



CSL

CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES

National longitudinal cohort study of primary schooling in Ireland

CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT IN CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES: EXPERIENCES FROM PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN IRELAND 2019-2023

UCD SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, DUBLIN
REPORT NO. 6
2023

Funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
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This report can be referenced as:

Martinez Sainz, G; Devine, D; Sloan, S; Symonds, J; Ioannidou, O; Moore, B; Crean, M; Barrow, N; Grieves, M; Gleasure, S; Donegan, A; Samonova, E; Davies, A; Stynes, H; Farrell, E; O'Giobuinn, R; Smith, A; Farrell, J. Gilligan, E. (2023)

SUPPORTED BY



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NCCA FOREWORD

I am delighted to welcome the publication of the report, *Curriculum and Assessment in Children's School Lives: Experiences from Primary Schools in Ireland 2019–2023*. This is the sixth in the series from the *Children's School Lives* longitudinal study and draws on the experience of almost 4,000 children in 189 primary schools, their teachers, school leaders and parents. Curriculum and assessment policy reflects what we, as a society, hold dear about what children should learn, when they should learn it and how they should learn. Drawing on a very extensive data set, the report paints a most interesting and insightful picture of the curriculum and the assessment practices used in primary education. In keeping with previous publications in the series, this report prioritises the lived experiences of children. In doing so, we not only learn how they experience curriculum and assessment; we also learn how they interpret and internalise these experiences and how this evolves as they progress through school.

As the national body responsible for advising the Minister for Education on curriculum and assessment, this report has particular significance for the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Its nuanced and rich findings on how curriculum and assessment is experienced by children throughout their primary school journey, are revealing and critically important.

Of particular interest are the children's perceptions of their own accomplishment and sense of competency in the different subjects making up the primary curriculum. Within this, we are presented with clear insights into how they experience learning as they move from junior to senior classes, what subjects they derive most enjoyment from and the extent to which they identify subjects as being relevant to them. Linking back to Report 5, we are reminded of the importance of the how of their learning with playful, interactive and creative pedagogies being favoured. We also learn how their experience of curriculum and assessment becomes less positive in the senior classes as the demands of the curriculum increase for children and teachers alike. The term 'overload' features capturing this changing experience, and shines a light on a key consideration for the next iteration of the primary curriculum.

Assessment, teaching and learning are inextricably linked. How assessment is understood and interpreted varies depending on its perceived role in the educational process. This report provides strong evidence of a culture of formative assessment in primary schools in which assessment is most definitely seen as informing teaching and learning. The report emphasises children's perceptive awareness of their teachers' use of a range of assessment strategies with the children showing strong preference for those strategies that provide them with direct feedback on how their learning can be improved. Of some concern is the illumination of the anxiety that testing, particularly standardised testing, can give rise to as children move into and through the more senior classes. Again, nuances are important. For some children, such testing demonstrates their 'smartness' and growing confidence while, for others, it contributes to a feeling of failure.

We know that the quality of the teacher-child relationship lies at the heart of good teaching and learning. The report demonstrates that positive relationships between families and schools are also key, with trust and provision of feedback to parents enabling them to support their own children's learning. Homework emerges once again as a theme requiring greater attention and consideration if it is to benefit all children and contribute to fostering their engagement with the primary curriculum.

The study is now in its sixth year. The ongoing involvement of the 189 participating school communities continues to demonstrate their deep commitment to this ground-breaking research. While the findings in all six reports to date spotlight important considerations for NCCA’s work on the primary curriculum, this sixth report carries very particular significance with its clear and probing findings on how children experience curriculum and assessment. The children tell us that there is much to be proud of and to celebrate, and they also direct our attention to where we need to do better through the redevelopment of the curriculum. The NCCA has a unique opportunity now to take account of what the children in this study have shared so articulately with us, and to ensure that the next iteration of the primary curriculum can underpin even better learning experiences for children from junior infants to sixth class. The Council expresses its sincere thanks to the children, their teachers, school leaders and parents for sharing their experiences of curriculum and assessment.

The NCCA is also indebted to the UCD Research Team led by Professor Dympna Devine, Assistant Professor Seaneen Sloan, Assistant Professor Gabriela Martinez Sainz and Assistant Professor Olga Ioannidou. The high quality of their research design shines through in the creative and responsive research methodologies they employ to encourage and enable high levels of engagement by all groups of participants, most importantly by the children. This creativity continues to ensure that children’s voices and perspectives remain at the heart of this research study.

Arlene Forster
Chief Executive, NCCA



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1. INTRODUCTION

The curriculum plays a pivotal role in shaping children’s experiences of school and their learning, offering a structured framework for their educational journey and overall development. It is through the curriculum – the content children learn, the forms of knowledge they engage with, the questions they are challenged to explore – that the wider values within society, of continuity and change, are given force. Curriculum provides a comprehensive foundation for the wider educational purposes of schools, contributing towards children’s holistic growth and development, as well as preparing them with the skills, dispositions and capacities necessary for life today and into the future. Curriculum focuses on the ‘*what*’ and ‘*why*’ of children’s learning, reflected in national guidelines related to both content as well as time across a range of learning areas. *How* children experience what they learn, both its relevance and impact on their everyday lives, is key to the realisation of national curriculum goals, and strongly interconnects with pedagogy as detailed in Report 5. Both curriculum and pedagogy are in turn influenced by assessment practices in the classroom – the evaluation, both formal and informal, of children’s progress and engagement with their learning. It is through assessment practices that judgments can be made about how best to support each individual child’s learning, in the wider context of standards and norms across primary schools. Assessment plays a significant role in shaping children’s learning trajectories and teacher pedagogies, through informed judgements about how best to tailor learning to children’s needs. As with our previous discussion of pedagogy in Report 5, children’s experience of both curriculum and assessment is social and relational – it occurs in the context of their interactions with their peers, their teachers and their parents, influencing and extending how they come to know themselves as learners, and as citizens.

Understanding *Children’s School Lives (CSL)* requires an in-depth exploration of how children experience the curriculum and assessment in their everyday lives, the focus of this thematic report. A core aspect of the CSL study has been to capture children’s voice and understand their experiences as they progress through primary school. In this report we place children’s experiences of curriculum and assessment *practices* at the centre of the analysis. While their voices are central, we present these also in the context of the perspectives of key adult decision makers in children’s lives: teachers, principals, and their parents. Relationships are at the core of the teaching and learning processes, as the evidence from the previous report on Pedagogy ([Report 5](#))¹ shows. For this reason, we explore teachers’ and principals’ experiences of both curriculum and assessment to better understand children’s experiences as these are framed within the complex challenges faced by school communities. Finally, a key element we explore in this report is the family dynamics around experiences of the curriculum, assessment and out of school learning by considering parents’ views and concerns. Each of these perspectives provides a wider lens into the rationale behind and experience of curricular and assessment practices in primary schools, and in the case of parents, their priorities and experiences, including the key insights they have over how their children respond to and engage with their learning.

¹ Devine, D; Martinez-Sainz, G; Symonds, J; Sloan, S; Moore, B; Crean, M; Barrow, N; Grieves, M; Donegan, A; Samonova, E; Davies, A; Farrell, E; O’Giobúin, R; Farrell, J. (2023) *Primary Pedagogies: Children And Teachers’ Experiences Of Pedagogical Practices In Primary Schools In Ireland 2019–2022*, Report No. 5; University College Dublin.

Previous reports of CSL have already captured some of the experiences related to curriculum and assessment – for children in 2nd class ([Report 1](#)),² for children in Junior Infants ([Report 3](#))³ and during the first COVID-19 lockdown ([Report 2](#)).⁴ In this report, we present a comprehensive overview, drawing upon longitudinal data for both cohorts of children, focusing on children’s experiences over time as they transition from Junior Infants through to 2nd class (Cohort A); and from 2nd class through to the end of primary school in 6th class (Cohort B). Following an overview of the sample, the report is divided into four main sections. Section 1 details experiences of the curriculum in practice, highlighting children’s experiences of what they learn and the preferences they have for learning different subjects. Teacher preferences are also detailed alongside the time they spend on different subject areas, and how this has changed since the pandemic. Principal perspectives on curriculum implementation at the whole school level are also considered. Section 2 outlines experiences of assessment beginning with children’s views of their ‘smartness’ and exploring the range of assessment strategies – both formal and informal – they experience in school. Additional perspectives are gained through parents’ commentaries of how their children respond to teacher assessments, in addition to their own experiences of feedback on their children’s progress in school. Teacher and principal practices are also outlined. Section 3 provides a lens on children’s out of school learning – in particular homework (including the family dynamics that arise) and a brief illustration of the extra-curricular activities children engage in after school. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on curricular and assessment practices are detailed in Section 4.

Key findings

Curriculum

- Most children starting primary school expressed enjoyment for reading and writing as well as Maths. Their interests in these subjects remained as they progressed into 2nd class.
- In 4th class almost all children are more interested in PE and Art and less than a half are interested in Irish. Reading and writing, as well as History, Geography and Science are also interesting subjects for most of the children.
- Children’s interest in subjects is reflected in their attitudes and engagement toward them; PE, History, Geography and Science are subjects they are interested in and feel happy when learning.
- Maths is the subject children feel more confused and bored with when learning; however, it was a subject commonly chosen as a favourite among children in both cohorts.
- Children also reported feeling bored when learning reading and writing but, unlike Maths, they were not necessarily confused by the subject.

² Devine, D.; Symonds, J., Sloan, S., Cahoon, A., Crean, M., Farrell, E., Davies, A., Blue, T. & Hogan, J. (2020). *Children’s School Lives: An Introduction*, Report No.1, University College Dublin.

³ Sloan, S., Devine, D., Martinez Sainz, G., Symonds, J. E., Crean, M., Moore, B., Davies, A., Farrell, E., Farrell, J., Blue, T., Tobin, E. & Hogan, J. (2021). *Children’s School Lives in Junior Infants*, Report No.3. University College Dublin.

⁴ Symonds, J. E., Devine, D., Sloan, S., Crean, M., Moore, B., Martinez Sainz, G., Farrell, E., Davies, A., Farrell, J., & Blue, T. (2020). *Experiences of Remote Teaching and Learning in Ireland During the Covid-19 Pandemic (March – May 2020)*, Report No. 2; University College Dublin.

- Across the years, children’s experiences of different subjects are strongly connected to their perceptions of accomplishment and competency; however, their enjoyment seems to decline as they progress through primary school partly due to what they perceive as repetitive and overloaded subjects.
- Children’s enjoyment of subjects is connected to child-centred pedagogies, including creative and play-based approaches to teaching and learning.
- Children could effectively distinguish between the subjects they enjoy and subjects they consider important in their everyday lives. The subjects considered most important were PE, closely followed by Maths, English and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE).
- There is an alignment between the subjects children felt were important in their everyday lives and those on which teachers spent more than the recommended time (Maths and English).
- Whereas most teachers enjoyed teaching English, Maths and SESE, the least enjoyed subjects by teachers were Religious Education, Drama, PE and Music.
- Teachers across primary school showed significant mastery of and creativity in teaching different subjects. They do so by setting priorities in response to children’s needs and abilities, incorporating collaborative teaching, project-based learning and differentiated strategies for each subject.
- Across primary school, teachers mentioned curriculum overload and lack of time as key challenges for teaching subject content effectively.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had a strong influence on the way the curriculum was implemented. This included how subjects were taught during remote learning periods, in addition to curricular priorities once school reopened and how teachers approached different subjects in the post-pandemic classroom.
- Principals were concerned about supporting children and their needs through flexible implementation of the curriculum in schools. They were also concerned to support teachers in navigating curricular changes and setting learning priorities.
- Principals indicated a high willingness among teachers in their schools to teach to the curriculum, but some uncertainty around their understanding of and success in implementing curricular goals.
- Principals who are in full-time administrative roles spend less time on curriculum related tasks than those who are in teaching principal roles.

Assessment

- Assessment of children’s learning is usually based on in-class tests, informal chats, homework, and teacher comments on children’s work and only to a lesser extent on standardised test results.
- A wide range of assessment strategies are used in the classroom including check-ins, observations, evaluation activities and tests.
- In both cohorts, informal assessments were recognised by children as constructive support for their learning.
- Children expressed their preference for individual feedback from their teachers and for informal checking over testing to demonstrate their learning as early as 2nd class.

- Children in Cohort B reported ambivalent views over time regarding how often they are tested, with over half of them highlighting the importance of testing in their schools.
- A third of children in Cohort B reported typically feeling anxious before and after standardised tests over their performance. Anxiety was often connected to a sense of failure or element of surprise.
- Children also considered tests as positive challenges to extend their learning and an opportunity to acknowledge their evolving competence and abilities.
- Most parents like getting feedback from teachers and affirm the positive impact of constructive feedback to both their engagement with their children's learning and their children's engagement with school.
- Parents demonstrate an ambivalent attitude towards tests, understanding their usefulness but also recognising their limitations as a source to assess their children's progress. This trend was also identified by teachers.
- Parents reported children in the early years of primary school do not feel worried or anxious about assessment, but this changes as they progress through primary school.
- Parents in the senior classes shared that children sometimes do feel anxious or worry particularly about testing.
- Parents' attitudes and levels of concerns regarding assessment are related to the diversity of children's experiences as they move through their different classes.
- Parents trust teachers and schools regarding the progress of their children's learning, with an expectation that any problems would be communicated to them.
- A wide range of feedback strategies used by teachers was also identified, with parents particularly valuing parent-teacher meetings as a key space where they learn about their children's progress over and above end of year report cards or test results.
- There was widespread agreement across parents, teachers and principals that standardised tests are only one component to assess children's learning.
- Most principals drew on test results to inform decisions about curriculum planning in their schools and agree that most teachers feel calm and confident during standardised testing periods.
- In case study interviews principals referred to some stress and anxiety by parents in relation to test results, especially in more middle-class schools.

Out of school learning

- Homework was generally not well regarded by children in both cohorts. They considered it 'boring' and additional work that takes time away off from play and time with their families and friends.
- Homework was viewed by parents in both cohorts as an indicator of how children were progressing in school; it was also experienced as a challenge in busy households even in junior classes.

- Parents of younger children expressed strong preferences for homework as an important element of education to reinforce learning and described positive family dynamics when doing homework. These preferences and positive attitudes declined as children progressed through primary school as children showed more resistance towards homework.
- Irish and Maths were the subjects identified as representing a challenge for parents when supporting their children doing their homework.
- Strongly connected to parent's views on assessment, positive relationships between families and school communities was regarded as a key element to support children's engagement with homework.

Impact of COVID-19

- During remote learning, Maths and Irish were the most challenging subjects for children as these required the expertise of teachers for the content to be adequately taught.
- Teachers spent more time than pre-lockdown on English, Maths and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) on return to school, seemingly at the expense of subjects such as Religious Education and SESE.
- Teachers made decisions about curriculum planning and implementation fully considering the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on children's learning.
- For the younger cohort that only had a few months of school experience before school closures, the priority for teachers was to consolidate literacy and numeracy skills and Irish.
- An important challenge for teachers once schools reopened was adapting subjects such as Art, Physical Education or Maths to adhere to the social distancing measures.
- The 'low key' approach to assessment during remote learning periods altered when schools reopened. Assessment became a priority to ascertain how the children had either progressed or fallen behind during lockdowns.
- Teachers employed multiple strategies to assess children's competence and skills to plan their lessons and provide differentiated instruction when needed.
- There were no significant changes to assessment strategies once lockdowns were over although there was some evidence of teachers using digital technologies to a greater extent.
- Principals welcomed the removal of expectations for standardised testing when schools reopened but had to navigate the difficulties and managerial pressures associated with not having test results for children, particularly for DEIS plans and SEN provision.
- New forms of communication with parents over how their children are doing in school that emerged during the pandemic have remained, including online feedback.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

This report documents the responses from children, teachers, and principals from two Cohorts (A and B), who were invited to complete questionnaires during annual waves of data collection between 2019 and 2022 (Table 1). At the beginning of the study, Cohort A children were aged 4/5-years in Junior Infants, and Cohort B children were 8/9-years in 2nd class. Cohort A children were surveyed first in Autumn 2019, then in Spring 2021 and 2022. Cohort B children were surveyed annually in Spring.

The COVID-19 school closures meant that in 2020, only Cohort B (who were, at that stage, in 3rd class and aged 9/10-years) children and their teachers participated in the 2020 survey (Table 2), which was administered online. Cohort A children (who were in Junior Infants at the time and aged 4–5 years) were considered too young to complete an online survey.

TABLE 1: COHORT A SURVEY SAMPLE

	2019 A Junior Infants		2021 A Senior Infants		2022 A 1st Class	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Children						
All	1,773	100%	1,696	100%	2,013	100%
Girls	800	45%	840	51%	787	39%
Boys	845	48%	814	49%	820	41%
DEIS	714	40%	714	42%	898	45%
non-DEIS	1,058	60%	982	58%	1,115	55%
Teachers						
All	105	100%	84	100%	66	100%
Women	99	94%	82	98%	60	91%
Men	5	5%	2	2%	5	8%
DEIS	43	41%	35	42%	31	47%
non-DEIS	62	59%	49	58%	35	53%
Principals						
All	60	100%	66	100%	56	100%
Women	43	72%	50	76%	42	75%
Men	17	28%	16	24%	14	25%
DEIS	18	30%	23	38%	22	39%
Non-DEIS	42	70%	41	62%	33	59%
Parents						
All	461	100%	401	100%	228	100%
Women	415	90%	354	89%	211	93%
Men	44	10%	42	11%	13	6%
DEIS	134	31%	150	37%	83	36%
Non-DEIS	318	68%	251	63%	145	64%

Note: Percentages do not always add up to 100 due to missing or 'other' responses.

TABLE 2: COHORT B SURVEY SAMPLE

	2019 B 2nd Class		2020 B 3rd Class		2021 B 4th Class		2022 B 5th Class	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Children								
All	2,062	100%	550	100%	2,297	100%	2,347	100%
Girls	1,017	49%	284	52%	1,077	47%	974	42%
Boys	998	48%	264	48%	1,034	45%	940	40%
DEIS	676	33%	146	27%	762	33%	777	33%
non-DEIS	1,386	67%	404	73%	1,535	67%	1,573	67%
Teachers								
All	78	100%	84	100%	94	100%	72	100%
Women	70	90%	67	80%	68	72%	52	72%
Men	8	10%	17	20%	23	24%	19	26%
DEIS	26	33%	35	42%	39	41%	24	33%
non-DEIS	52	67%	49	58%	55	59%	48	67%
Teachers								
All	77	100%	65	100%	78	100%	68	100%
Women	47	61%	38	59%	52	67%	44	65%
Men	30	39%	25	39%	26	33%	24	36%
DEIS	27	35%	23	35%	29	37%	27	40%
Non-DEIS	45	58%	42	65%	46	59%	41	60%
Teachers								
All	No survey		418	100%	447	100%	177	100%
Women	-	-	378	90%	410	92%	163	92%
Men	-	-	40	10%	32	7%	12	7%
DEIS	-	-	95	23%	102	23%	37	21%
Non-DEIS	-	-	324	77%	345	77%	140	79%

Note: Percentages do not always add up to 100 due to missing or 'other' responses.

TABLE 3: COHORT B CASE STUDY SCHOOLS SAMPLE

SCHOOL	SES	URBAN/RURAL	GENDER	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTALS
1	Non DEIS	Urban	Co-Ed	8	18	26
2	DEIS	Urban	Co-Ed	7	9	16
3	Non DEIS	Rural Town	Girls	-	25	25
4	DEIS	Urban	Boys	15	-	15
5	DEIS	Rural Town	Co-Ed	8	15	23
6	Non DEIS	Rural	Co-Ed	1	2	3
Total				39	69	108

TABLE 4: COHORT A CASE STUDY SCHOOLS SAMPLE

SCHOOL	SES	URBAN/RURAL	GENDER	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTALS
1	Non DEIS	Urban	Girls	-	23	23
2	Non DEIS	Urban	Boys	28	-	28
3	Non DEIS	Rural Town	Co-Ed	11	16	27
4	Non DEIS	Rural	Co-Ed	5	3	8
5	DEIS	Urban	Boys	16	-	16
6	DEIS	Urban	Girls	-	21	21
7	DEIS	Urban	Co-Ed	12	11	23
Total				72	74	146

Data analysed and presented in the report from the National Study include Wave 1 (2019) to Wave 4 (2022). For the Case Study Schools data, the report covers from Wave 1 through to Wave 5 (2023).

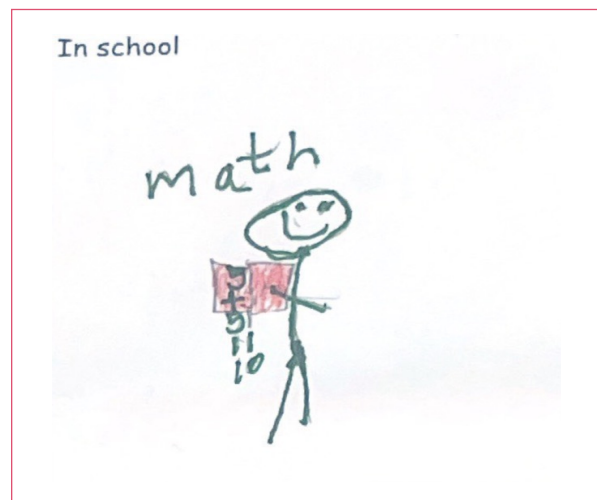
A DAY IN MY LIFE – CHILDREN’S ILLUSTRATIONS OF LEARNING IN SCHOOL

In 2019, when children in Cohort B were in 2nd class, we asked them to draw what they would normally do before school, in school and after school as part of the activity ‘A Day in My Life.’ The same activity was conducted with children in Cohort A in 2023 when they were in 2nd class. In the activity, different subjects of the curriculum were portrayed in children’s accounts of what they do during the school day (Figure 1).

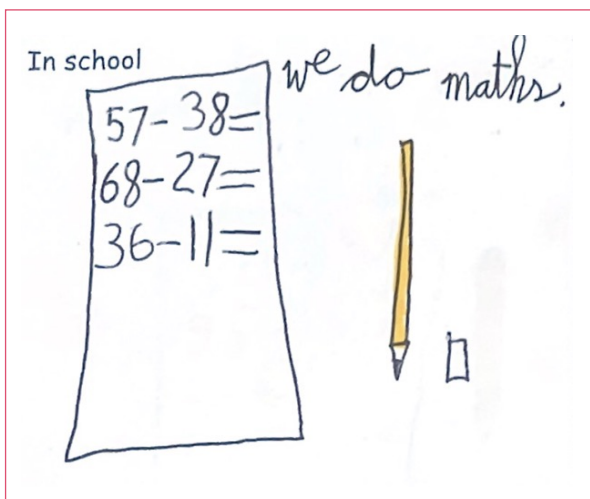
FIGURE 1: COHORT B (2019) AND COHORT A (2023) DRAWINGS FROM THE ACTIVITY ‘A DAY IN MY LIFE’ REFLECTING WHAT THEY DO IN SCHOOL



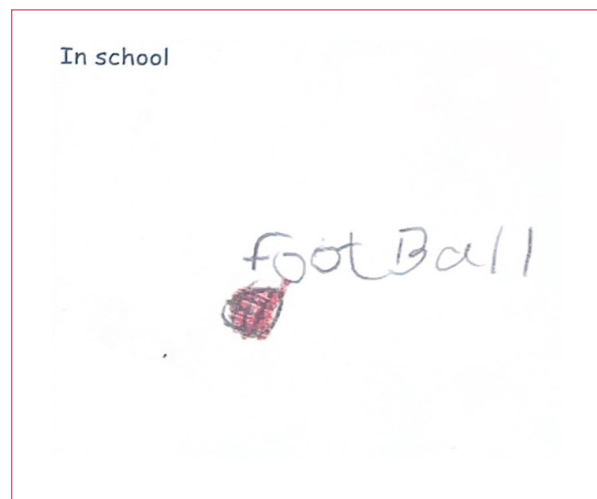
(Girl, 2nd class, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)



(Boy, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)



(Girl, 2nd class, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)



(Boy, 2nd class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

EXPERIENCING THE CURRICULUM IN PRACTICE

Over the course of the study, children were asked about their experiences of learning across the curriculum. These experiences are framed in the context of teachers' actions as well as wider decisions school leaders make about curriculum implementation in the school. In the following sections we detail experiences of the curriculum through the eyes of children, their teachers, and their school principals.

