between children in cohort B in DEIS and non-DEIS schools. This suggests positive and focused learning climates in primary school classrooms, irrespective of social context, dovetailing with our findings on teacher expectations for children's learning. Case study findings suggest a prevalence of more overt disciplinary strategies in DEIS case study schools including rules, and sanctions reported by children and reports by teachers on behavioural challenges. A key tension in all schools is managing time with and attention to (including visibility of) all children in the classroom, in a context of diverse challenges and needs. Continued engagement with learning in this period of childhood is crucial to children's life trajectories. Combined with findings from our previous reports on pedagogies, curriculum and assessment (Reports 5 and 6), they suggest that further attention is needed on how to engage children with complex social needs in the classroom and the opportunities created for their learning, and to ensure that teachers and principals, as well as their parents, are fully supported in doing so. Primary schools do not operate in a vacuum. A key finding is that children's experiences are also framed in the context of family, community and societal inequalities that shape their dispositions to learning. Wider economic, social and educational policy frame children's everyday lives in schools. Differences between schools in the demographic profile of students, including the clustering of minority groups in some schools reflects wider patterns of social segregation in Irish society. Further reports will build on these findings to consider how these intersect also with children's gender and ethnicity.

ADDITIONAL PUBLICATIONS ON THE CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES STUDY

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CSL CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES

National longitudinal cohort study
of primary schooling in Ireland