Children's experiences of what they learn

Children's subject preferences – What children like to learn

Across the waves children expressed pleasure with a range of different content areas and educational experiences, but also some frustrations and clear dislikes. In relation to the curriculum, some children expressed preferences for subjects like Maths and English. Others expressed enjoyment of more peripheral content areas, including digital technology or art-based subjects. Children's experience of their learning was often expressed through their experience of the passage of time. Children noted that when they enjoyed learning a particular subject time passed more quickly. For subjects where children felt less engaged, such as Irish, time seemed to pass much more slowly.

In 2021, when children in Cohort A were in Senior Infants, they were asked about their enjoyment of learning to read and write, and Maths (Figure 2). Most children indicated that they enjoyed learning both reading and writing (71%) and Maths (71%), with slightly over half saying they really enjoyed learning maths (i.e., *Yes!* in Figure 2). Approximately 10% of children responded that they really did not like learning Maths, with a slightly smaller proportion indicating the same for reading and writing. A similar pattern emerged when the same cohort was asked again in 2022 (1st class) about their interest in these subjects (Figure 3), with most children agreeing that they were interested in these subjects.

FIGURE 2: COHORT A (2021) SENIOR INFANTS CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO WHETHER THEY LIKE LEARNING

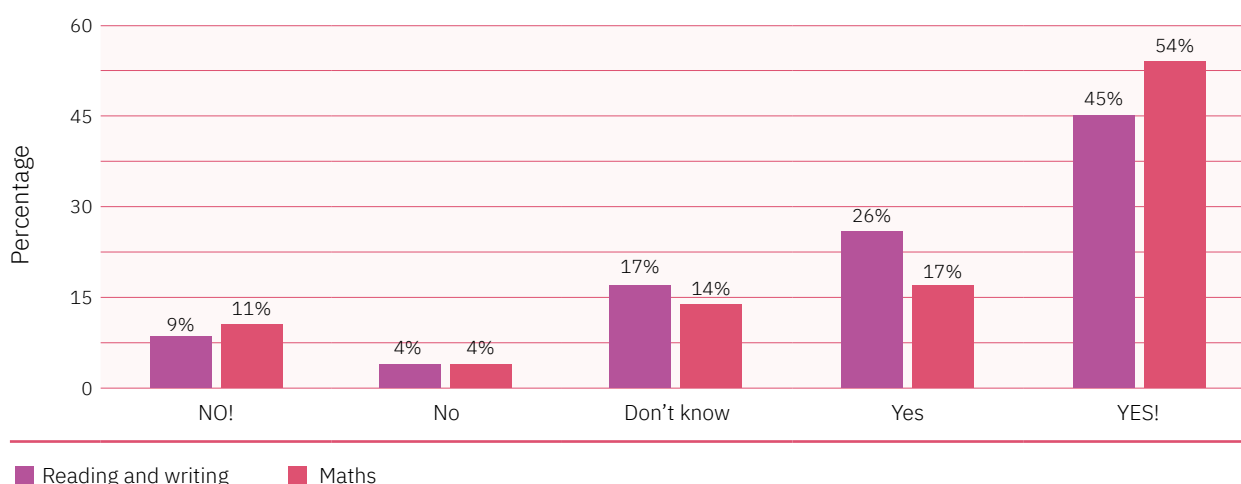
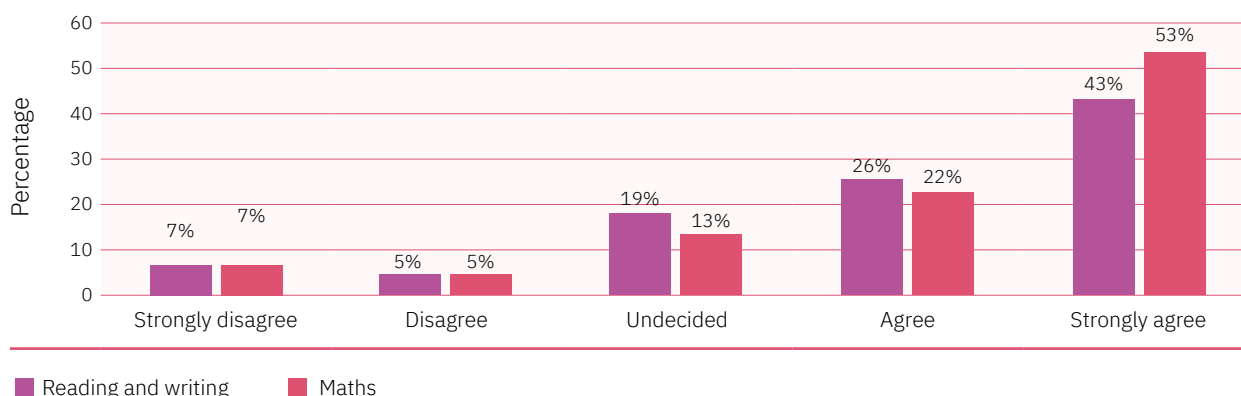


FIGURE 3: COHORT A (2022) 1ST CLASS CHILDREN’S INTEREST IN SUBJECTS



In 2021, children in Cohort B in 4th classes were asked about their interest in subjects, and how bored, happy, and confused they felt when they were learning them. The following results focus on children who reported positive and negative responses, rather than neutral responses. Figure 4 shows children’s responses to questions on how interested they were in subjects. Like opinions voiced in 2019 (Table 5), many children in Cohort B 4th classes indicated that they were least interested in Irish, while conversely more children reported being interested in PE (96%).

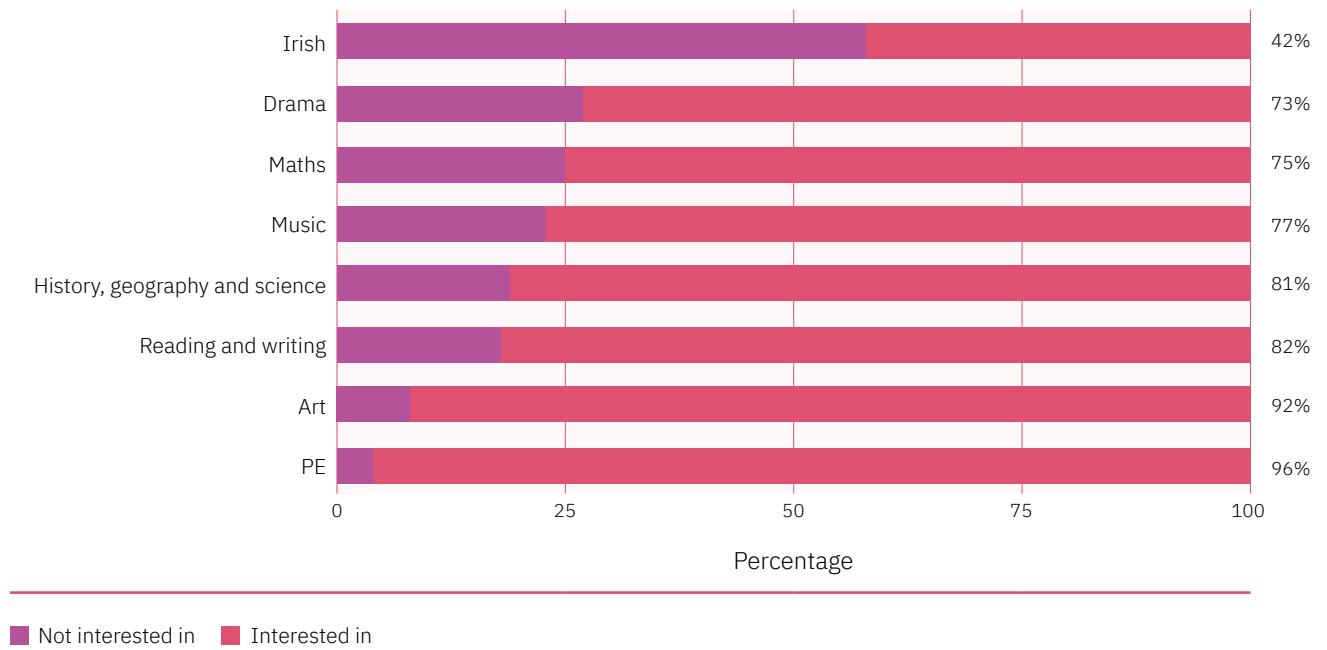
TABLE 5: COHORT B (2019) 2ND CLASS CHILDREN ’ S INTEREST IN SUBJECTS FROM CHILDREN’S SCHOOL LIVES: AN INTRODUCTION, REPORT 1⁵

	NUMBER	EXTREMELY	SOMEWHAT	NOT VERY
HOW INTERESTING ARE THESE SUBJECTS FOR YOU?				
1. Physical education	1861	72%	19%	9%
2. Art	1860	72%	19%	9%
3. SESE: history, geography, science	1859	68%	21%	11%
4. Music	1854	57%	28%	14%
5. Reading/English	1861	48%	35%	17%
6. Maths	1861	40%	35%	25%
7. Irish	1854	25%	33%	42%

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding to the nearest whole number.

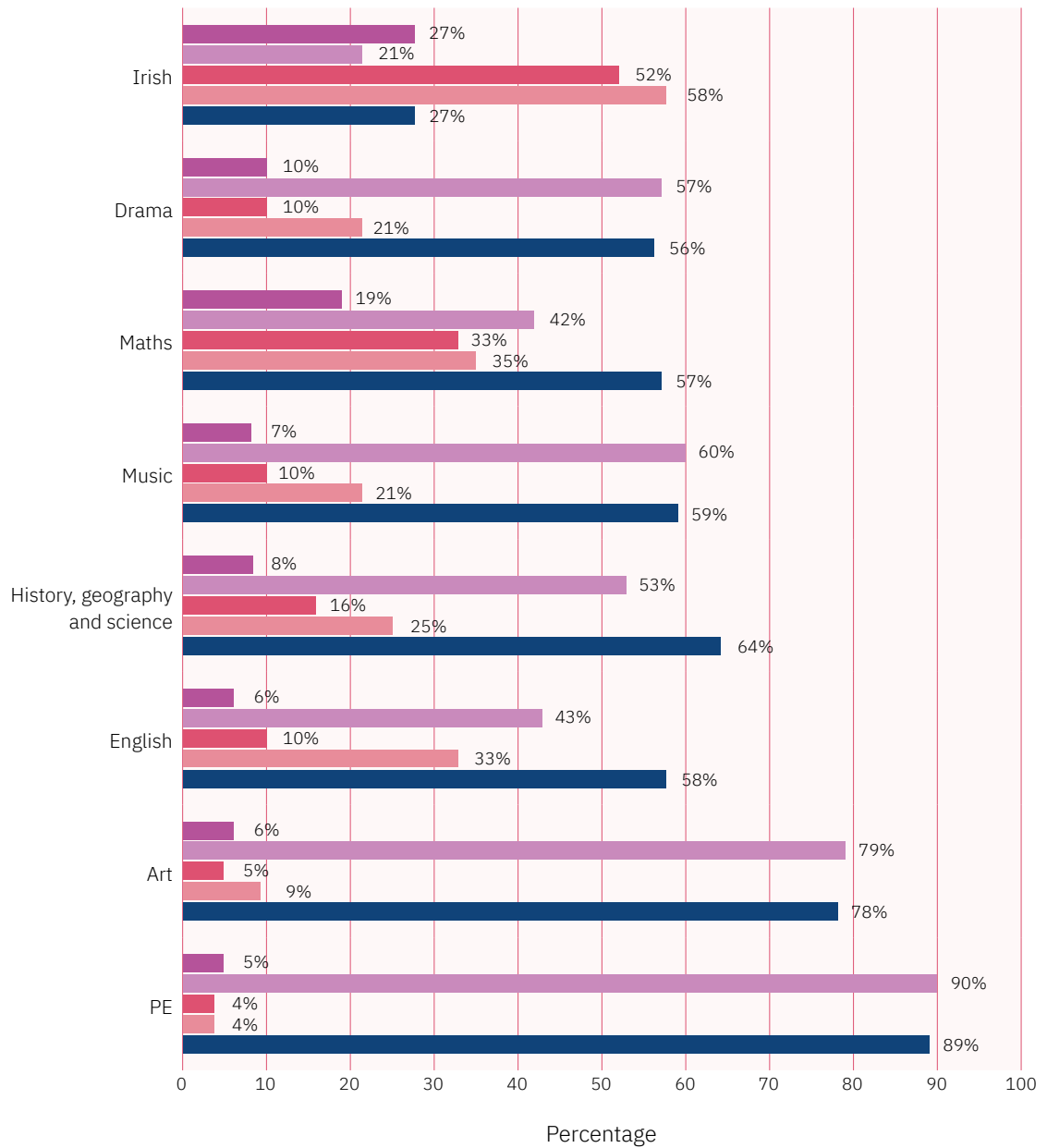
⁵ Given the number of subjects and length of the overall children’s questionnaire there was a need to cluster some subject headings into thematic areas in the curriculum. Religious Education was not included given the variation across school types in provision.

FIGURE 4: COHORT B (2021) 4TH CLASS CHILDREN’S RESPONSES TO HOW INTERESTED THEY ARE IN EACH SUBJECT



To capture their experience in practice and over time, the children were also asked whether they felt bored when they were learning as shown in Figure 5. Unsurprisingly, in 5th class children were least likely to indicate that they were bored when they were in PE (4%), while the largest proportion of children indicated they were bored while learning Irish (58%) and Maths (35%). The inverse relationship was observed when children were asked how happy they were learning the same subjects, with PE appearing at the top of the list and Maths the lowest ranked subject (Figure 5). Only a few children indicated they felt confused when learning any of the subjects (Figure 5). Where children felt confused, this was most likely to be for Irish (52% agreed or strongly agreed they felt confused) and Maths (33%).

FIGURE 5: COHORT B (2022) 5TH CLASS CHILDREN’S RESPONSES TO FEELING CONFUSED, HAPPY AND BORED WHEN LEARNING SUBJECT (% AGREEING OR STRONGLY AGREEING)



■ WORRIED
 ■ HAPPY
 ■ CONFUSED
 ■ BORED
 ■ INTERESTED

The findings suggest clear preferences for certain subject areas, but also some ambiguity especially when it comes to learning English and Maths. Our case study work with children provides some context for these views. Across the years of the study, it was clear that children’s experience of different subject areas was strongly connected to their perceptions of accomplishment and competency in them. Maths and English were consistently identified as subjects that children enjoyed across both cohorts. In the case of Maths, it was mentioned consistently through the years as the favourite subject in the case study classes.

“ *Because it’s really fun doing Maths. You get to know all the answers and once you get it right, it’s okay.*
(Girl, 2nd class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town) ”

“ *In first class [Boy] was better than me at maths and then I just became champion in first class and then I won every time.*
(Boy, 2nd class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ *What subject makes you feel happy? Maths.’*
(Boy, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ Interviewer: *What is easier about second class?*
Child 1: *The maths is easier.*
Interviewer: *Easier than it was last year? Is it because you are getting older?*
Child 1: *I’ve been doing a lot of it before I went into second class. That’s why I do love maths. That’s why.*
(Girl, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ *Maths because I feel like I learn it super-fast*
(Boy, 2nd class, All-boys, DEIS, Urban) ”

“ *Why does maths make you excited?*
Because I know most of the time, I’m not going to get it right, but if I do get it right, it makes me feel good.
(Girl, 4th class, All-girls, non-DEIS, Rural Town) ”

In the case of English (reading and writing), there was a change in the positive engagement of children with the subject as they progressed through primary school. In the infant classes, children enjoyed reading and writing and regarded these as their favourite subjects, sources of pride and confidence as they developed literacy skills. However, by 4th class the enthusiasm for these activities decreased with children complaining about long writing tasks:

“ *What do you like about reading?*
That there is words in it.
Is reading good or bad, do you think?
Good.
Why is it good?
Because then you know all of it.
(Boy, Junior Infants, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ *‘What is it about English, Child 3, that makes you feel a bit bored? It’s just, whenever you’re writing you’re just like “My hand hurts”’* (Child-CRAG,⁶ 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

Children also discussed subjects they liked to learn when they could do creative or unusual activities in the subject. Several children also expressed their joy at learning art-based subjects, or any subjects that enabled them to freely create in the classroom. The emphasis children place on creative and play-based learning approaches and the reasons they gave for liking specific subjects resonates with their preferences for activity and play based pedagogies noted in Report 5 (Devine et al. 2023), and how pedagogy connects to children’s engagement and enjoyment with the curriculum (see [CSL Study Report 5](#)).

⁶ CRAG refers to the Children’s Rights Advisory Groups that led on the design of our research with children in the case study classes in Cohort B.

“ *What subjects do you like?*
Art

What do you like about Art?

That it is nice.

(Boy, Junior Infants, non-DEIS,
Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ *Well art is just fun, and you get to learn about new trees.*
(Girl, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ *I like iPad time because I always like to play games and make
new stories on the iPad* (Boy, 2nd class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ *‘Learning new things about like what
happened in the past and I was
told about the multiverse and what
happens if you enter a black hole.*

(Boy, 2nd class,, DEIS, All-boys,
Urban). ”

“ *Deir O’Gradaigh’...It’s fun...It’s like Simon says but
it’s harder... It’s done in Irish...You get confused when
she says lámha suas, lámha síos, lámha amach agus
isteach... Then it gets harder. It gets harder and faster.*

(Girl, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

In contrast to the relatively consistent positive views towards the learning of Maths and English across both cohorts and all grades, more negative views towards learning Irish were consistently evident. This was connected to the difficulties children experienced and sense of incompetency when learning Irish. Most children made references to finding it difficult because of unfamiliar words and sounds, with many of them wishing teachers could provide more support helping them with pronunciation and translation:

“ *I hate the most is Irish.*
(Boy, 2nd class, non-DEIS,
Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ *Irish is very slow, and the rest of the day is very fast*
(Girl, 2nd class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural). ”

“ *I don’t know, I just don’t like Irish.
I don’t mind speaking different
languages, but the way they have it,
not they, I mean it’s my language, it’s a
bit complicated, they sound mad.*

(Boy, 4th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ *The words are very different and some words if you
put them together will make a different sound and
they have fadas and I’m not really used to them
because I write in English most of the time and
yeah. Sometimes I forget what fadas are for but
then I remember they’re making the vowel longer.*

(Child-CRAG, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ *[Irish] makes my mind, it makes my mind dizzy and makes my mind be on a lot of pressure and kind
of like, how it sounds and it’s very different from English and it’s very hard for me to understand it.*

(Child-CRAG, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ *It’s just a different language and it’s hard learning a different language when you didn’t know anything about it. It’s just difficult.*

(Girl, 2nd class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ *[My teacher] She is really good. She teaches us Irish and now I am really good at learning Irish.*

(Child, 1st class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

”

“ Boy: *Irish. I don’t like Irish; my brother doesn’t like Irish. Nobody in my family likes Irish.*

Girl: *I love Irish.*

Boy: *You’re not in my family.*

(Children, 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

“ *There’s loads of things I’d like to learn. Really?*

Languages, like Irish and other ones, I’d like.

Okay you’d like to learn more Irish?

And other languages and I’d like to learn like how everything works.

(Girl, 1st class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town).

”

In 4th class, children spoke to some of their negative learning experiences related to other subjects for example, Geography and History, that was connected to their experiences of how these were taught, as noted earlier (see [CSL Study Report 5](#)), with suggestions by the children on the use of games, experiments and creative activities to make these subjects more interesting.

“ *Why does geography make you feel bored? Because it’s just too much to learn. Too much things to write and to think...*

(Boy, 4th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

“ *I hate history. Most boring subject in the world.*

(Boy, 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

“ *You said history makes you feel bored, is that right?*

Yeah. Because it’s in the past and it’s all done and it’s just really hard because you have to write the words from the book into your copy, so that’s why I don’t like it.

(Boy, 4th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

In the earlier years (Cohort A) from Junior Infants through to 2nd class, children used strong affective terms such as ‘love’ and ‘hate’ for subjects that connected with their experience of play/activity in their learning.

When discussing their negative learning experiences, children identified concrete problems in the curriculum that affect their engagement with different subjects: repetition and overload, that was evident as they progressed through primary school. Children in 4th class considered repetition, of both content and activities, as the main reason why they considered a subject boring. Similarly, some children stressed the increasing workload they experienced as they progressed in primary school as early as their transition into 2nd class. Evident is a sense of more ‘adult-like’ expectations beginning to penetrate their learning experiences, such as a focus on the catholic sacrament of communion in 2nd class and less time for play-like behaviours. Mirroring the findings of the national study, children in the case study schools noted that when they did not enjoy a subject area, they felt that the school day passed very slowly, adding to their sense of boredom:

“ *What subjects make you feel bored, or are there any subjects?*
Sometimes I feel bored – not always, but sometimes I feel bored in English.
Why is that?

Because I’m very used to English, because at home I use English most of the time, when at school I also use English, so I’m just bored of doing the same thing again and again

(Girl, 4th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town) ”

“ *Sometimes English, because we’ve already known the basics of English, since second class, or first or any of them. And we’re just learning more over the years, and sometimes can get a little bit boring.*

(Girl, 4th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town) ”

“ *Like when you are using the same subject for the lesson except that you’re learning about something different and that can be a bit boring.* (Girl, 2nd class – Cohort B, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ *And then like, then like during Irish it feels like it’s [time] going really like slow...And it’s the same when it’s like nearly time to go home like, it just, it’s like it [time] just slows down.*

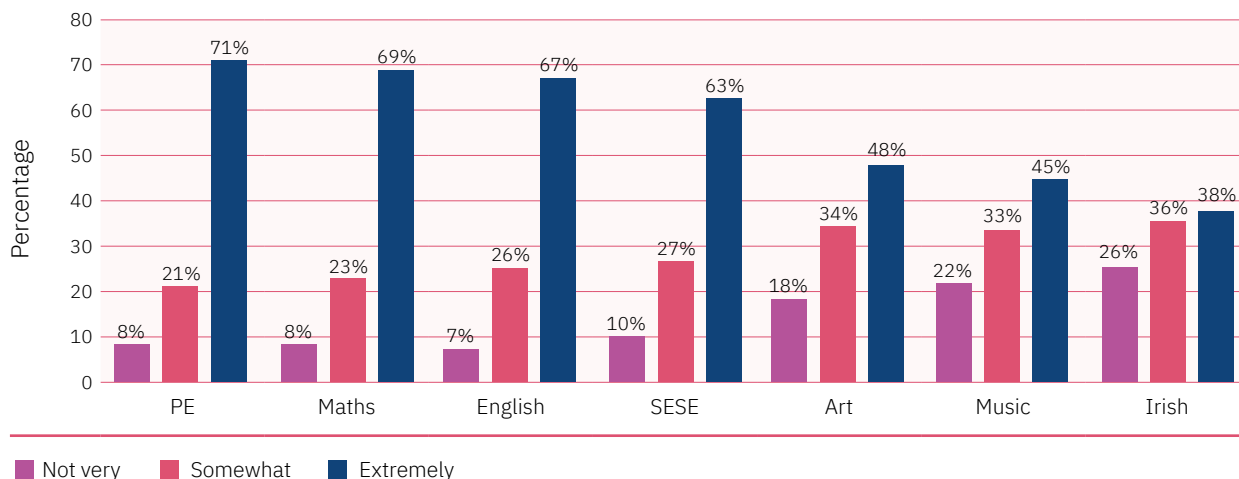
(Girl, 2nd class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town) ”

“ *When it goes, when you’re bored it goes slower. Well, when I was in that class it was alright but it was a bit bored and still not even two o’clock yet.* (Boy, 2nd class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

Children’s experiences of learning different subjects

In Report 5 (see [CSL Study Report 5](#)), we highlighted children’s views on the purpose of going to school and the value they placed on learning. Here we focus specifically on how their ideas of why they go to school influence their perception of learning different subjects. We were keen to know if children ranked subjects in terms of their usefulness. Figure 6 highlights the responses of children in Cohort B when they were in 2nd class [in 2019], clustered into *not very useful*, *somewhat useful*, and *extremely useful*. Physical education (PE) was reported as being *extremely useful* by 71% of children, closely followed by Maths (69%), English (67%) and SESE (63%). More ambiguous views are held with respect to the perceived usefulness of Art, Music and Irish with less than 50% of children identifying these as *extremely useful*, with substantial proportions of children (18–26%) responding that these subjects were *not very useful*.

FIGURE 6: COHORT B (2019) 2ND CLASS CHILDREN’S RESPONSES TO HOW USEFUL EACH SUBJECT IS IN THEIR LIFE



Our case study work with children highlighted how Maths in addition to English were seen as the most important subjects in school because of their practical value. Children stated these subjects provide a foundation for their future aspirations and were important to securing good jobs as adults. Also, one child noted that if they themselves did not learn Maths as children they would never be able to help their own children when they were in school.

“ *Maths is very important. Because if you don’t have a lot of Maths knowledge then you wouldn’t be able to get like a good job because maths is very important.* ”
 (Child-CRAG, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

“ *I think Maths because yeah, nearly every job includes maths. Shopkeeper, that’s money. Builder, centimetres and metres, grams, kilograms and whatever. Teacher, every part of maths. So, yeah I think Maths and English would be the main part because nearly every job includes reading and spelling and Maths.* ”
 (Girl, 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

“ *Some people were like “You’ll need it in a job when you grow up”, but the reason I’d say is because when you grow older, a lot of the good paying jobs, you would have to be good at Maths to do them.* ”
 (Child-CRAG, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

Children had differing views of the importance of Irish as a subject. Many of them acknowledge its importance as an aspect of Irish culture, while others highlighted it as a gateway to future career opportunities:

“ *I think I should do a bit more Irish... Because I want to get better at it.* ”
 (Boy, 2nd class A, non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

“ *Maybe, well for Ireland, probably Gaeilge, because we want to keep our own language up, running for as many years as we can, before it goes extinct or something.* ”
 (Girl, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

“ *And if you're trying to become a teacher, then you have to like, learn every single word in Irish...*
(Boy-CRAG, 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ *Well, sometimes people won't be using Irish that much, only people that want to be teachers or something to do with Irish would want to learn. So, I think we should be studying our own interest before we study things that we don't really need.*
(Girl, 5th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town) ”

A notable difference was evident however in the perspectives of children who attended our Gaelscoil case study school. Here the children recognised how competency in Irish was considered an important advantage. Most of them recognised the difficulty in the early years but felt proud of their progress in their language proficiency and anticipated the opportunities that Irish might open for them in the future:

“ *I think my Irish is going to be very well, when I'm in sixth class but I'm also thinking of going into college, but I think that Irish school is going to help me learn a language that I want to learn very well.*
(Boy, 2nd class A, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ *It's good because an Irish school is different [...] because in English schools like my brother they say they do have Irish lessons, but they don't get to talk a lot about it and it's good because we don't get a lot of homework and the homework that we do get I know it. So, when my brothers have Irish homework, and they don't know it sometimes they ask me. So, when I'm finished all my homework, they're just doing their Irish homework so I can come down and help them with their Irish homework.*
(Girl, 2nd class A, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ *I feel like coming to an Irish school makes a huge difference in a kids life because maybe like you might be still talking English even here, you might be saying slán agus dia duit but now that you're an older class it really depends on how you want to learn how much you want to learn and coming into an Irish school, it makes someone President someday because you have to know a bit in Irish to be President. [...] And someday maybe if any kid in this school, if they learned Gaelige they could be the next president, one of the next presidents.*
(Boy, 2nd class- Cohort A, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

Children in 4th class in the case study schools were asked to reflect the time they spent in different subjects and suggest any changes regarding time allocation that they would like to see in the curriculum. While many focused on having more time for their preferred subjects such as Science or physical activities, other children suggested to have dedicated time for specific subjects that are currently combined for example Sciences or SESE:

“ *We don't do as much science [...] Drama, we haven't done too much drama recently.*
(Boy, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-ed, Rural) ”

“ Because, although I do think we have a lot of subjects, I do think we could have more to learn about more stuff, like biology and stuff... . I know you do it in secondary school, but it would be nice to start it in primary school as well.
(Child-CRAG, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ More like fun maybe PE and geography and stuff.
(Child-group interview, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ For the first question I said, to add, they said they wanted baking and computers.
(Child-group interview, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ There should be football teams or other sports for school.
(Boy, 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ My answers were access to the internet, longer yard, more PE class, school sports, and more interesting subjects.
(Child-group interview, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ I probably think there should be like stuff like SPHE and PE encompass a lot of different things, but I say one of the things in one of them is pretty big and you might want to make it its own subject.
(Child-group interview, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ [Teacher]’s been trying to get all the hard stuff out of the way and then do all the fun stuff.
(Child-group interview, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

Children then have distinct preferences, and ideas for what they learn that is primarily shaped by their growing sense of competency in different subject areas, their experience of pedagogies related to particular subject areas (including repetition and overload), as well as the perceived relevance to their lives as children as well as future adults. The following section contextualises some of these experiences through the perspectives of teachers.

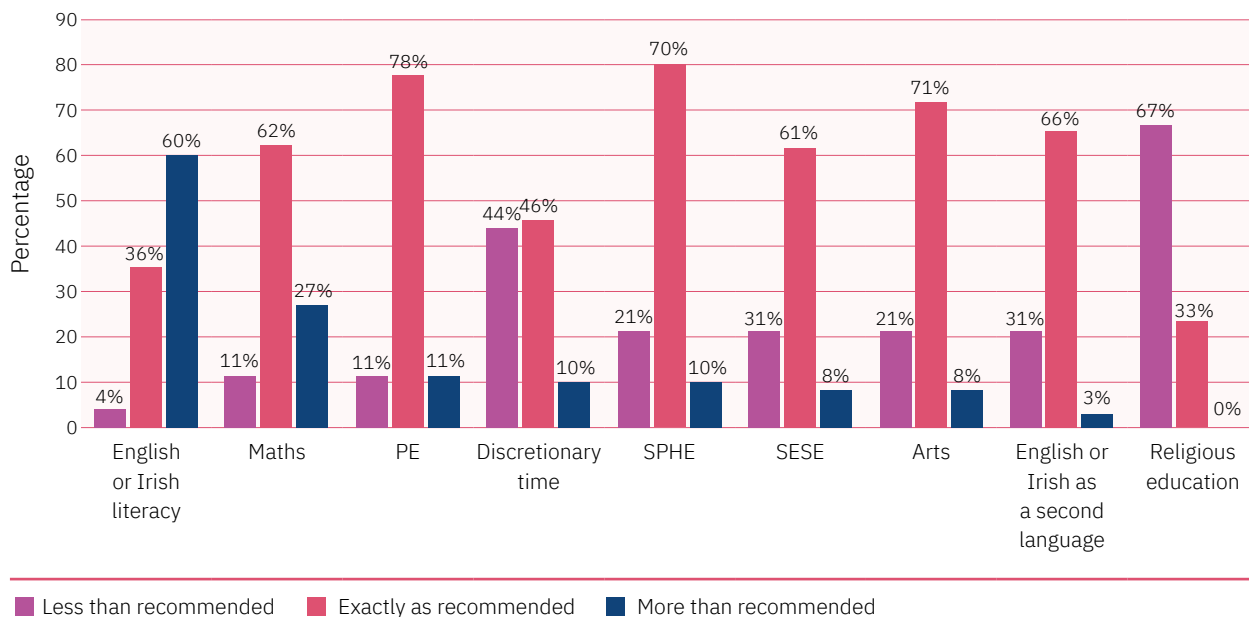
Teachers’ experiences of what they teach

Teacher curricular decisions

The time teachers spend teaching curricular areas signals their relative priority. While there are specified national guidelines on how much time to be given, in practice this may vary across teachers and schools. In 2019, at the start of the *Children’s School Lives Study* we asked teachers how much time they spent across different curricular areas. We outline these in Figure 7 and below. The charts are ranked, with the most frequently taught subjects on the left of the chart and continuing in descending order to the right.

In Figure 7, when the children were in Junior Infants, about a quarter (27%) of teachers reported spending more than the recommended time on maths, and 60% reported spending more than the recommended time on literacy. In comparison, two thirds of teachers (67%) indicated that they spent less than the recommended time on Religious Education.

FIGURE 7: COHORT A (2019) TEACHER RESPONSES TO SPENDING LESS, EQUAL OR MORE THAN THE RECOMMENDED TIME ON SUBJECT AREAS



These patterns are mirrored through our observations in case study schools as well as our interviews with teachers over the period of the study. Consistently high focus on numeracy and literacy was in evidence in Junior Infants, reinforced through other subjects such as SESE and Art. Teachers emphasised the importance of providing children with a solid foundation to promote their ability to access learning, as they progress through school. Also, evident in these earlier years, was the concern by teachers at what they referred to as the overloaded nature of the curriculum. Combined with the shorter time in school in the infant classes, teachers referred to the challenges of delivering the curriculum, and choosing what subjects to prioritise.

“Curriculums in general in Infants I think they’re way overloaded like... as a teacher stand back and set priorities like, what do these children need, just so much to cover, so much.
(Female Teacher, Junior Infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)”

“There’s also an overloaded curriculum that has to be achieved. So, it’s just very hard to balance all of the requirements.
(Female Teacher, 1st class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)”

“It’s just you have so many other pressures. Especially, then when you’re coming into communion time too. You might not have covered as much Irish as you would’ve liked so you have to give a little bit more time there. SESE gets kind of taken out, and I know you can put a lot of SESE, drama and art into Aistear itself, but there are other days that you really just need to buckle down and cover different strands or strand units.
(Male teacher, 2nd class- Cohort A, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)”

By 4th class, teachers spoke of the difficulties they faced teaching subject content effectively, with some noting curriculum overload and lack of time, while others highlighted the need for responsive and differentiated instruction to make the subjects engaging for children:

“ *The big thing that I would say I suppose in terms of what would restrict the children’s say into how things go on in the school would be time pressure okay, I really feel that the curriculum is overloaded, you know.*
(Male teacher, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ *I’m conscious of parents too that they would be going home, the kids would be going home and they’d be like, ‘Oh what did you do today?’ And then the kids would be like, ‘Oh we played this and then we played that’, and the parents [...] might be like, ‘Oh why didn’t you do your maths sums in your copy’, you know what I mean like, so I think that’s probably the main thing for me, [...]I think it’s just, I’d be just afraid.*
(Female teacher, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

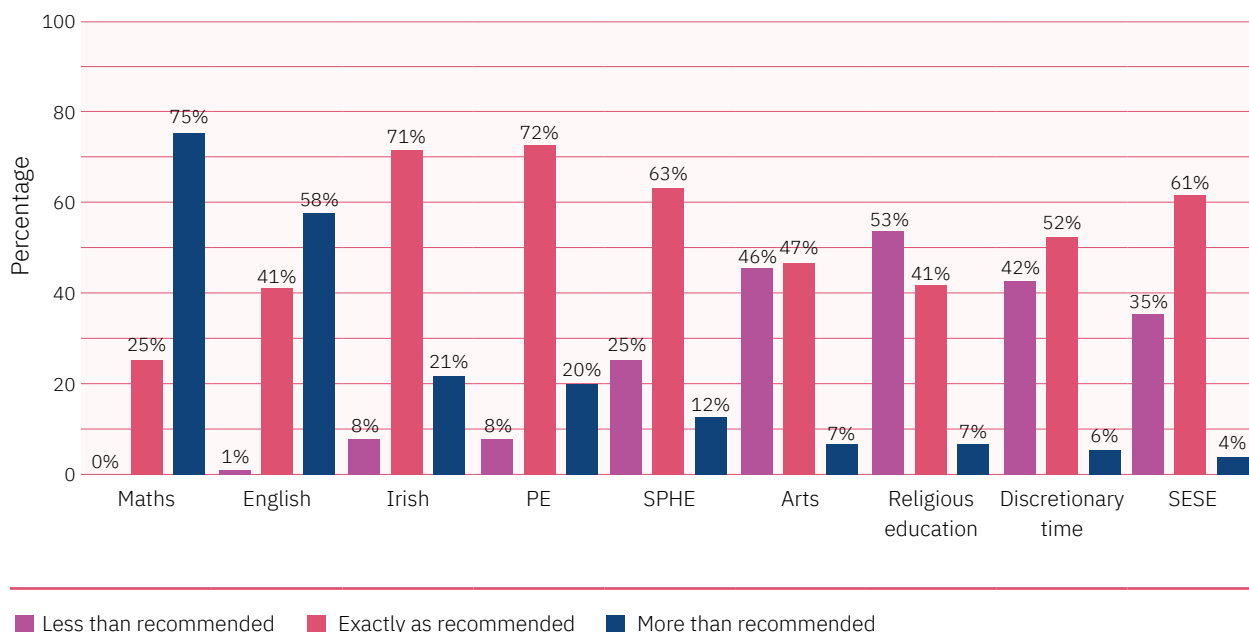
The flexibility to adapt and experiment with curriculum is also enjoyed and appreciated, across teachers in the case study schools. It was a particularly important feature reported in the DEIS schools and in the junior classes.

“ *I think you are better off covering a smaller amount of things well, rather than trying to do the whole curriculum rushed because our kids don’t have a lot of the language needed to access the curriculum which you see. In Maths, our kids find the abstract concepts of Maths very difficult because they don’t have the language for it. So, we would spend a lot of time purely on trying to increase their language. Then, they can try and do the different types of Maths that are in the curriculum.*
(Female, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ *I think for different topics and different subjects I think, like sometimes you might need the child sitting down and applying their writing skills or their mathematical skills to what’s in front of them. But then if you go to something that’s more hands on like a Science or a Geography lesson you want them to use their own general knowledge or the knowledge that they already have and apply it to that situation. So, a bit of both.* (Female Teacher, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

Mirroring the subjects children felt were important in their everyday lives, the patterns that emerged from the surveys with teachers on the time they spent teaching particular subjects highlighted the emphasis on subjects such as Maths and English. Cohort B (2019) teachers of 2nd class (Figure 8) with both Maths (75%) and English (58%) identified as subjects teachers spend more than the recommended time teaching. Most teachers reported spending exactly the recommended time teaching Irish, PE, SPHE, arts, discretionary time and SESE. As with teachers of Junior Infants, over half of teachers of 2nd class children also indicated spending less than the recommended time on Religious Education. Of interest, a small proportion (7%) indicated that they spent more than the recommended time on the subject, presumably owing to preparation for Catholic sacraments in 2nd class. Teachers responded to this question in relation to the time allocations from the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2012).

FIGURE 8: COHORT B (2019) TEACHER RESPONSES TO SPENDING LESS, EQUAL OR MORE THAN THE RECOMMENDED TIME ON SUBJECT AREAS



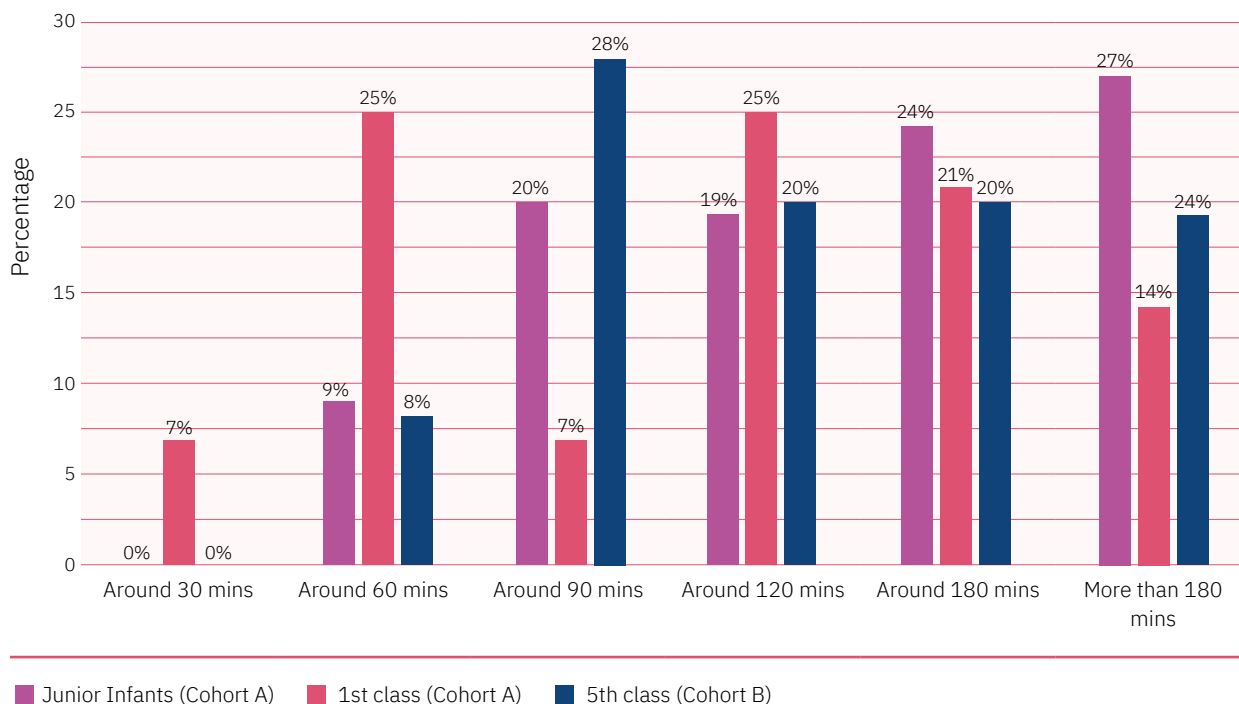
Despite the challenges they face when implementing the curriculum, teachers across primary school showed significant mastery of and creativity in teaching different subjects. For example, teachers discussed the need to set priorities particularly in response to children’s needs and abilities. Collaborative teaching, project based learning and differentiated strategies for each subject were among the different strategies the teachers discussed for teaching across the subjects in the curriculum:

“ I suppose in our school we are very lucky, we have a lot of new ideas, very young staff, everyone is coming in with new ideas. We actually came up with a new idea this year that we were to do History, Geography, Science so the SESE subjects and the arts subjects through playful learning. And we had like different stations for history, we had different stations for geography, and they were, the children were all kind of doing an activity in a fun way rather than me standing at the top of the classroom and doing it.
 (Female teacher, Junior Infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ The content has to be appropriate; it has to be fit into the curriculum in some way and it has to be relevant to their lives and relevant to not just an individual but it has to be relevant for the class as a whole.
 (Female teacher, 5th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town) ”

It is worth noticing the preparation time required by teachers to teach across the different subjects in the curriculum (Figure 9). In Cohort A, over half of the teachers (51%) responded that they spend around or more than 3 hours per week in Junior Infants decreasing to just over a third by 1st class (35%). For Cohort B, just over a quarter of teachers in 5th class (28%) spend around 90 minutes planning with the majority spending around 2 hours or more (64%) in planning and no 5th class teachers spend less than one hour.

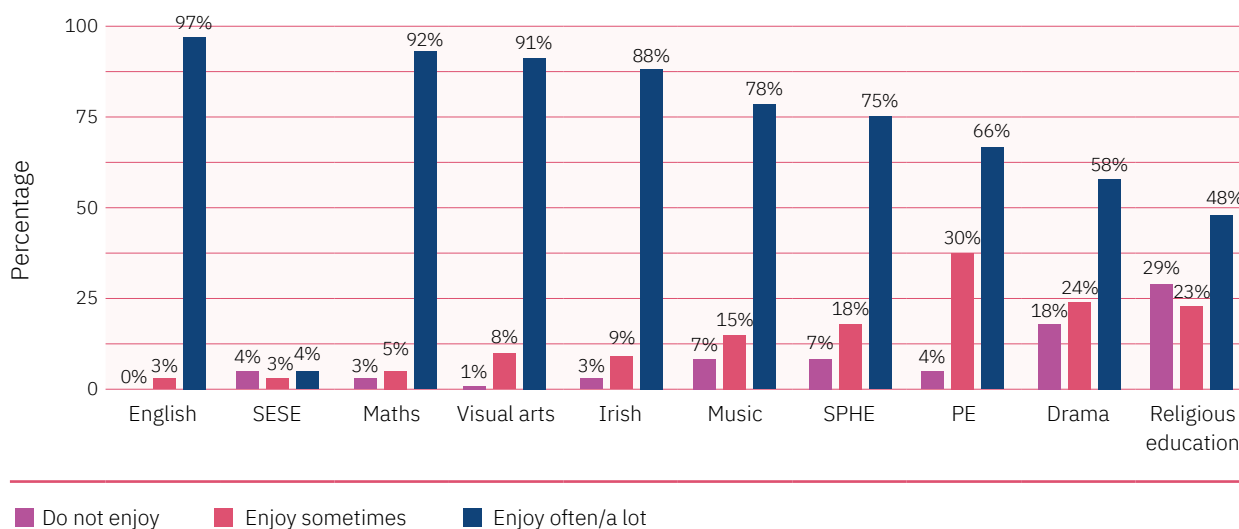
FIGURE 9: COHORT A (2019) JUNIOR INFANTS, COHORT A (2021) 1ST CLASS AND COHORT B (2022) 5TH CLASS TEACHER RESPONSES TO TIME THEY SPENT PLANNING PER WEEK



Teacher curricular preferences

In 2019, teachers in both cohorts were asked how much they enjoyed teaching different subjects as previously reported (see [CSL Study Report 1](#)). Our evidence indicates high levels of engagement by teachers with the content of the Curriculum. Among the Cohort A Junior Infant teachers (Figure 10), close to 100% reported enjoying teaching English *often/a lot*, with no teachers reporting not enjoying teaching English. Indeed, except for religious education, most teachers indicated enjoying teaching every subject *a lot*, with just under half of teachers (48%) reporting likewise for Religious Education. The largest percentage of teachers indicating that they *do not enjoy* teaching a subject was found for Religious Education (29%), followed by Drama (18%).

FIGURE 10: COHORT A (2019) TEACHER RESPONSES TO LEVEL OF ENJOYMENT FOR TEACHING SUBJECT AREAS



Case studies across the junior waves highlight how teachers in these classes are enthusiastic about all the subjects in the curriculum despite having personal preferences or their own personal favourite subjects that they particularly like to teach. Regardless of their preferences, in the early years of primary school the focus for teachers is very much on making all subjects engaging for children:

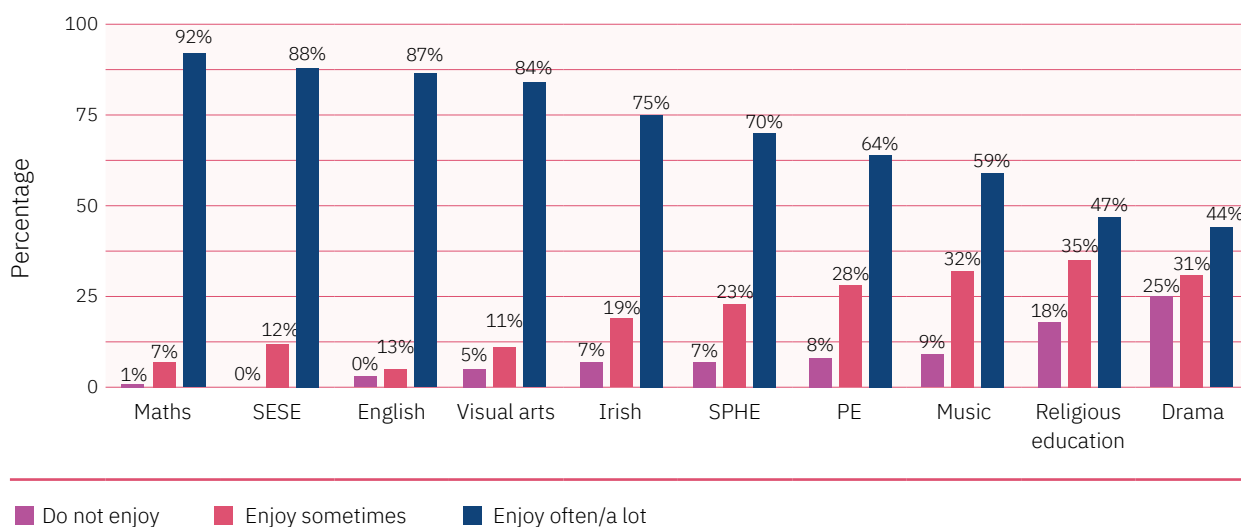
“ I love teaching English, I love Art, I love Music. They’re probably my three fav – I love Maths, Irish. Yeah, I enjoy the programmes, [...]it can be a real challenge to try and do things to make it fun. (Female teacher, 1st class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

“ Yeah, Maths would be my favourite subject. For Maths I’d be very much about like exploring numbers kind of seeing like why are we learning about this [...], different things just letting them see why they’re learning the Maths and not just doing the Maths. (Female teacher, 1st class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

“ I love handwriting. I love art. There are so many things. History? Adore it. Adore it because I can bring in so many artefacts from my own parents’ lives. (Female teacher, 1st class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

Similar patterns were identified among teachers in Cohort B, also in 2019, who shared their enjoyment across most of the subjects of the curriculum, reflected in Figure 11 below. Over half of teachers reported they *Enjoyed often/a lot* teaching their subjects, except for Religious Education (47%) and drama (43%). Given children’s views, it is also worth noting the relatively high number of teachers (75%) who stated they enjoyed teaching Irish a lot. A lower proportion of teachers reported *not enjoying* teaching religious education (17%) compared to Junior Infants teachers, while conversely a greater proportion reported *not enjoying* teaching drama (25%) compared to Junior Infants teachers.

FIGURE 11: COHORT B (2019) TEACHER RESPONSES TO LEVEL OF ENJOYMENT FOR TEACHING SUBJECT AREAS



Our case study work highlighted how teaching subjects such as Maths or English for example was something they enjoyed because they were able to see children’s progress and envision more clearly their learning pathways. In contrast, some teachers mentioned being reluctant to teach creative / arts-based subjects due to their lack of confidence on how to do this effectively, not being able to see clear progress and generally ‘feeling lost’ when teaching these subjects. Issues of self-efficacy, as with children, also influence the perspectives of teachers in relation to their curricular preferences:

“ I’ve always had a fear of art but I’ve seen it as a challenge and I believe I’ve improved at it. Still not there but getting better I think.
 (Male teacher, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

“ I wouldn’t be that confident with music or drama, I wouldn’t be that like overly skilled in or experienced [...] I try to do them [band studies or artist studies] every now and again but it’s just hard to fit them in all the time you know.
 (Female teacher, 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

“ I don’t like teaching drama. I don’t like teaching it. Not because, I mean you can have great fun with children and everything but it’s because I suppose you have your niche and you have the areas where you don’t feel confident.
 (Male teacher, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

“ ...which subject do you like teaching most?
 Probably maths. ... there’s a clear pathway like we need to do this, we need to do this, yeah!
 What about then what subject do you most dislike teaching?
 Probably PE.
 That’s okay. What is it about PE that you don’t like?
 I find that ...it’s hard to make progress in PE. That’s what I find.
 (Female teacher, 5th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town)

In contrast to children’s experiences in relation to Irish, the case study data confirmed a generalised enjoyment for teaching Irish across teachers in our case study schools, mirroring the pattern in the national study. Teachers recognised that their own enjoyment of the language influenced their preference for it, but at issue also was their sense of competency in it.

“ *I always liked Irish and I like doing art and I like doing music...*
(Female Teacher, 5th Class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ *I do like teaching Irish but I wouldn’t have the most confidence in myself at times but...*
(Female teacher, 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban, Catholic) ”

Although teachers clearly had curricular preferences and love of learning in different curricular areas, of central importance to them in discussing curriculum were the pedagogical challenges that arose for different subjects. As noted previously in Report 5 (see [CSL Study Report 5](#)), teachers’ responsiveness to and engagement with the curriculum is very much at the core of their decision making in the classroom.

Teachers are responsive to both the social and cultural contexts of the children they teach, in addition to the challenge and constraints of multigrade teaching in smaller (mostly rural) schools and classrooms. For example, in a multi-grade classroom a Maths lesson may be more challenging to teach and as a result impact on the teachers’ enjoyment and preference for Maths as a subject. Our interviews showed the importance of continuing professional development with respect to specialised pedagogies for specific subjects to increase their confidence and build upon their preferences and expertise to better engage children across the curriculum:

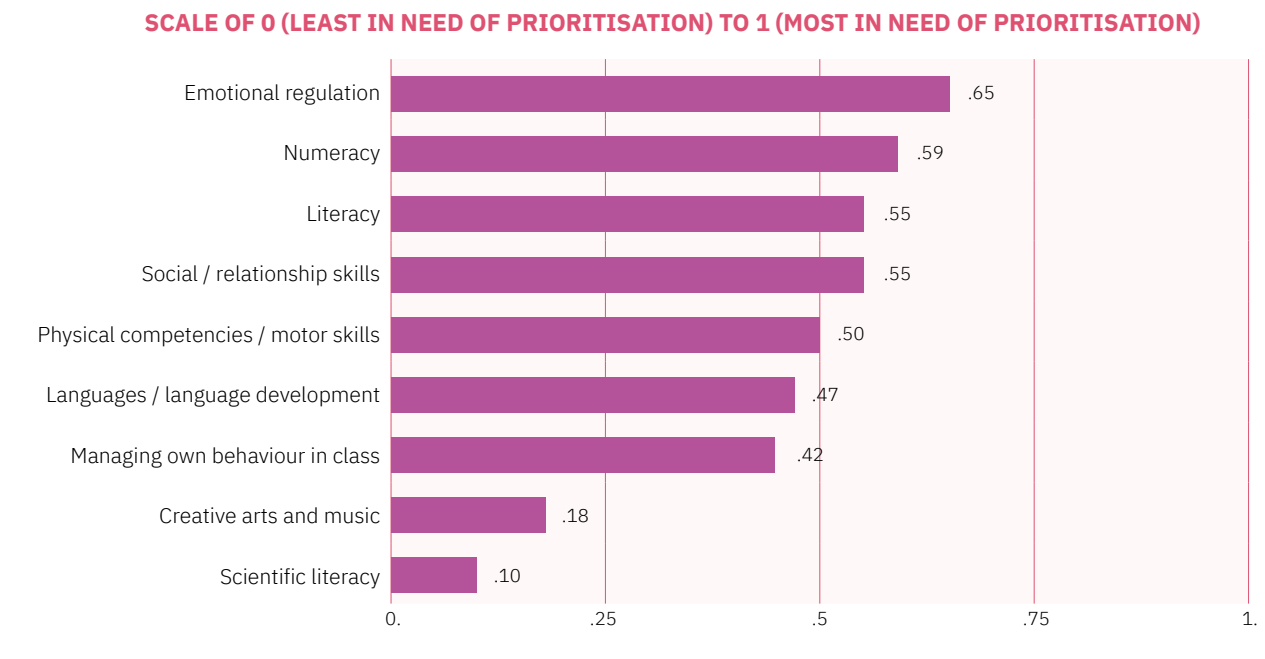
“ *In the mixed, in the multi-grade the Maths is really hard to do..., you’re jumping from one thing to another. [...], drama I suppose is hard. Depending on the group, if you’ve a really good group that are going to engage in it suspend reality for a little while. It’s good.*
(Female teacher, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ *I suppose, stereotypical male nearly lost my life when I saw I had to teach dance for a full month and then had to teach gymnastics as well. So, what I luckily had done a few years ago was a CPD course ... all about fundamental movement skills.*
(Male teacher, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

Post pandemic curriculum learning priorities

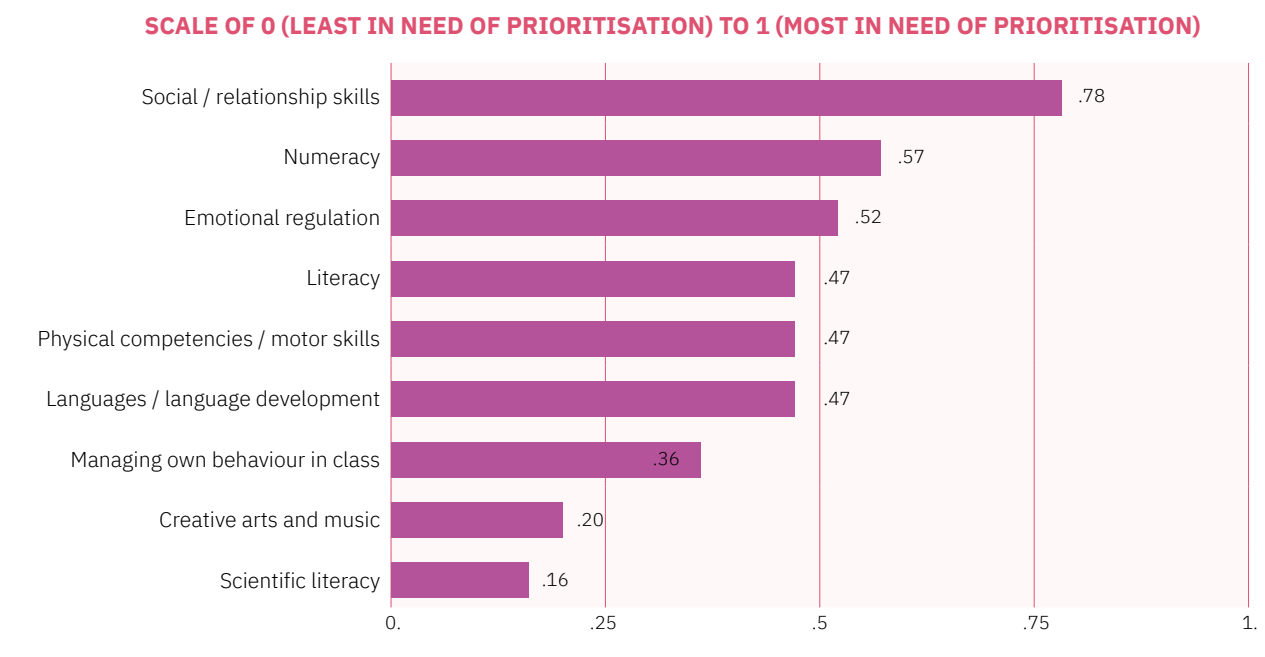
Teacher priorities can also change depending on context and this was especially evident during the pandemic. Teachers of both cohorts were asked what areas of children’s learning needs were in most need of being prioritised because of the pandemic. In Cohort A Senior Infants, teachers were most likely to indicate that emotional regulation was the area most in need of prioritisation, followed by learning skills such as numeracy and literacy (Figure 12). These teachers assigned the least need of prioritisation to scientific literacy and creative arts and music.

FIGURE 12: COHORT A (2021) TEACHER RESPONSES TO AREAS OF LEARNING IN NEEDS OF PRIORITISATION FOLLOWING THE PANDEMIC



For Cohort B 4th class teachers, also in 2021 (Figure 13), the areas reported as most in need of prioritisation post-pandemic were children’s social and relationship skills, followed by numeracy and then emotional regulation. On average, literacy skills were perceived as the fourth most in need of prioritisation. As with Cohort A, scientific literacy was evaluated in least need of prioritisation. This low ranking of scientific literacy for children is interesting considering the major debates about public health information and misinformation that emerged during the pandemic.

FIGURE 13: COHORT B (2021) TEACHER RESPONSES TO AREAS OF LEARNING NEEDS TO BE PRIORITISED FOLLOWING PANDEMIC



Some teachers in 3rd class, when learning was being conducted remotely, spoke of subjects that were negatively impacted by lockdown, such as Irish and Maths. For some this was because children had trouble accessing the correct resources, because, for example, they had left their textbooks at school. For others, learning Irish was perceived as being especially challenging because parents at home were unable to properly scaffold their children's learning experiences. The COVID-19 lockdown appears to have strongly influenced how teachers think about subject content and they noted that some subjects lent themselves more readily to online instruction than others. This theme carried over to the third wave – when schools had reopened, where teachers found teaching certain content areas such as PE and Maths, was made more challenging due to social distancing restrictions:

“ I am trying to mix it up so let's say with Maths, I was doing fractions and intending on doing decimals over the next few weeks but I think that is far too difficult to do at home so I am definitely picking much easier things.

(Female teacher, 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ Irish anyway, because... that's definitely impacted. Even you know, a lot of the Irish, parents wouldn't be able to deal with that at all, really. And corrections wise, or anything, they wouldn't be... even helping the students to do the work, they wouldn't be. [...]. Then PE, because you don't... I suppose they're stuck inside.

(Male Teacher, 4th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

Following their return to face-to-face teaching, 4th class teachers spoke to the challenges associated with adjusting and pacing of the curriculum content to accommodate for children's return to school after prolonged periods at home. Some spoke of focusing specifically on several subject areas, like maths and literacy, while others had chosen to focus primarily upon issues of mental health and child-wellbeing in the initial period following lockdown. Teachers spoke of challenges met during this period, but also of innovative new pedagogies, particularly the use of digital technology as noted in Report 5 (see [CSL Study Report 5](#)).

“ Me in my teaching, I think I put, and I know the curriculum guidelines are different, but I put a huge amount of emphasis on SPHE and I do far more than we're told we should be doing every week, because I just think the biggest thing I can give them when they're leaving is confidence and the ability to express themselves, whether it's their opinions or their feelings,...

(Female Teacher, 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ So, in our school we actually focused on wellbeing firstly, and then it was the literacy and numeracy, and the Gaeilge, and PE. So, for the whole month of September, and even into October, they were probably the only subjects I really taught, and an odd project or an odd block of something else

(Female teacher, 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ Well, we found this year the use of the iPads have been brilliant. So, for example in Gaeilge we use [Name of Book]. So, I would have a group on a 1st class book, and it's brilliant.[...] they can open the book, they can play the little games, they can get themselves set up, get themselves organised

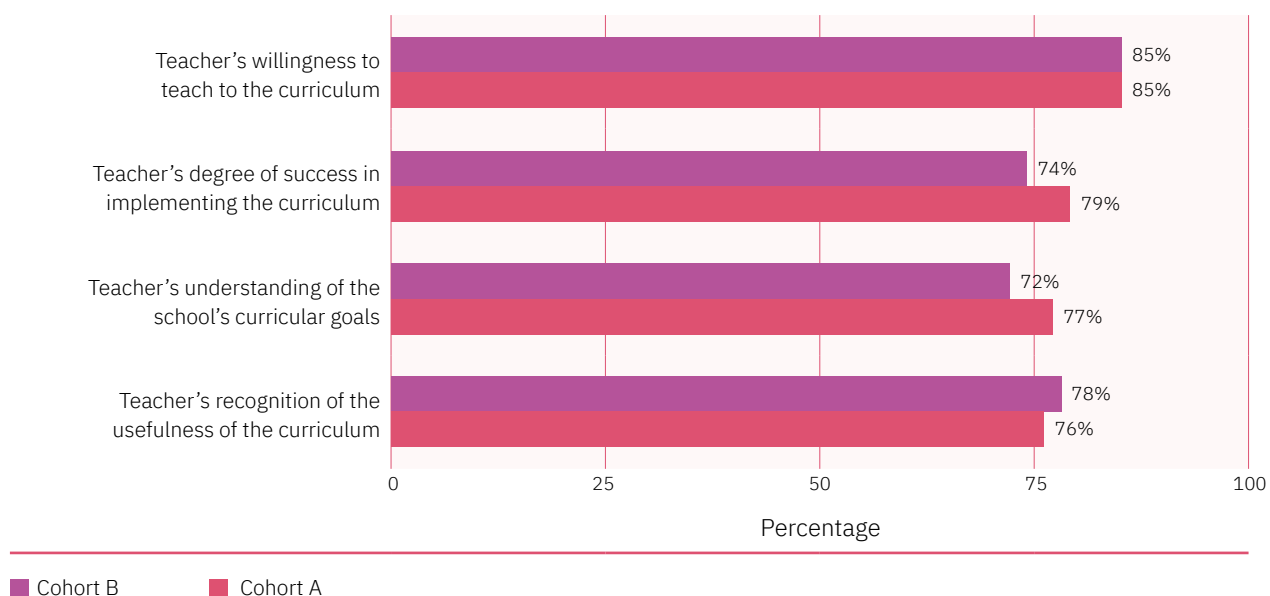
(Female teacher, 4th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town) ”

Principals' experiences of the curriculum

Curriculum implementation

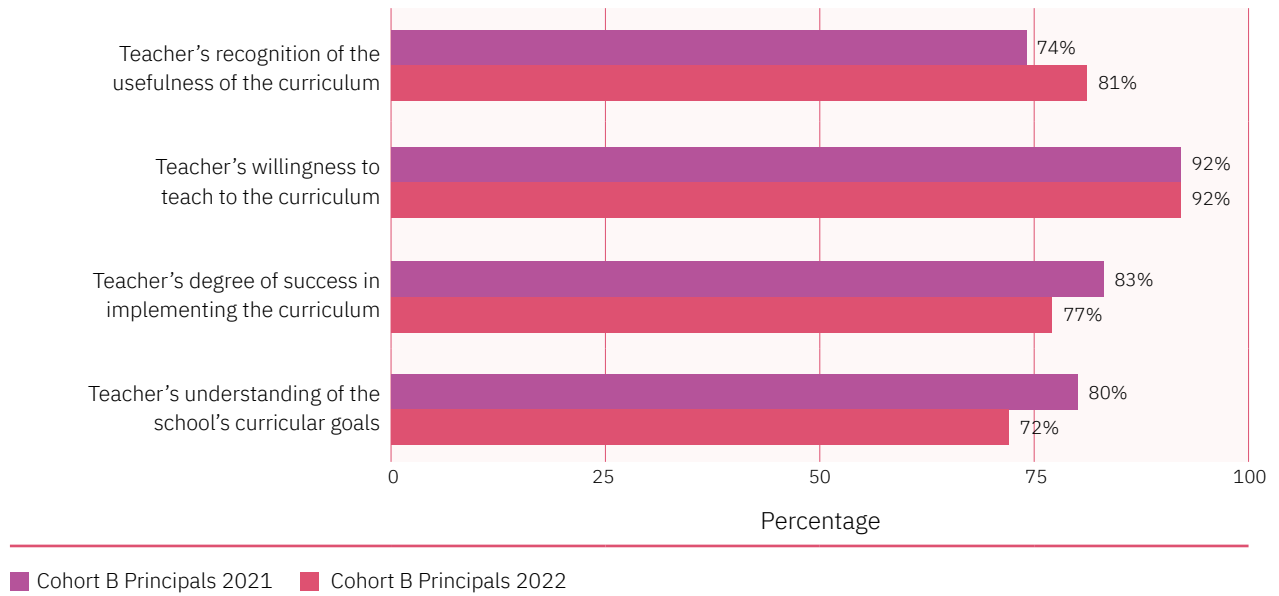
School leaders set the wider context within which the curriculum is implemented taking a 'whole school focus' on planning and preparation to support classroom teaching and learning. Principals in Cohorts A and B were asked in 2021 to rate their perception of how teachers engaged with the curriculum in their schools. This included views on the usefulness of the curriculum, understanding of curricular goals, success in implementing the curriculum and willingness to teach to the curriculum. As Figure 14 below shows, 85% of principals perceive teachers as being willing to teach to the curriculum, responses to other areas are less positive, especially among principals referring to teachers of children in our Cohort B schools.

FIGURE 14: COHORT A & B (2021) PRINCIPAL RESPONSES TO HOW THEY WOULD CHARACTERISE TEACHERS IN RELATION TO CURRICULUM (% RATING TEACHERS AS HIGH OR VERY HIGH)



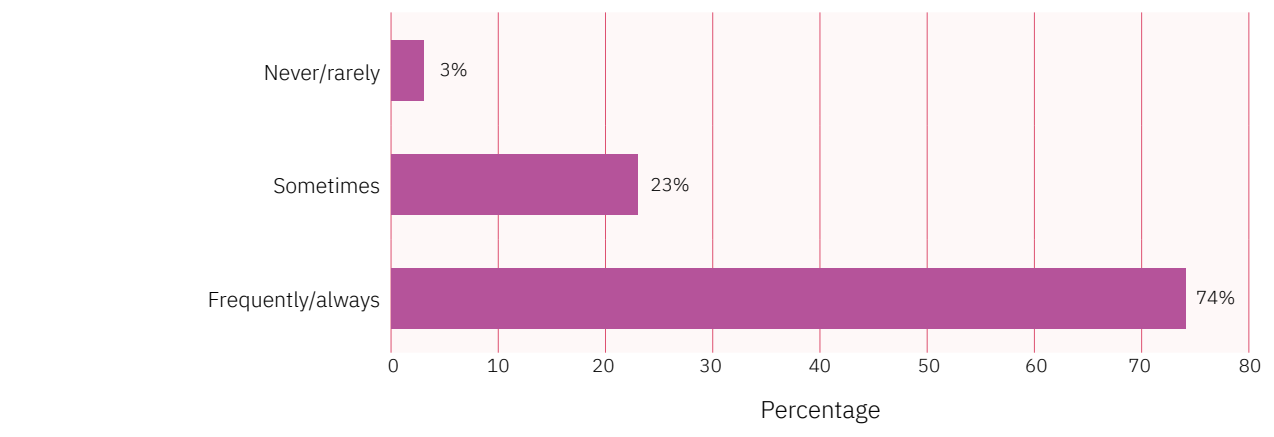
Given the slight divergence in responses for Cohort B, we asked a similar question in the following year allowing some comparison over time. A longitudinal analysis of the responses by principals, when Cohort B was in 3rd and 4th class, demonstrates a consistency in their reports regarding teachers' willingness to teach the curriculum (92% in both years) with a slight increase in teachers' understanding of curricular goals by the school and success in implementing the curriculum as shown in Figure 15.

FIGURE 15: COHORT B (2021 & 2022) PRINCIPAL RESPONSES TO HOW THEY WOULD CHARACTERISE TEACHERS IN RELATION TO CURRICULUM (% RATING TEACHERS AS HIGH OR VERY HIGH)



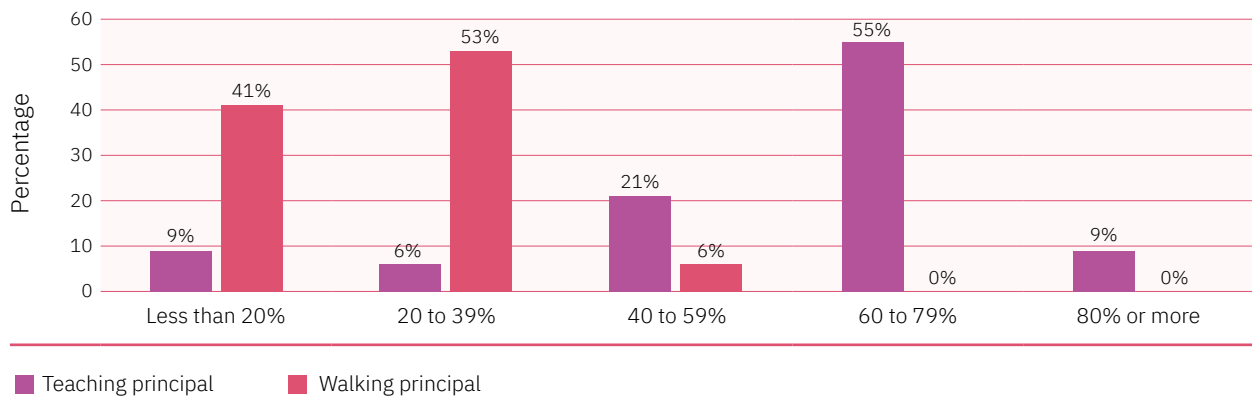
We also asked principals in the first wave of the study (2019) how involved they were in ensuring clarity over the implementation of the curriculum in their schools, with the majority indicating a high frequency (Figure 16).

FIGURE 16: COHORT B (2019) PRINCIPAL RESPONSES TO WHETHER THEY ENSURE CLARITY OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR CURRICULUM COORDINATION



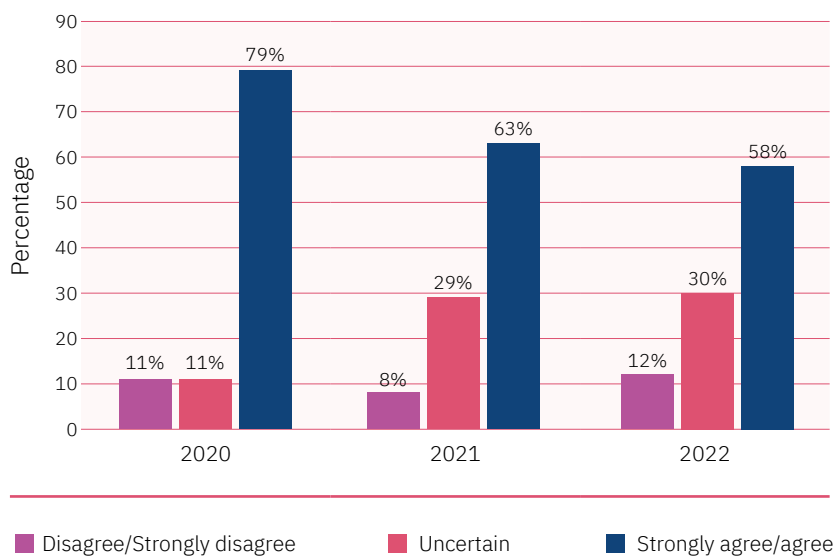
Principals in Cohort B were also asked about the time they spent throughout the school year in different tasks, in particular curriculum and teaching-related leadership tasks. A quarter of the principals (25%) spent less than 20% of their time in curriculum related activities whereas a third of the principals (32%) dedicate more than half of their time to them (Figure 17).

FIGURE 17: COHORT B (2019) PRINCIPAL RESPONSES TO TIME SPENT ON LEADERSHIP OF CURRICULUM AND TEACHING-RELATED TASKS (INCLUDING TEACHING, LESSON PREPARATION, CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS, MENTORING TEACHERS)



Of note is that those who are in full-time administrative roles (walking principals) spend less of their time in curriculum related tasks, than those who are teaching full-time in the classroom (typically in smaller rural schools). A longitudinal analysis of the responses by principals in Cohort B shows their views across time on the impact of curricular changes in the way teachers plan in their schools (Figure 18). Overall, most principals agreed that curricular changes have influenced teachers’ planning in their schools, with a slight decline from 2020 to 2022, most likely owing to the impact of the pandemic and disruption to schooling (see page 78– 80). In contrast, those uncertain about the influence of curricular changes increased after 2020 and remained the same since.

FIGURE 18: COHORT B (2020, 2021, 2022) PRINCIPAL RESPONSES TO WHETHER CURRICULAR CHANGE HAS INFLUENCED THE WAY TEACHERS PLAN



Interviews with the principals from the case study schools provided more details about their involvement in the implementation of the curriculum. Several principals discussed the flexibility needed to meet children's needs and setting curriculum priorities at a school level. For them, a priority is to be responsive to the diverse needs of children and 'meet them where they are:

“ *There's definitely an understanding and awareness about how to support the children from the place they're at in the curriculum. There's differentiation within the classroom for children, you know. There's huge supports there [...] It's basically every child is where they're at, OK, and that would be very much the message, part of our culture. It's OK to be who you are, it's OK to be where you are in terms of the curriculum as long as you are the best version of you, you know, basically that you can be.*

(Female principal, 3rd class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

“ *I think sometimes people come in and say well, this is the curriculum but you need to have the respect to say... to take kids from where they're at... a lot of teachers come in and I'm saying you know, if you really want to start at that level, try it, but we are very aware that if they're failing at that level you need to adjust your expectations very quickly.*

(Female principal, 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

Principals in the case study schools discussed challenges that arise for their schools and teachers because of curricular changes. For many, these changes are more procedural and related to pedagogical approaches rather than curricular content. Several principals felt overwhelmed with the frequency of curricular changes and highlighted the stress these changes generate across the school community, particularly teachers and the need to ensure the provision of sufficient resources to support curricular goals.

“ *There's been an awful lot of reform or change, but that doesn't always equate to improvement.*

(Male principal Junior infants, non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

“ *I think in general DEIS schools are better at adapting to change [...] we are much more maybe, open to change happening in our schools and among our staffs.*

(Female principal, Senior infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

EXPERIENCING ASSESSMENT IN PRACTICE

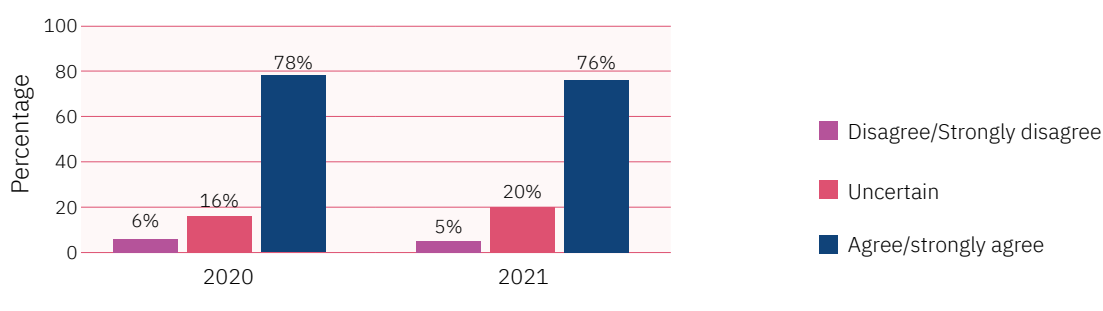
A key element of children’s experience of the curriculum is their feeling of competency across different curricular areas. How they are evaluated in schools and assessed in terms of their progress is important then in shaping their experience of their learning. In this section we consider how children experience assessment in practice, not only through their evolving ideas of their ‘smartness’ but also in the kind of feedback they receive from their teachers. We draw also on experiences of parents as they have a unique window into their children’s evolving competencies over their primary schooling. When exploring assessment, we also consider the diverse methods and strategies that teachers use in the classroom to gather and share information about children’s learning trajectory, their progress towards learning goals and overall understanding of the curriculum.

Formal and informal assessment methods are explored with the children of both cohorts in the study, including experiences of standardised testing. We also explore teachers’ views and priorities regarding assessment, and their practices to support children as they progress through the learning goals in primary school. The way in which teachers provide feedback to the children and their parents, and how they report on children’s learning trajectories is also considered a crucial element of assessment. Finally, we explore whole-school approaches and priorities regarding assessment and the impact these can have on children’s experiences of school. Due to the complexity of assessment and the difficulty of capturing it in its full diversity we incorporate parent accounts to analyse assessment also in the context of family dynamics and perspectives on: standardised tests, in-class tests and assessment. Analysing assessment through the lens of a parent’s perspective also makes it possible to explore informal assessment approaches and the feedback parents receive from primary school regarding their child’s progress.

Children’s perceptions of their smartness

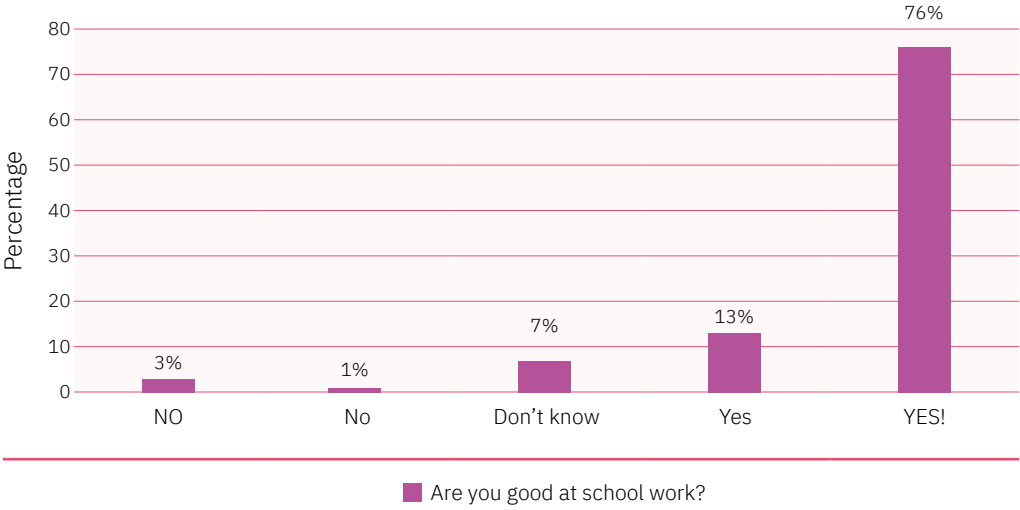
Evaluating children in school influences how children think about themselves in terms of their competencies and abilities. Typically, children define this as being ‘smart’. Children in Cohort B were asked about their academic self-concept through six questions on how confident they felt about learning (their ‘academic self-concept’) in 2019 and 2021. The questions were measured on a five-point scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Specifically, children were asked if they were better than most people at their classwork, if they did well at their classwork, if they learned things quickly in class, if they were no good at their classwork, and if they had always done well in their classwork. As Figure 19 shows, most children state they do well in their schoolwork, although this declines slightly over time (from 78% to 76%). Similarly, children who are uncertain show a slight increase over time from 16% in 2019, to 20% in 2022.

FIGURE 19: COHORT B (2019 & 2021) CHILDREN’S ACADEMIC SELF CONCEPT FROM 2ND CLASS TO 4TH CLASS



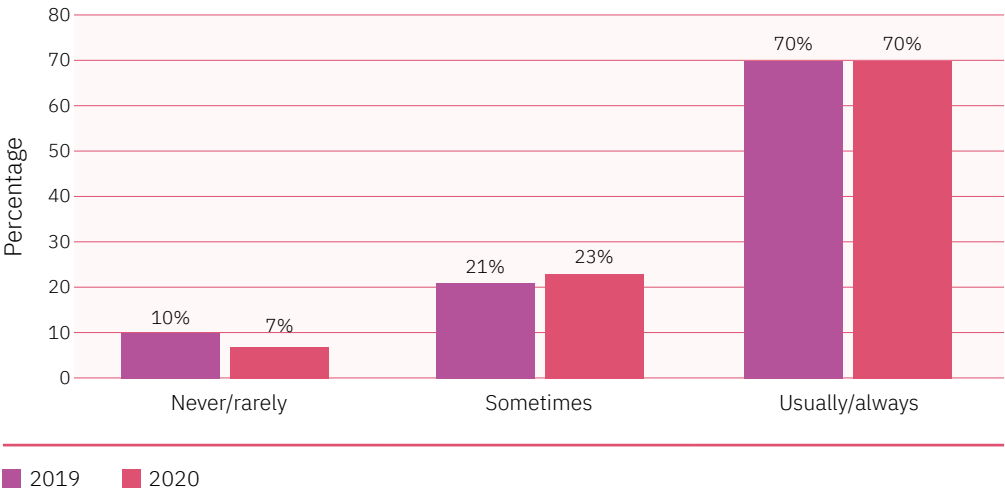
Children in Cohort A were asked if they felt they were good in schoolwork in 2019 (Figure 20). The vast majority perceived themselves to be good at schoolwork, with 13% agreeing and 76% strongly agreeing with this assessment. Less than 5% of children thought they were not good at their schoolwork.

FIGURE 20: COHORT A (2019) JUNIOR INFANTS CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO WHETHER THEY ARE GOOD AT SCHOOLWORK



Children in Cohort B were asked in 2nd class and again in 4th class their perception of how their teachers evaluated their smartness (Figure 21). The perception of children who believed that their teacher *usually/always* perceived them to be smart remained stable over time, with 70% thinking so in 2019 and 2021. There was a small increase in the children who thought that their teachers *sometimes* thought that they were smart, rising from 21% to 23%, with a matched decline in those who thought their teachers *never/rarely* thought so from 10% to 7%.

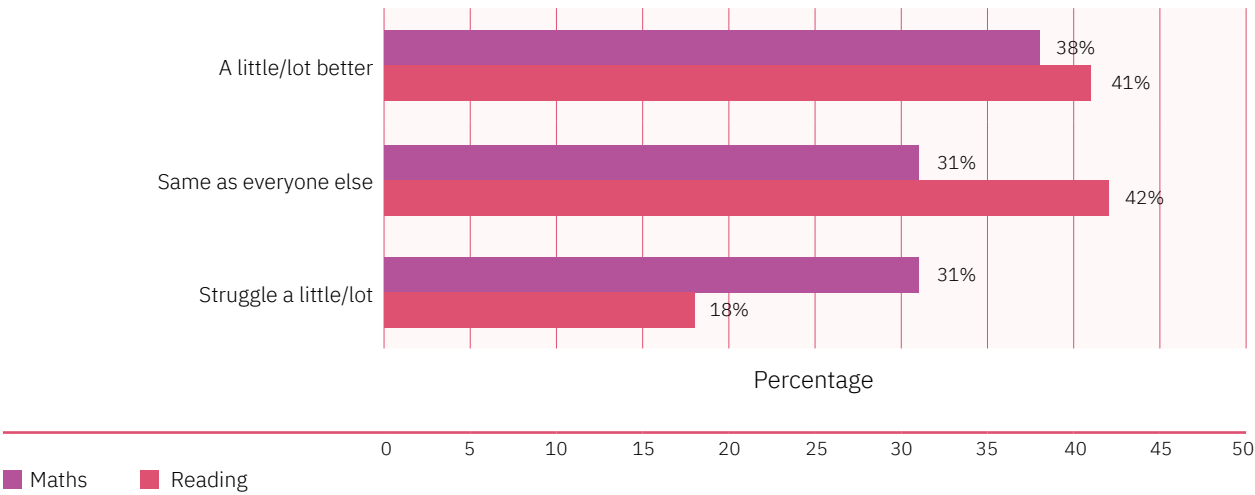
FIGURE 21: COHORT B (2019 & 2021) CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO WHETHER THEIR TEACHER THINKS THEY ARE SMART FROM 2ND CLASS TO 4TH CLASS



Smartness was conveyed to children through the different assessments used by teachers, with tests especially impactful. In the junior years these took the form of weekly in-class tests on spellings or tables.

In 2021, children in Cohort B were asked to evaluate their performance in Maths and reading relative to their peers (Figure 22). 38% of children perceived themselves to be *a little or a lot better* than their peers in Maths, with 41% perceiving themselves to be so in reading. Most of the remaining children perceived themselves to be the *same as everyone else*, although the percentage thinking so in Maths (31%) was the same as the percentage who perceived themselves to *struggle a little/a lot* relative to their peers (31%). In reading, only 18% responded that they struggled relative to their peers, compared to 42% who felt they did the same as everyone else. These findings suggest some ambiguity among a cohort of children as to their relative strengths in Maths compared to their peers, dovetailing with patterns noted earlier in relation to children’s perspectives on Maths as a subject.

FIGURE 22: COHORT B (2021) 4TH CLASS CHILDREN’S RESPONSES TO HOW WELL THEY DO IN READING & MATHS COMPARED TO OTHER CHILDREN



Children’s experiences of assessment

Intuitive assessment and planned interactions (feedback)

Our interviews and classroom observations highlighted the wide range of assessment strategies used by teachers including testing, daily checks of written work and assignments as well as whole class and group discussion. During one research activity, for example with children in 2nd class (Cohort A) children’s preferences for different kinds of teacher feedback were explored. Across these case study classes, children consistently expressed a preference for receiving one-to-one feedback from their teachers, concerned over being teased by other children over their queries or mistakes. This was also reflected in their preference for answering questions in one-to-one interactions with the teacher, but additionally in their enjoyment of time with the teacher through personal feedback:

“ I like having chats with teacher. (Girl, 2nd class A, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ Alone, it’s so obvious. Oh my god, like, what if you got like everything wrong? Your class doesn’t need to know that. They might slag you. (Girl, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ So then nobody else knows about my work. (Girl, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ Because I get embarrassed sometimes. I get things wrong. (Boy, 2nd class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ Because it's better [to only tell the teacher] and you won't have to tell everybody your answers. (Boy, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

Children also expressed a preference for informal checking over testing in the assessment of their work, although some children commented that tests helped them demonstrate their learning and were useful to improve their work. These children expressed their pride in being 'good' and being challenged by the feedback they received from tests:

“ [I prefer] When my teacher just looks at it [rather than tests]. (Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ Because they're hard. (Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ [I prefer tests]..because then you learn better. (Girl, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ Because I'm good at testing and I'm good at word searches. (Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ When I get the highest score in the class. I always get 10s. (Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

Children also discussed the usefulness of using their old work and previous feedback from their teachers as reference to improve their learning. Writing down or just saying the answers out loud was also discussed in connection to the feedback they would get from teachers, their preferences indicating the myriad of factors (e.g., pride in being able to show their work to their parents, classroom disciplinary rules, levels of confidence) that influence their attitudes toward evaluations of their work in school:

“ So then, if there are the same questions, I can just look at it and just use the same questions on it. (Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ You can show your mammy. (Girl, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ Sometimes it may be helping with your work at home. (Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ You prefer to write them? Why do you prefer to write them?
Because if I forget, and I don't know what to say. (Boy, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ If I shout it out, I might get in trouble. (Boy, 2nd class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ Our teachers always says not to shout out loud.
(Boy, 2nd class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ So people don't know. (Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ Say the answers.
Interviewer: Why don't you want to write them?
Because I can't write. (Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

Similar concerns were expressed by older children in 5th class in Cohort B. They also appreciated positive feedback from their teachers, and the informal 'checking-in' that took place alongside individual help when required. Informal assessment was recognised as constructive support for their learning:

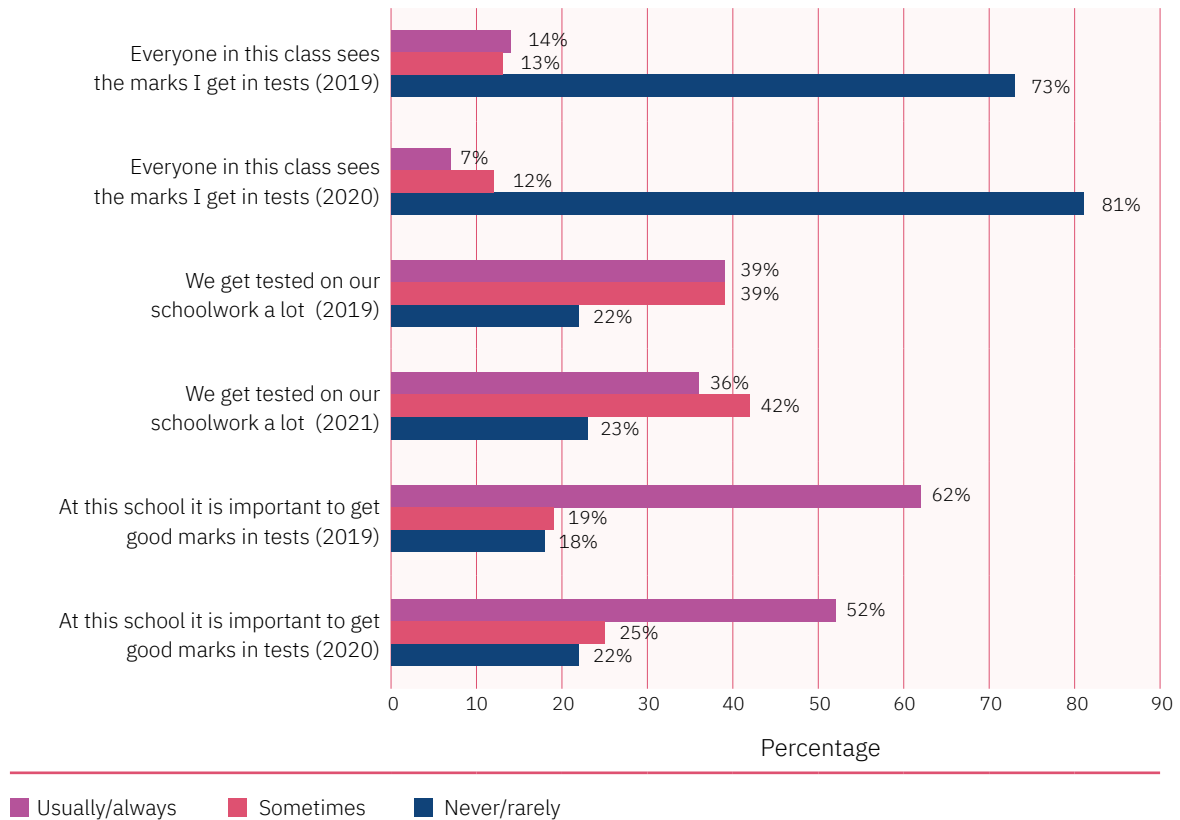
“ Well, say teacher's handing out the copies and she would say well done on your sentences or brilliant as always, sometimes. But it's quietly, so only like you can hear it.
(Girl, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ She (Class teacher) goes over it with you. She's like 'Do you understand it okay?' Or 'Are you finding it difficult?' And she kind of explains it. ...It matters more if you get the right answer because sometimes I do things a bit differently to help me learn. ... and I do it differently but I still get the same answer, it's fine.
(Girl, 5th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town) ”

Teacher-designed assessment (in-class tests)

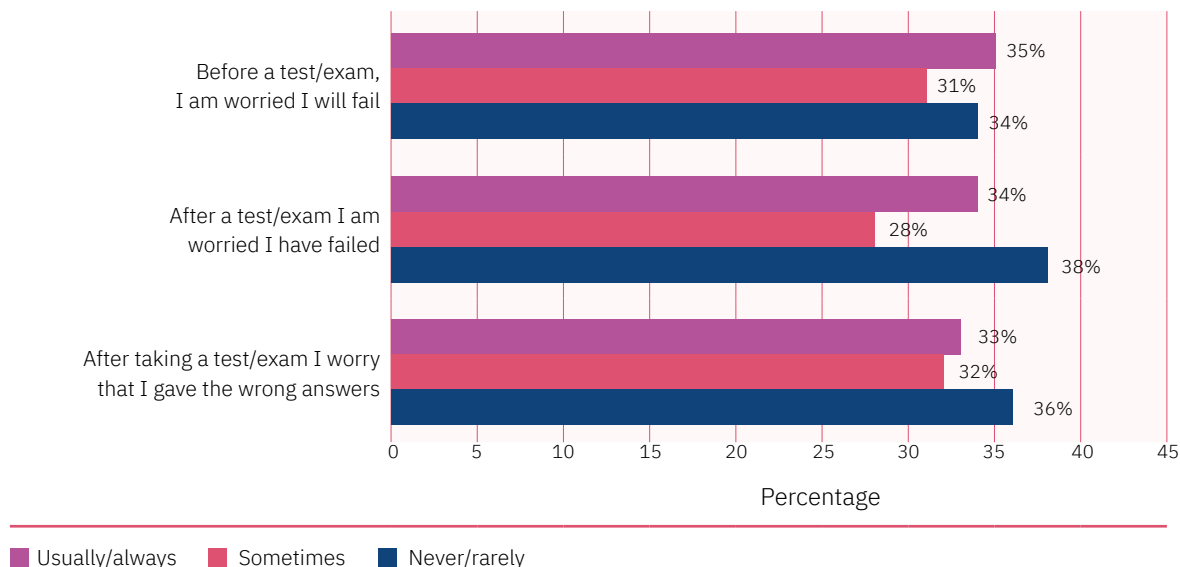
We were interested to learn of children's experience of formal assessments and their perception of the 'testing' culture within their school and classrooms. The questions were designed to elicit children's attitudes towards the experience of doing tests, rather than to capture the testing practices and approaches implemented in schools. Children in Cohort B were asked to evaluate school testing in their school in 2nd class in 2019 and in 4th class in 2021. Results were similar across the school years. Most children did not feel that other people saw their test results. However most children reported being tested sometimes or usually/always in class. There was a clear emphasis on the importance of testing, with 62% of children in 2nd class, and 52% of children in 4th class reporting that it was usually/always important to get good marks in tests in their school.

FIGURE 23: COHORT B (2019 & 2021) CHILDREN’S PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL TESTING FROM 2ND CLASS TO 4TH CLASS



When they were in 4th class (2021), children in Cohort B were also asked about their experience of anxiety over tests in school. Children tended to report similar levels of test anxiety across the questions, meaning that some children were typically lower in anxiety whilst others were typically higher. Approximately a third of children typically did not feel anxious about testing, another third typically felt anxious sometimes, while the other third typically felt anxious usually/always.

FIGURE 24: COHORT B (2021) 4TH CLASS CHILDREN’S RESPONSES TO TEST RELATED ANXIETY



Our case study interviews with children in 5th class highlighted how anxiety itself was connected to a sense of failure or element of surprise, but children also referred to the positive challenges of tests, and the opportunity they provided to extend their learning and acknowledge their successes:

“ *It doesn't really, I might get a tiny bit worried if I might do a bit bad in like a test or something. ... Stuff that I'm not familiar with. Like we've only done a day of working on it and then we're just thrown right into it. It happens sometimes in Irish and we do like occasional like tests in geography just to speed us up but a lot of the time it helps because sometimes you do need to be thrown into them situations.*
(Boy, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-ed, Rural) ”

“ *I don't really like doing spelling tests. It is good to revise your spellings and to try to get them in your head. I just don't really like doing the spelling test.*
(Boy, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ *Sometimes in like a test I was worried that one time I got like one of the questions – I don't get really worried if I get one question wrong but like one time like I knew I'd get something wrong then I kind of felt worried.*
(Girl, 5th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town) ”

“ *...if I was to be concerned or worried about my work, then I'd know I need to practise it more and put more effort in.* (Girl, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ *I remember one of the... what are they called? Maths tests I did, and I was really happy with my score. I got a 39 out of 42....And he put it up on the visualizer, and I got the second highest score. I was really happy.*
(Boy, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ *Yeah, (Class teacher) kind of goes around the class sometimes to have a look at the work. Sometimes in maths we do it to check if our answers are right.... There's a chance you could win a prize like pupil of the month or something like that. I am the pupil of the month*
(Girl, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

Parents' perspectives on assessment

Feedback on children's progress is also central to parent's engagement with and knowledge about their children's school experience. Across the waves, and for both cohorts, multiple forms of feedback to parents about their children's progress was evident – including annual teacher/parent meetings; end of year report cards usually based on in-class tests; informal chats, homework, and teacher comments on children's work. In our interviews with them, parents focused more on the content of the feedback they received rather than its frequency. Most parents agree they love getting feedback from teachers and remark on the impact that positive constructive feedback from teachers has on their children and their engagement in school. Our interviews with parents across all schools highlights how they take note of and respond to the advice given by teachers about their children's work. Parents explain that they would expect the school to contact them if they noticed any issues with their children's ability to learn.

We also get an additional window into children's experiences of assessment through their parents' eyes, in their discussions at home. Parents reported mixed reactions from children in relation to in-class tests. For parents of younger children, in Cohort A, there was a view that children did not appear overly concerned about in-class tests, although some noted that children could be competitive about them. Children usually reported back to parents if they have done well or even if they have made a mistake in their tests but overall, parents did not observe anxiety or worry about testing:

“ *She might say that yes, she had a spelling test or something like that but she wouldn't make a bit deal about it, just mention it in passing. She's always positive about anything coming out of school.*
(Dad, 1st class, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

“ *I think it's brilliant, she gets ten out of tens for her spellings every week and she knows she does.*
(Mum (girl), Senior Infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

“ *He's not worried at all. He's actually always on the ball. He's always looking ... I think he wants challenges, I can see. He wants difficult. He wants a complex, I think he wants to excel more.*
(Dad (boy), Senior Infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

In the older classes, it is noticeable that parents comment that some children worry or are anxious about tests, particularly standardised testing, with parents demonstrating an ambivalent attitude towards them. Several parents feel it is unfair to assess every child with the same test and commended teachers for valuing children's individual development, yet appreciate that such tests are useful to schools, to assess where children are in their learning/academic ability. Other parents shared their understanding and strong opinions on the unfairness of tests, including standardised testing. In such cases, parents discussed how tests and presentations cause stress and anxiety among children to the point of feigning illness:

“ *I mean when it comes to testing a person, like standardised tests, I know they have to be there because you have to have some kind of a measurement tool. [...] But what I liked about the education itself, in most cases the teachers would have an individual approach.* (Mum (girl), 5th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town)

“ *I think they're too young to be putting pressure on them with tests and everything all the time, no.*
(Mum (boy), 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

“ *Anything to do with any test. He hates, [...] He hates them (tests), he hates them, if you tell he has a test or anything he tries to dodge school and everything else like....*
(Mum (boy), 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

Parents in Cohort A also shared how they appreciate when the teacher writes clear and straight-forward comments on their children's work as part of the continued feedback on their learning progress. We noted the significant involvement from parents because of the feedback that children receive, including parents taking note of and working on the areas that require attention:

“ I'll always review her copybook from the stuff that she's written the day before or the couple of days and the teacher does put in comments. (Dad (girl), 1st class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ Everything, she's doing so well and it's good because the teacher gives feedback. She gives you pictures of what they're doing. You get your paperwork home, you know, you can see exactly how she's doing.

(Mum (girl), 1st class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ (Child) does this homework, writes out her sentences, and ... the teacher [puts a] big red mark around because she did a full stop too big. Big red mark around...and literally she wrote 'too much space between the words'. I Love her feedback, she's particular, love her! (Mum, 1st class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

In the senior classes, formal feedback took the form of parent-teacher meetings, including individual meetings if issues arise. Parents also observe that children want their teacher to provide honest constructive feedback on their work. Parents also commented on variations in children's experience of feedback across teachers, with some indicating they would like more feedback and the challenge of keeping up with “what the kids are doing”.

“ ...whether it be good or bad she [previous teacher] would write a comment, 'that was brilliant ' [examples] but you shouldn't have wrote this' or it was brilliant or not suitable or whatever it was. Whereas this year, I heard him [child] say one day, he says, 'I don't know why I'm bothering', he says, 'they're [homework] not even checked. (Mum (boy), 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ I was really impressed with her teacher she has this year, [...] in terms of parent teacher meetings, I had a couple of them, one or two since we last spoke. They were phone contacts. [...] the teacher's level of understanding to children's needs, [...]. Not what she needed to do better, or you know, that kind of thing. It was more around you know the children's needs and there were just other things that really stood out from the conversations I have had with him. (Mum (girl), 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

In the earlier years, parents did not report feeling worried or anxious about their children's assessments, however, they were concerned about knowing how their children were doing in school and their overall learning and progress. More importantly for them was the feedback they would get directly from teachers through one-to-one parent/teacher meetings, rather than through the results of standardised assessments for example. Consistently, parents in this cohort felt confident enough to approach the teacher or the school directly if they felt this was needed, and were reassured from the feedback they would get directly from teachers when they did so:

“ Well, we were told there was an assessment and (child) said we were all taken out and she said it to us at the parent teacher meeting that she seemed to be okay on everything. [...] they didn't really give us any cause for concern. (Mum & Dad, Senior Infants, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ We don't have worries that way. (Teacher) tells us that she's great as well, at the parent-teacher meeting you know so we just yeah just by observing her I suppose. (Mums, Senior Infants, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ I've seen her work, I know she can do it. So [...] if she did like, score lower in an assessment, I would know it was because she didn't understand what she was being asked. If I had any concerns I would have mentioned it to the teacher, but I've seen, I know she's capable of all they're doing at the minute. (Mum, Senior Infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

There is an increased awareness of assessment in general by 4th class, although across the waves parents of Cohort B children are not aware of any pressure on the children around in-class tests. Some parents even discussed that some pressure is useful to encourage children to progress. Dictation on Fridays, as well as spelling tests are mentioned as common assessment strategies. Some parents in 4th and 5th classes explained they would appreciate more frequent contact with the teachers and schools to receive feedback on how their children are doing. Others, however, seemed unaware or unconcerned about this given their children's positive adjustment to and engagement with school. Similar to the junior classes, the parent/teacher meetings were a crucial part of how parents would receive feedback regarding their children's learning.

“ But 4th, 5th, 6th class should really be drumming down the basics. But I think they could contact the parents more often. (Mum, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ Because I work full time, my husband works full time, and it's really hard to keep track of what the kids are doing. (Mum, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ So, the only feedback I have at the moment is you know, from the parent teacher meeting and I think he's doing okay, yeah, I think he's doing fine. I think he always sort of would have done above average I think in any of the sort of, the standardised tests. But again, I think he's probably the sort of kid where that's not going to be the best means of assessment for him. (Mum, 5th, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

There was also reference to the value of the additional support provided to children with special needs and the importance of testing for diagnoses of particular learning difficulties. A key issue that emerged for parents was the emphasis on testing to support children's learning, rather than as a marker or fixed standard of achievement.

“ They actually do a lot of testing with them. They see how they are getting on with their reading and their painting. I think it is (SEN teacher 1) and (SEN teacher 2), would bring them out and (SEN teacher 3) and do testing. It is really good because they can pick up on things.

(Mum, Senior Infants, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ And it's something that I would have a concern about with (Child2) and his personality because like as you know, like testing is a fact. But ... it's not, a testing environment

(Mum, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ I don't think there's an overemphasis put on testing, ... Well, it's not something she's ever worried about if, you know she's never... well she's never expressed to me that she's worried about a test. And they have this spelling test on a Friday, or it's a dictation, so it's not really a test. ...I don't know, maybe she is, ..I've never asked the poor child. (Mum, 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

Teachers' views on assessment

In 2019, teachers of 2nd class (Cohort B) were asked about their use of assessment methods (Figure 25). 81% of teachers indicate that they *frequently or always* observed children when they were working, and provide them with immediate feedback, while only 3% indicated that this *never or rarely* occurs. A similarly high proportion of teachers indicate that they *frequently or always* provided children with written comments about their work (75%), with the remainder indicating that they did so *sometimes* (24%). Responses are less clear cut in response to the question *I let my students evaluate their own progress*, with over half (57%) of teachers indicating that they did so *sometimes*, while 38% indicate that they did so *frequently or always*, and 4% that they did so *never or rarely*. Nearly half of teachers (44%) indicated that they *never or rarely* provided children with a letter or score grade on their work, while 29% did so *sometimes* and 26% indicated they did so *frequently or always*.

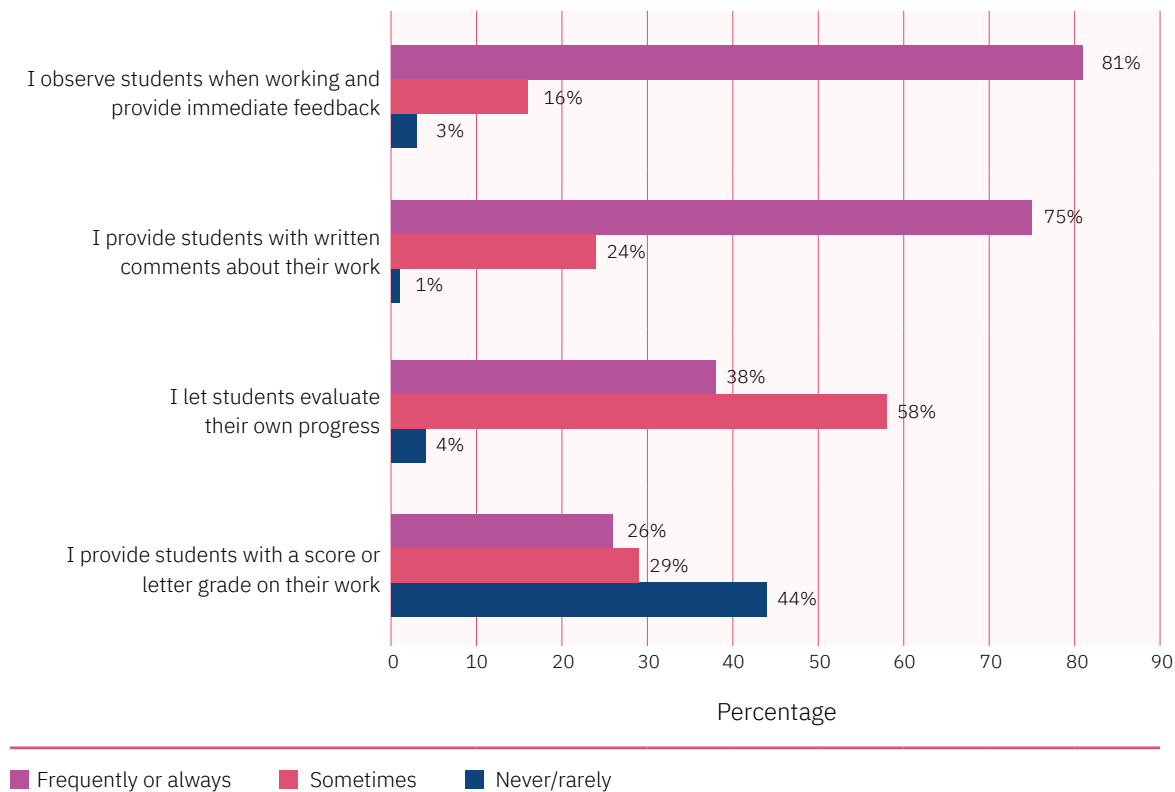
The data from the interviews with the teachers reaffirms the views that in the junior classes teachers are not overly concerned about assessment and are mindful about not drawing attention to differences in ability. Teachers reported that assessment takes place in the form of in-class weekly tests but also through the ongoing interactions with the children:

“ So, they've done their reading assessments, we don't do Maths assessment for like October break and for Christmas and then they do weekly spelling tests and a weekly maths test. (Female Teacher, 1st class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ I know the kids so well. And I see every single day, like even if it's not a formal assessment, I'm in formally assessing all the time and I see where a need lies very quickly... But I definitely get ... to observe and react quickly and make changes quickly to what I'm teaching based on what's happening from one day to the next. (Female teacher, 1st class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ Like it might be informal sometimes, but I also do formal assessment, and like we would do the formal assessment in Maths every few weeks. We do the, I still do spelling tests, ... everybody does them I think in this school. That one is another way of assessing. I mean I’ve always checked their written work to see what’s what, you know? (Female teacher, 1st class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

FIGURE 25: COHORT B (2019) TEACHER RESPONSES TO ASSESSMENT METHODS



Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding to the nearest whole number.

Teachers in the junior classes highlighted the importance of developing a climate in their classrooms where children were not afraid to make mistakes, reflect and correct their own work while also providing them with work that is challenging. Efforts are made, in collaboration with SETs, to ascertain children’s different levels of ability, as early as possible in junior classes, to ensure they receive the most effective level of support.

“ So, you are constantly helping, monitoring, correcting, whatever. But they are also getting to the point where they are able to see their own mistakes, so they say, you know, I made a mistake and they want it to be right. So, you help them with that. (Female teacher, 1st class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ As a class teacher, you would yourself, mainly (assess children). But, because we have a support teacher who comes in and does like station teaching. So, ... at least you have another professional to discuss things with and that’s really helpful. If you have any concerns then we would take them to the (Colleague) who is in charge of ‘Special Ed’ in the school. (Female teacher, Junior Infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ I do think that like if – I think that we nearly baby them too much sometimes and that they actually are well capable of doing a lot more than we think of them. (Female teacher, Junior Infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

In the senior classes, teachers also focus on a calm approach to tests, however they noticed that children’s stress around tests tends to increase as they progress through primary school.

“ I wouldn’t be one for giving them tests too often anyway. They always do their spelling test and their Mental Maths test on a Friday, but apart from that I never, I never really would have given Christmas tests, or anything like that. (Female Teacher, 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ Do I value assessment? Absolutely, 100%. Do I put it as highly important in this class? No. (Male teacher, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

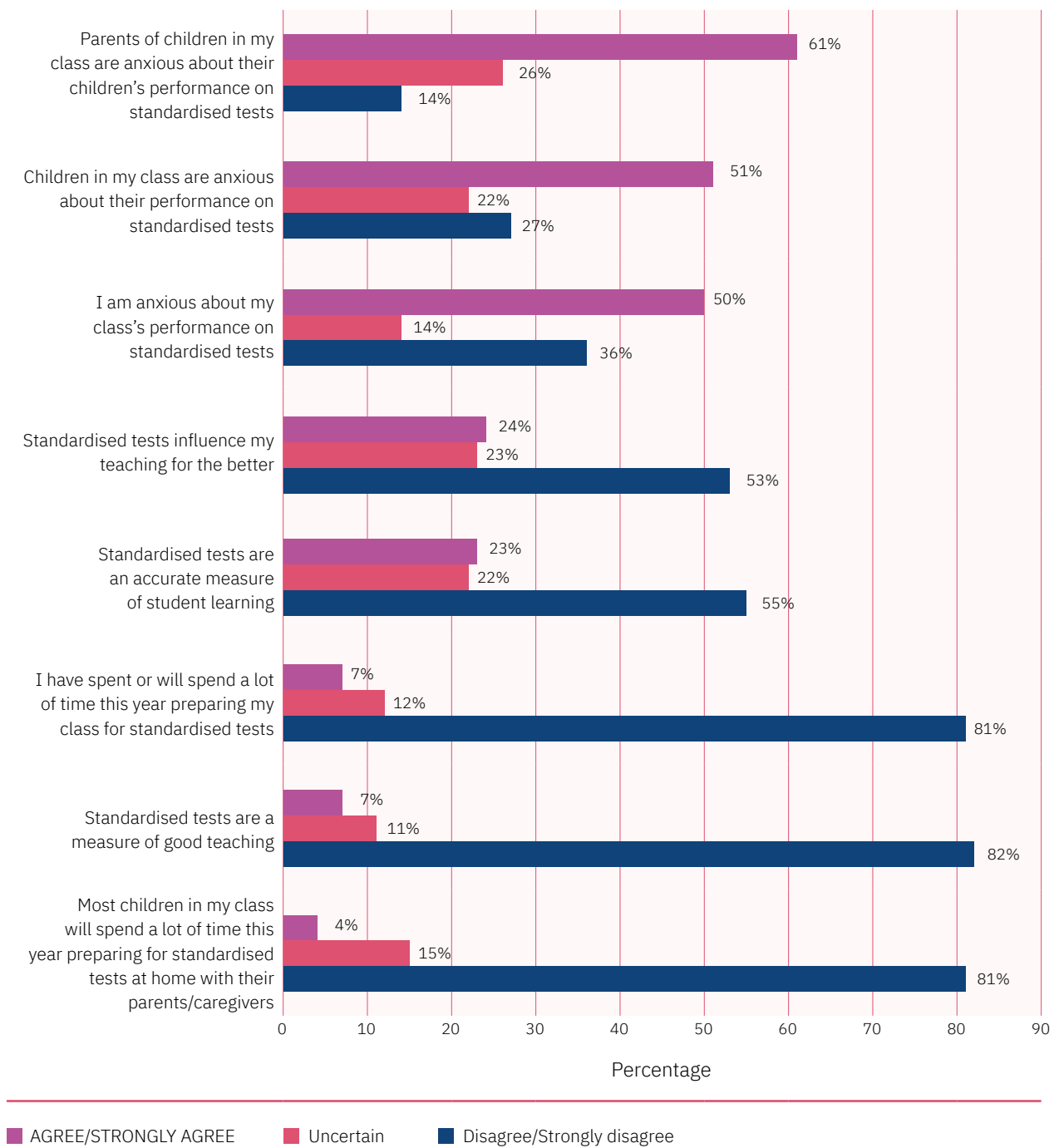
“ Like I think kids always when it comes to testing, they freak out, because they’re like ‘Oh no! It’s a test!’ It’s like ‘It’s okay. It’s only for me to look at. It doesn’t matter about anybody else. (Female teacher, 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ Depends on the children. Some children love their weekly assessments, some of them work themselves into a right tizzy over it and you get that in particular with Irish. (Male teacher, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

We were also interested in exploring the impact of standardised testing on the culture of assessment in primary school classrooms. In 2019, teachers in Cohort A (Junior Infants) were asked about their use of standardised assessment. Half of teachers reported using standardised testing, whereas half reported not using standardised testing. Teachers in Cohort B were also asked about standardised testing in 2019 (2nd class) (Figure 26).

Most teachers *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that *parents of children in my class are anxious about their children’s performance on standardised testing* (61%), with approximately half of teachers perceiving that the children in the class were also anxious about their performance in standardised tests (51%). Conversely, over half of teachers did not agree with the statement that standardised testing *influenced their teaching for the better* (53%) or that standardised testing was *an accurate measure of student learning* (55%). Over 80% of teachers *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with the statement that they spent or would spend *a lot of time preparing their class for standardised tests* (81%), that *standardised tests are a measure of good teaching* (82%), and that most children in their class spent *a lot of time at home preparing for standardised tests with their parents and caregivers* (81%).

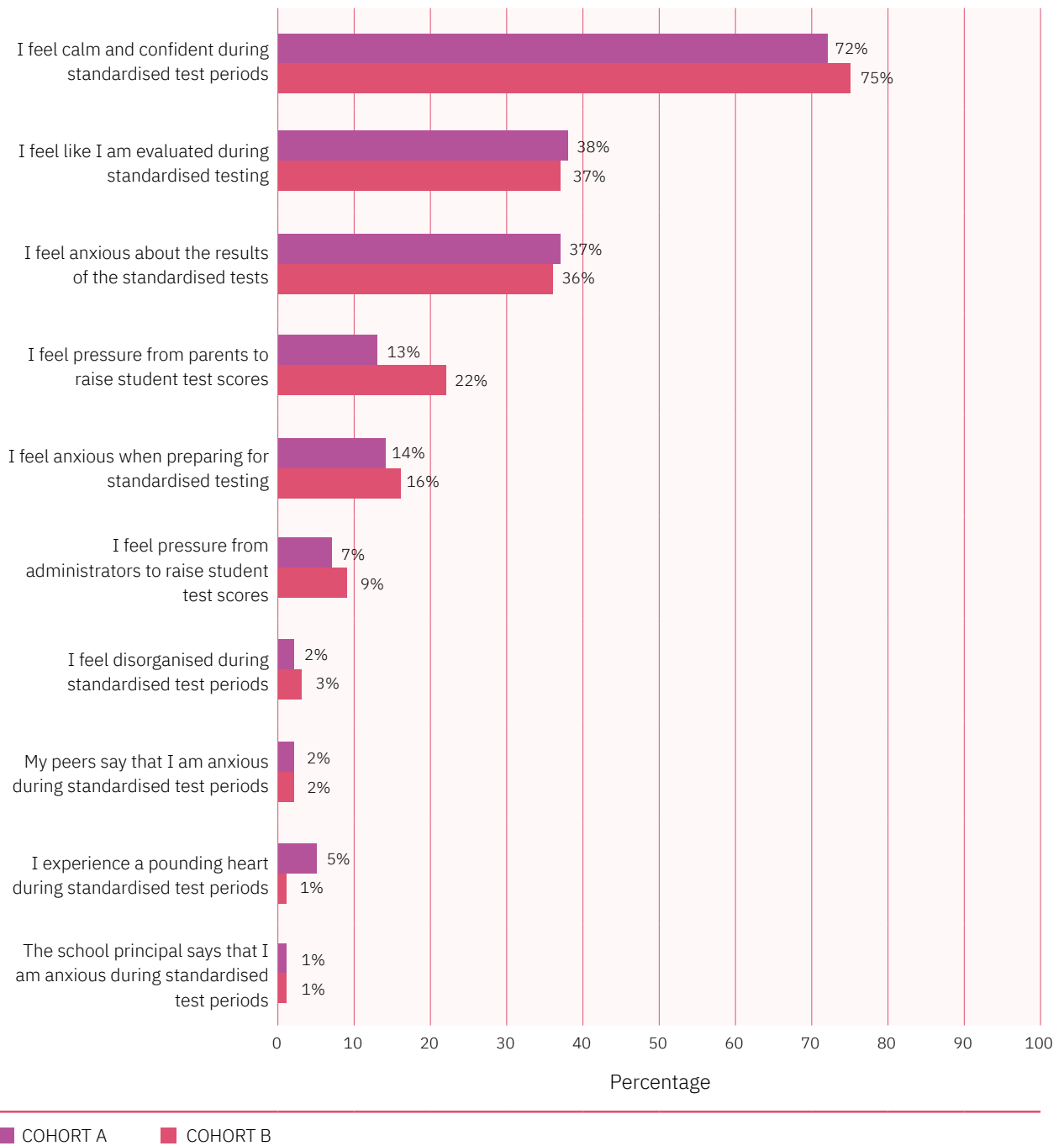
FIGURE 26: COHORT B (2019) TEACHER RESPONSES TO STATEMENTS ABOUT STANDARDISED ASSESSMENT



Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding to the nearest whole number.

In 2021, teachers of Cohort A (Senior Infants) and Cohort B (4th class) were asked to report on how they felt when preparing for and delivering standardised assessment (Figure 27). Most teachers disagreed that they felt anxious preparing for the standardised tests (A = 64%, B = 77%), and did not feel under pressure from ‘administrators’ to raise children’s test scores (A = 73%, B = 78%). However, large proportions of teachers felt anxious about the results of standardised tests (A = 42%, B = 51%), and felt they were being evaluated (through the performance of children) during standardised testing (A = 35%, B = 49%).

FIGURE 27: COHORT A & B (2021) TEACHER RESPONSES TO STATEMENTS ABOUT EFFECTS OF STANDARDISED ASSESSMENT PREPARATION AND DELIVERY (% AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE)



Teachers in Cohort A considered that standardised testing has a role in junior classes, regarding assessing how a child is progressing but most importantly to identify whether additional support is needed when progressing through primary school. Teachers in both cohorts are aware of the limitations of standardised testing and explained how it is often a challenge to explain these to parents and make the case for important things that are not reassured in the tests, for example how happy children are at school:

“ Look, standardised testing has its role ... I've always worked in a school where standardised tests have been viewed as identifying general areas for improvement across the school. And they've always been used to maybe say 'Okay, look, this is the target area, maybe it's going to be time or the calendar or children's understanding of capacity or something like that seems to be a problem across the board so we're going to put a focus on that in our school improvement planning for next year, or our Maths plan for next year', for example. ... I would never use it to judge myself as a teacher or judge my children as pupils and as learners.
(Female teacher, 1st class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

“ I think it has a function. You know, it's good to know where the children are in relation to everybody else but... some parents can put too much emphasis on it and be quite driven by it. But I think it is very good to be able to make a comparison between an NRIT test and the standard score to see if children are working to their ability, if not, why not... and that you have some kind of a criteria, or some kind of a baseline from where to judge how children are going. (Female Teacher, Junior Infants, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ But then within that as well there's the school's ... the child's happiness in school and readiness for learning.
(Female teacher, Junior infants, Co-Ed, DEIS, Urban) ”

“ ...they [parents] worry about them and we always try to tell them every year that it's not a reflection of their child's ability but in fairness to parents ... that's all they have to go off ...you know that's all they can see and then they're thinking about their kids going into secondary school and sure it's all tests, tests, tests... like I don't blame them for feeling that way because that's the only way they can measure their child's ability ... how else can they when they don't see them every day in school.

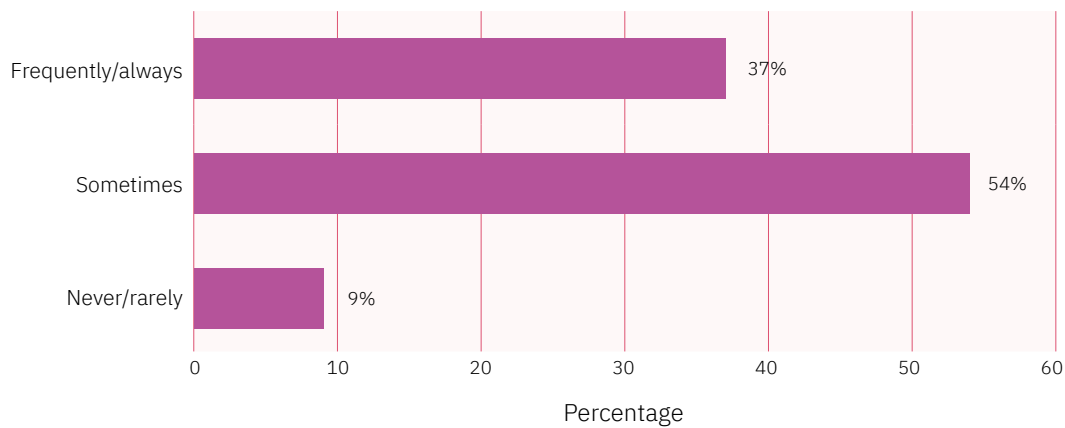
“ Occasionally ... (parents) might enquire, normally if the score was a bit lower than they were expecting or whatever, but you don't get a huge amount. They tend to be fairly accepting of what (scores) they get.
(Male teacher, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town) ”

(Female teacher, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

Principals' views on assessment

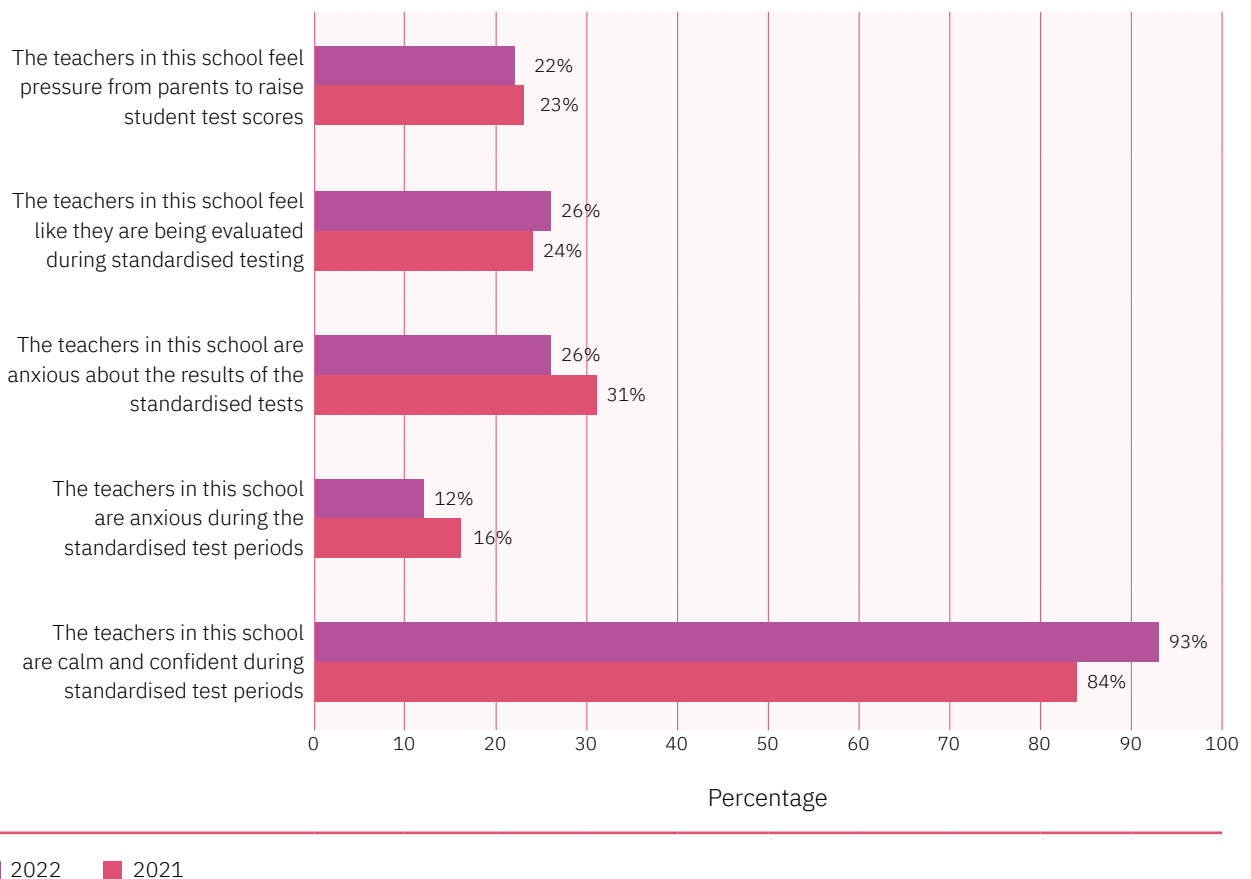
Principals in 2021 and 2022 were asked about the impact of test results on decisions regarding curriculum development as part of their school leadership. Over a third (37%) of the principals reported that they frequently or always took test results into account in decisions about curriculum development, while 9% rarely or never did (Figure 28).

FIGURE 28: COHORT B (2019) PRINCIPAL RESPONSES TO ‘I TAKE TEST RESULTS INTO ACCOUNT IN DECISIONS ABOUT CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT’



Principals were also asked about the impact of standardised tests on teacher practices and wellbeing (Figure 29). Almost all principals (93%) considered teachers in their schools to be calm and confident during standardised test periods, with an increase of almost 10% from the previous wave of data collection. Despite such positive reports, almost a quarter of principals agree that teachers feel pressure from parents to raise test scores and that they as teachers are being evaluated during standardised testing. Over time, there is an increase in the principals’ reports of teachers’ anxiety during standardised test periods and about test results.

FIGURE 29: COHORT B (2021 & 2022) PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS RESPONSES TO STANDARDISED TESTING



For principals across cohorts, standardised tests were only one component in a comprehensive approach towards assessment of children’s learning trajectories. They emphasised that the results in a report card for example should not be a surprise to parents as they should receive feedback regularly throughout the year, either at parent-teacher meetings, work sent home from school as well as homework.

“ *The results go out, the Sten [maths and reading comprehension standardised test] is given, there’s a comment made, and the Sten level is explained in the report. [Parents] they’re more interested in the comments and how [children] they’re behaving and how they’re experiencing school and enjoying school and you know, because some of the parents, like teachers worry about parent teacher meetings. [...] Now obviously, parents will be checking results and coming into you and talking to you and seeing how they’re getting on and they’ll see through homework, and you’ll be talking to them saying, ‘Listen, he can do his long division, he can do this, this and they’re getting on’ [...] So, parents should never be suddenly surprised by a report.*
(Principal, Junior infants, non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

“ *So, you have to in 2nd, 4th and 6th, you have to report either the Sten or the percentile rank. And then you have to give them an explanation of what that means, ... I’m fine with it. The downside of it is, the kids who are really struggling and might, on their school report have all ones – because the template is standardised –where they are experiencing difficulty in everything, it can be such a negative.*
(Female principal, Junior infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

During interviews, principals corroborated that most of the time the pressure towards test results comes from parents rather than the teacher, something that was especially evident in more middle-class schools:

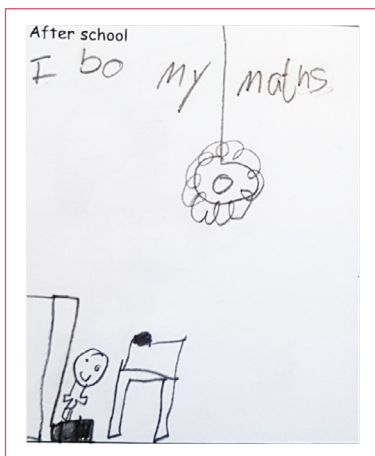
“ *Maybe more parental anxiety more than... children or staff, no. It’s one standardised test in English and one in maths at the end. What we do in Irish, a standardised test for the last few years as well. But it’s more parental expectations and then maybe explaining the results to parents afterwards if they feel that the result is different than their expectation.*
(Female Principal, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ *I know in my previous school it would have caused anxiety among children, some children.... I would have just told them it was just another test. I’d never make it any bigger than it’s meant to be. It shouldn’t be. It shouldn’t cause any stress or anxiety. And I think maybe some parents read too much into that, into the test scores. Too much into that rather than looking at the whole child.*
(Female Principal, 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

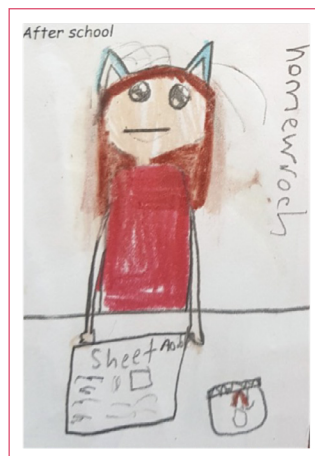
OUT OF SCHOOL LEARNING

We were interested in capturing children’s learning experiences outside of the school day, including those that would be assigned by their teachers, such as homework. Extracurricular activities are another example of the kind of informal learning that takes place that influences children’s learning. In 2019, children in Cohort B were asked to draw what they do after the school day is over. In the drawings, homework and out of school learning featured as an important aspect of children’s lives. The same activity was conducted with children in Cohort A in 2023 and homework also featured in the responses in addition to the joy of finishing with school for the day.

FIGURE 30: COHORT B (2019) AND COHORT A (2023) DRAWINGS FROM THE ACTIVITY ‘ A DAY IN MY LIFE’ REFLECTING WHAT THEY DO AFTER SCHOOL, IMAGES FEATURING CHILDREN’S DOING THEIR HOMEWORK



Boy, 2nd class B, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban



Girl, 2nd class B, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban



Boy, 2nd class B, DEIS, All-boys, Urban



Girl, 2nd Class A, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban



Girl, 2nd class A, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban



Girl, 2nd class, A, DEIS, All-girls, Urban

Homework

Children's perspectives on homework

While one of the 'feedback' loops by schools to parents is through homework, as reported previously (see [CSL Report 5](#)), homework was generally not well regarded across the waves by children. They consider it 'boring' and a form of additional work that takes time off from things that matter more to them including play and time with their families and friends. However, some children see homework as useful because it helps to revise the material and contribute to better performance in school:

“ *Girl: I think... I also think I'm really slow in homework, so that's why I don't really want to do it, because I always don't want to take long.*
(Girl, 2nd class, DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ Interviewer: *Why do you think you do homework?*
Girl: *To get your education levels up.*
(Girl, 2nd class- Cohort A, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ Interviewer: *Do you like homework?*
Girl: *Yeah, sometimes, if it's not too hard.*
(Girl, 2nd class- Cohort A, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ Interviewer: *How do you feel about homework?*
Child 1: *It is boring, why do you have to do homework because when you do homework, you already did the work at school, you don't need more work at home.*
Child 2: *Good news everybody, the President might have decided soon...*
Child 3: *No more homework...*
Child 2: *Banned it.*
Interviewer: *So, would you all choose to ban homework?*
All: *Yeah.*
(Child, 2nd class- Cohort A, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town) ”

“ Interviewer: *Does anybody have any ideas of any suggestions that they'd like to make?*
Child 1: *No homework for a year.*
Child 2: *Or forever!*
Interviewer: *[name] so do you think everybody would be in agreement with that? No homework forever?*
Child 2: *I mean like the teachers won't but everyone will.*
(Child, 2nd class- Cohort A, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town) ”

Further analysis of homework in children's school lives was conducted for this report, this time from the lens of family life and parents' perspectives on the subject.

Parents' perspectives on homework

Parents were asked about their perceptions of homework (Figures 31 and 32). Across both cohorts, parents appeared to place high value on homework, with high levels of disagreement with each of the four statements, ranging from 64% to 88%. Comparing the two cohorts, a smaller proportion of parents in Cohort A compared to Cohort B expressed agreement with the statements, suggesting less positive attitudes towards homework among parents as their children progress through primary school.

FIGURE 31: COHORT B (2021) 4TH CLASS PARENTS' HOMEWORK MOTIVATIONS

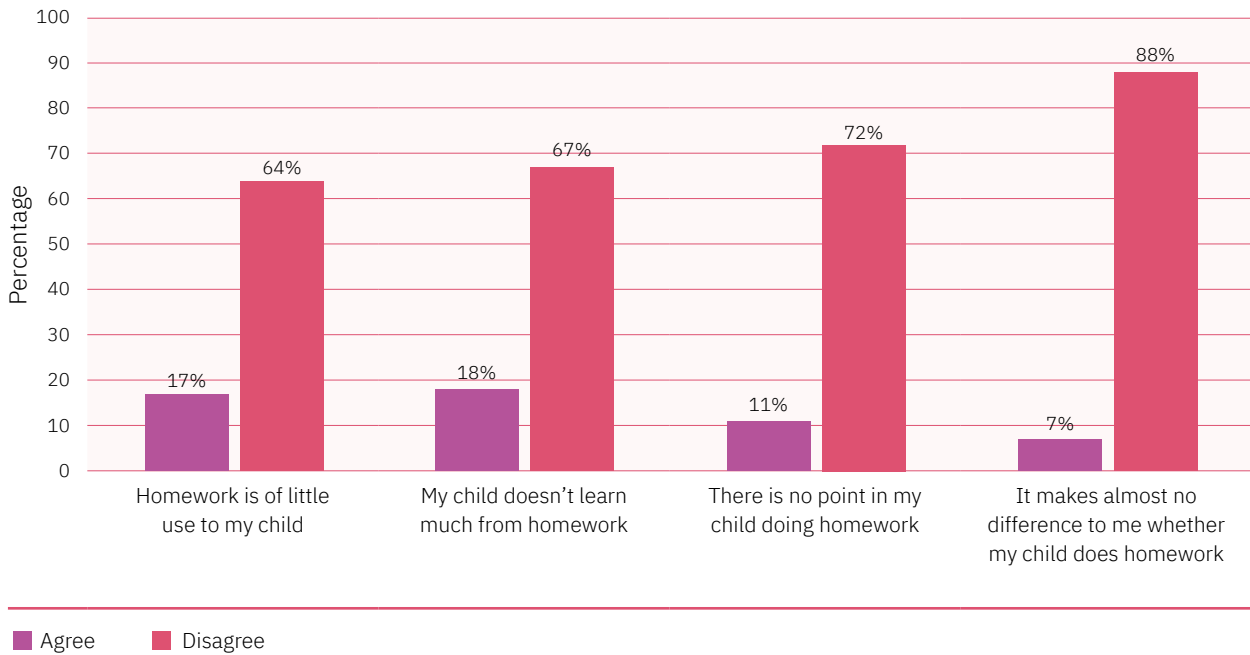
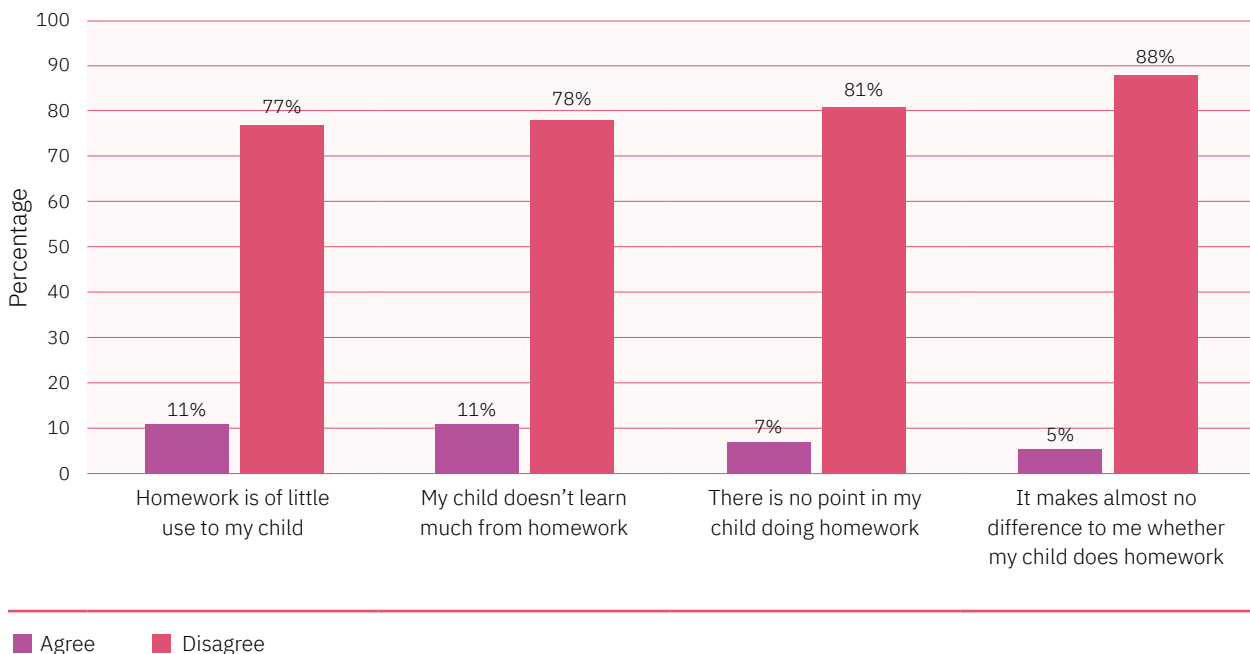


FIGURE 32: COHORT A (2021) SENIOR INFANTS PARENT'S HOMEWORK MOTIVATION



In our interviews with parents as part of the CSL family study, we probed further the experiences of doing homework in the wider context of everyday dynamics of family life and parent's understanding of the role of homework in children's education. Evident over time was the distinct difference in children's attitudes and approach to homework between the Junior and Senior Infants classes noted in the national study and the impact on parent-child and overall family dynamics. Overall, across both cohorts while homework is viewed by parents as an indicator for how children are progressing in school it is also experienced as a challenge in busy households.

Parents of younger children in Cohort A expressed strong preferences for homework, from senior infants into first class, believing it plays an important role in their children's education. For parents, homework reinforces their children's learning, but it is also a useful indicator for them to assess their children's progress and see how well they are doing or where they may be struggling in school. Some parents however said they would prefer children not to have homework in these earlier years:

“ I think they need it, I know people say they do enough in school and they shouldn't have to do work when they go home. But the teacher cannot sit with 20, 25 in my son's class, students all day, and make sure they're getting all their work done that needs to be done on time [...] they need to do it at home as well. I have no problem with it. (Mum (girl), Senior Infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ Yeah, I think homework is very important [...] Because it challenges children's minds. ... Yeah, even though they are not in school, they have the opportunity to learn. (Dad (boy), Senior Infants, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ I think it's good, I like it, otherwise you wouldn't really know what your kid is learning in school. [...] because if you have one teacher to 20+ pupils you can't really keep an eye on them, so it's a lot better ratio at home. (Mum (girl), Senior Infants, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ I don't really agree that they should be doing much homework until they go into secondary school. So, hopefully the level of homework stays relatively similar to that. (Dad (boy), Senior Infants, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

Parents of 1st class children described positive family dynamics in relation to 'doing homework'. Homework was perceived mostly as manageable, considering the subjects and different types of activities the children must do. However, the accounts ranged from children being proactive about homework to being resistant towards it:

“ ... she's interested in school. You can see that in her homework. She takes it seriously. She's doing her words and her spelling each evening, and she wants to get them right. (Dad (girl), 1st class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

“ And then (Son) will just stay with us, will do his homework straight away after from school, like the brother is not into that.
(Dad (boy), 1st class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“ Obviously, we do the homework and things like that, but it can be a nightmare to get him to do it. Even during it he says, “oh, how many more pages have we got to do. I hate this, blah, blah, blah.
(Mum (boy), 1st class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

Also evident from 1st class is children’s growing autonomy in the completion of homework, only asking for help if they need it:

“ I’d help him with the maths a good bit yeah. But in fairness to him he doesn’t need a lot of help it’s just to put his head down and do it.
(Dad (boy), 1st class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town).

”

“ ...she does her homework with ease. Like, I kind of, she says to me all the time, ‘I know what to do, you don’t have to tell me’, I’m like, ‘Okay I kind of have to help you but’, but she’ll be like, ‘No I done this in school I know what to do.
(Mum (girl), Senior infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

As the children get older however, parents comment on an increasing incidence of resistance to homework – most often referenced with respect to boys. Further, parents of children in senior classes felt more strongly that homework is an unnecessary source of stress for children in school and they should not get too much of it.

“ He doesn’t like the homework. He doesn’t know why they get so much homework because they do enough work at school. (Mum, 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

“ I kind of just sit beside him to keep him company while he was doing his homework, he would get, the head would be down the table, he would get so cross and so sad by things. Just really, his head would be getting fried with things and from a confidence point of view he has really come into himself. (Mum boy), 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

In both cohorts, for parents with busy family lives where there are work commitments, multiple school pick-ups and extra-curricular activities to consider, homework is difficult to manage. This was particularly evident with families, where both parents are working, and where homework is a challenge even in the early years.

“ So, she (mum) would have spent an awful lot of time with the kids when they’d come home from school working with them to do their homework, making sure they understand what they’re doing, correcting their homework, and going through it with the kids to make sure that they understand what they’re doing and why they’re doing it. (Dad (boy), 1st class, non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban).

”

“ Like they’re after spending eight hours of the day, six hours of the day in a classroom doing stuff and then coming home and then having to do another hour and a half again you know what I mean I think, and it’s okay for somebody, some kids who don’t have to go anywhere but like [child] unfortunately has got basketball and she’s got football, so she’s only home for an hour and she does drama and there’s stuff, nice good stuff for her to do (Dad (girl), 4th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town) ”

Parents of children in 4th and 5th class, in Cohort B mentioned the amount of homework assigned to the children as a challenge and one of the main causes of resistance since children prefer to do other things, including extracurricular activities.

“ I suppose homework can be a bit delayed in the evenings.... But obviously, like when she comes in, she’ll have something to eat and play with her friends and draw or whatever she wants to do then. We try not to leave it too late but [...] I like to give her the little chance after school to just unwind a bit before she does it, yeah. (Mum (girl), 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ A few times I would ask him had he homework. He would say yes and then I would come back [...]. He says he can do it in school or in the morning and maybe I could write a note to the teacher. He thinks he can get away with it then ... He does it most of the time anyway. (Mum (boy), 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban) ”

An additional challenge for parents was needing help to support their children’s homework. In these contexts, they referred to the importance of assistance and communication with the school to point them in the right direction. This was particularly relevant in relation to specific subjects they might find challenging to support. Across the waves and cohorts, Irish is given a special mention, by both Irish and migrant parents, as a subject they struggle with themselves and worry about giving support to their children in higher classes or in secondary school. Our interviews also highlight the efforts parents go to overcome these challenges in support of their children’s learning. One child from a migrant family background, loves Irish and his Dad, uses an ‘App’, to help his children learn, by setting competitions for them.

“ For example, if there is Irish language, there is no chance to help them. And even Maths. So, there are two things which I was not good at helping... (Mum, 5th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town) ”

“ I forgot that there is also some Gaelic. Good, because I have an app in my phone about... sometimes every morning I do give him a competition about his brother and him... Yeah, I do give them some Irish that’s not in school. But I remember it ... (Dad (boy) 1st class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

“ As she gets older, I’ll defo struggle with the Irish but not yet. (Mum, (girl), 1st class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban) ”

Maths is also mentioned as a challenging subject by some parents. Some of the challenges to support children are not necessarily because of the subject itself but differences in learning styles between parents and children, or previous experiences by parents themselves in school:

“Mammy, I’m working it out in my head.’ I was like [laughing] ‘Okay, never mind.’ ... like I can’t do maths. Like I couldn’t do maths at all ... ‘She doesn’t get it from me.
(Mum (girl), Senior infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

“I would find them (Maths) difficult. Like I said I wasn’t good in school, so I find it hard to help him.
(Mum (boy), 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

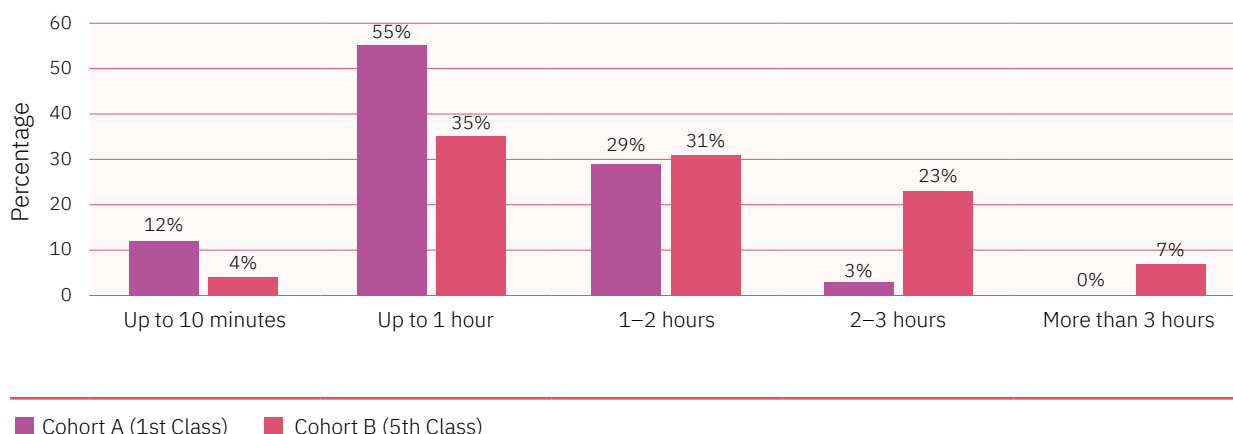
“I’ve been through years and years of college and when I can’t do primary school and it’s actually a joke we have, when we are trying to sit down it’s okay, we need help here. Oh, the Maths. Oh my God. The Maths is an absolute nightmare.
(Mum (girl), 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

“Yeah, it’s what he would ask me questions about, and I am really bad at specifics... I am no good at recollecting detail or being sure that I am giving him the right answer on things, and he is always asking these, you know questions.
(Mum (boy), 5th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

Teachers’ perspectives on homework

Teachers reported on the amount of time they expect children in their class to spend on homework over a typical week (Figure 33). For children in 1st class, over half of teachers (55%) expected that they would spend up to one hour on homework, and a smaller proportion of teachers of 5th class (35%) reported this as the expected amount of time for their class. Just under a third of teachers of both age groups expected children to spend 1–2 hours a week on homework, while teachers of 1st class were less likely to select longer time periods of 2–3 hours (3% compared to 23% for teachers of 5th class) and more than 3 hours (0% compared to 7% for teachers of 5th class).

FIGURE 33: COHORTS A & B (2022) TEACHER REPORT ON THE AMOUNT OF TIME THEY EXPECT CHILDREN IN THEIR CLASS TO SPEND ON HOMEWORK OVER A TYPICAL WEEK



Extracurricular activities

In an effort to capture rich descriptions and data for children’s voice and perspectives, a visual diary of children’s school days, ‘A Day in My Life’ was completed by Second Class children in both cohorts, for Second Class children in 2019 in Cohort B and Second Class children in 2023, in Cohort A. One section depicted what children do after school. The children filled their drawings with a myriad of extracurricular activities that reflect both their interests; sports, pets, music and dancing; as well as some social shifts in children’s lives, such as online gaming, girls playing football and heading to ‘afterschool’ childminders.

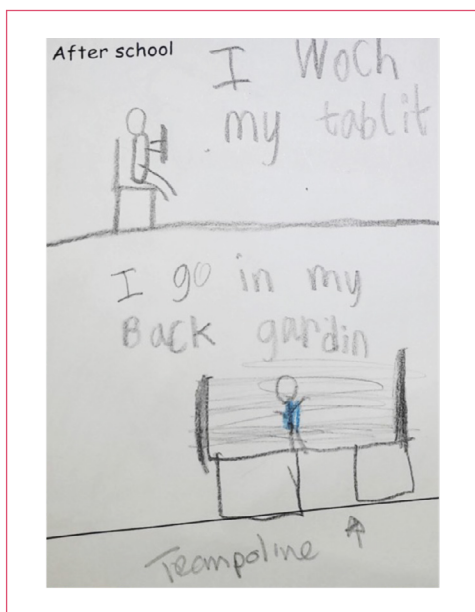
FIGURE 34: COHORT B (2019) AND COHORT A (2023) DRAWINGS FROM THE ACTIVITY ‘ A DAY IN MY LIFE’ REFLECTING WHAT THEY DO AFTER SCHOOL, IMAGES FEATURING CHILDREN’S EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES



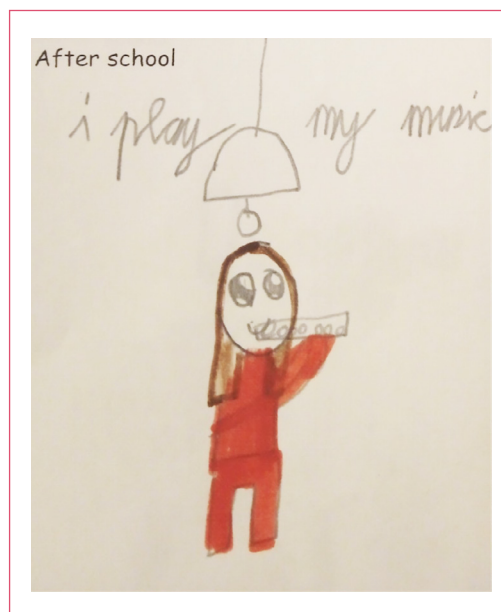
Girl, 2nd class A, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban



Boy, 2nd Class A, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban



Boy, 2nd class A, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural



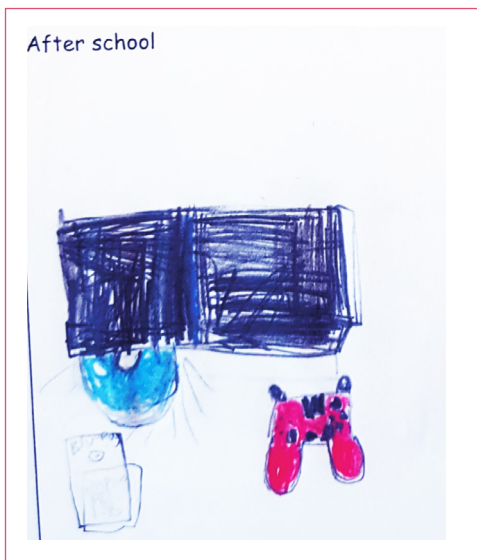
Girl, 2nd class A, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town



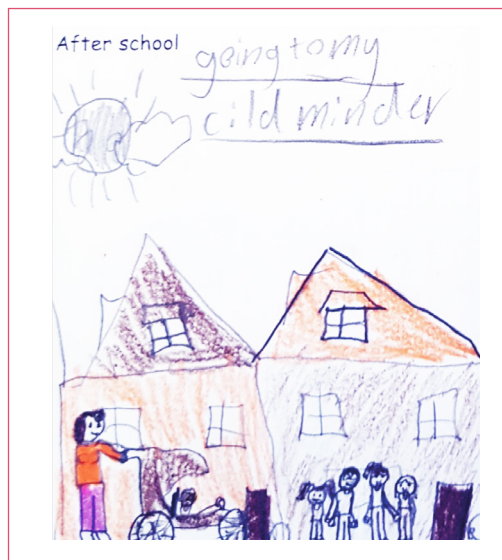
Girl, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-girls, Urban



Girl, 2nd class B, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban



Boy, 2nd class B, DEIS, All-boys, Urban



Girl, 2nd class B, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban



Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban



Girl, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-girls, Urban



Girl, 2nd class B, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban



Girl, 2nd class B, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EXPERIENCES OF CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's experiences of school has been documented in several of our previous reports, both through the initial period of lockdown and switch to remote teaching and learning, and through to children's return to in-person learning, albeit in the context of restrictions on movement and interaction. Here we document the impact across experiences of curriculum and assessment over the period of the study.

Impact on children's experiences

Remote learning conducted at home dominated children's reflection on learning in 3rd class for Cohort B. Some noted that the workload online was less than it had been before, and others spoke to their familial relationships and who in the household supported their learning online (See [Report 2](#)). With respect to engaging with the curriculum, children experienced Maths as one of the most challenging subjects for them during periods of remote learning. They thought of it as a subject for which you need a teacher to explain things to you and in a way that parents could not always do. Similarly for Irish, this was also considered one of the most difficult subjects to study during the lockdowns due to the limited support at home, especially when parents did not speak Irish nor at the level of being able to help in the manner that was required:

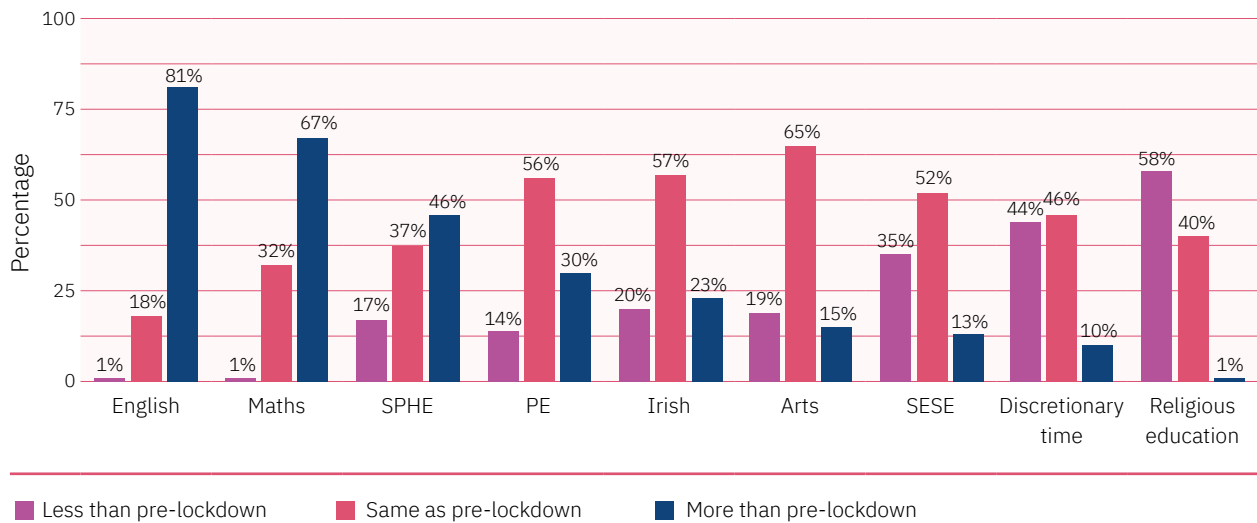
“ *My dad was the only one that only knew a little bit of Irish, and my mum didn't know any. And my grandad knew a lot and my granny, but we couldn't go over to them.*

(Girl, 4th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town) **”**

How the curriculum changed

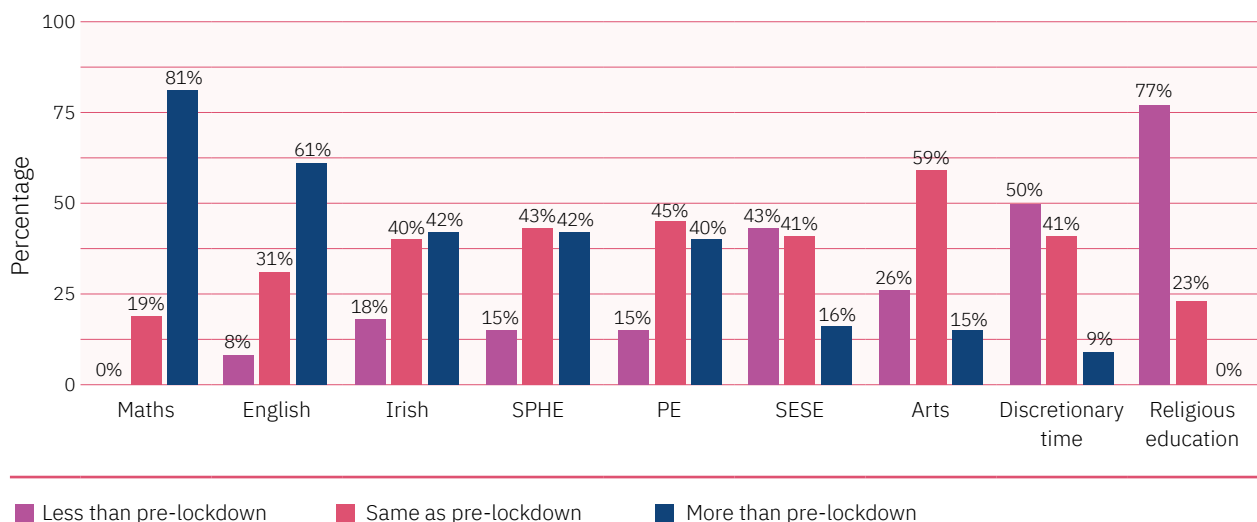
We were interested to track how teachers adjusted their curriculum priorities considering the disruptions to schooling during the pandemic. Our research with principals (see Figure 13, page 36) highlighted how most perceived high levels of engagement among teachers in working with the curriculum. This included adjusting their priorities as the pandemic restrictions took effect. On return to school following lockdown, Cohort A teachers (Figure 35), teaching children in Senior Infants in 2021, reported on average that they were teaching more English (81%) and more maths (67%) than they were pre-lockdown. *Teaching more than pre-lockdown* was also the most selected response for Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) while for Physical Education (PE), Irish, Arts and SESE most teachers indicated that they were teaching the same as in pre-lockdown. Increased time spent on teaching some subjects post lockdown appeared to be made at the expense of subjects such as Religious Education, which most teachers (58%) indicated they were teaching less of, as well as discretionary time (44%) and SESE (35%).

FIGURE 35: COHORT A (2021) TEACHER RESPONSES TO CURRICULUM AREAS THEY ARE TEACHING LESS/SAME/MORE OF COMPARED TO PRE-LOCKDOWN



Among teachers of Cohort B whose children were now in 4th class, the results were similar (Figure 36), with most teachers again indicating that they were teaching more maths (81%) and English (61%) than pre-lockdown. Cohort B 4th class teachers also indicated that they were teaching less Religious Education (77%) and discretionary time (50%) than pre-lockdown.

FIGURE 36: COHORT A (2021) TEACHER RESPONSES TO AREAS OF LEARNING NEEDS TO BE PRIORITISED FOLLOWING PANDEMIC



During remote learning, the main challenge for teachers across cohorts was to find new ways to make the curriculum interesting so that children would engage with online classes ([See Report 2](#) for full overview of experiences). Once schools reopened, teachers' challenges in relation to the curriculum shifted from fostering children's engagement to assessing the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on children's learning to make decisions about the curriculum. An additional challenge was adapting subjects to adhere to the social distancing measures in schools when these reopened.

For Cohort A for example, the priority was to consolidate literacy and numeracy skills, as these had been severely impacted by school closures. Special Education Teachers (SET) and Special educational needs (SEN) teachers supported classroom teachers to assess and support children to consolidate or catch up to where teachers thought they should be in their learning as a class and as individuals.

“ I had a lot of support from one of the learning support teachers, (SET1) and (SET2), and we just really fired the phonics and the number and everything into them, we did loads of them, to try and catch them up. (Female teacher, Senior infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

“ When they came in, at the beginning of Senior Infants, I anticipated it would be like having a Junior Infant class, because they'd been gone so long. So for the first month or two, really just pitching it towards Junior Infants, rather than Senior Infants. And I'd say I only got the Junior infant English curriculum finished at Christmas. (Female teacher, 1st class, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

“ We were looking at our objectives every week, but again she (SET) was feeling that we were very much on par with the curriculum from last year. (Female teacher, 1st class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

Across both cohorts, the emphasis regarding the curriculum was meeting children's immediate needs, understanding where they were in relation to specific subjects and making sure they had the foundations to move forward. Teachers reflected on how specific subjects were particularly impacted by remote learning, for example Religious Education and Irish. Children were only really beginning to learn Irish in Senior Infants, as they had forgotten a lot of what they had already learned during their few months in Junior Infants:

“ (Principal) told us to prioritise English and Maths, and do... do an hour of English, an hour of Maths every day, because we feel that the need is there for our children. And then after that, to do our Gaeilge and PE and art subjects, because they're really important for wellbeing. And then to take time out of SESE and religion. And we had done SPHE as well, along with the music and the PE and the art. Because we just thought that for a lot of children who would be coming in very emotional and very anxious, those subjects were very important. And just to keep everything fun and happy. (Female Teacher, Senior Infants, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

“ Gaeilge was impacted hugely because they’re not coming from Irish language backgrounds. (Female Teacher, Senior Infants, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ I think that I might be focussing a little bit less on SESE, which is like science, geography, history, integrated into the learning but because we were focussing on other aspects of the curriculum, we were asked to focus on SESE, I think that that maybe has taken a bit of a hit. (Female Teacher, Senior Infants, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural) ”

As noted in Report 5 ([see Report 5](#)), a main issue faced by teachers returning to school post-lockdown was that of social distancing. The need to maintain social distancing in the classroom meant that teaching many subjects became more challenging, highlighting the inter linkage between pedagogy and experiences of the curriculum. Teachers provided examples such as Art, PE, and numeracy, where the use of selected ‘hands on’ materials was made difficult by the fact that they had to be cleaned following use, to minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

“ I suppose Maths springs to mind as a subject that, in numeracy we’d have a lot of materials. So, we try to colour code, some have got red counters, green counters, blue counters, whatever. Each pod has their own set of materials. If we’re not using materials, then very often you’re trying to circulate them around, so you’re trying to lift things and keep them for 72 hours... (Female Teacher, 4th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town) ”

“ PE material we just don’t do it, we just don’t use any. We’re outside doing athletics and dance and gymnastics and things outside, without any equipment, if we can. Kids are desperately missing things like Go Noodle, which was an interactive on the whiteboard, which you’d do between lessons and so on, but again that involves jumping around the room so there’s a risk of us touching each other. (Female teacher, 4th class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town) ”

“ The art was actually, it was the logistics of art was tough, to have to think about that because sharing of materials, we had to keep things as separate as possible so it was, it was the, it was the logistics of that. (Male teacher, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban) ”

Nonetheless also noted was the impact of the restrictions positively on focus, given the limited number of activities (considered as distractions) that could be pursued:

“ I think that there was more teaching and learning going on last term than normal because funny enough we didn't have all of the interruptions that you normally would have in a school [...]. There were a lot of positives out of it. (Female Principal, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban).

”

How assessment changed

Our previous overview of assessment practices highlights the 'low key' approach that was evident, especially in the Infants classrooms. However, after the COVID-19 lockdown, when children were allowed to return to classrooms, assessment became a priority for schools. This priority arose from the felt need to ascertain how the children had progressed or fallen behind, during the remote learning periods. Through a combination of different strategies, from classroom observations to mini-tests or verbal feedback, teachers worked to assess children's abilities and levels, especially in literacy and numeracy. A core focus was to enable teachers to plan their classes and provide differentiated instruction for children with particular needs:

“ Usually it's just verbal feedback from the children. And then assessment I just gave my Senior Infants tiny little tests [...] before in October and at Christmas. We didn't do a formal Maths assessment, but I just did kind of a light touch one just a kind of tick sheet to see where they were at with different maths concepts.

(Female Teacher, Senior Infants, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

“ It did take a bit of time to get everybody you know, assessed and again you didn't want to be putting anyone under pressure. So, you nearly have to make it like fun like a little game kind of... You know, you don't want anybody to feel 'Oh I can't remember this' because that's the very last thing I wanted to do is put anyone under pressure to be not able to remember anything, you know. (Female Teacher, Senior Infants, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

“ ...writing you'd kind of see it every day so you'd kind of be assessing as you're going around looking at it but you'd have a rough idea of who would be where when it comes to writing, so that would be that. (Female Teacher, 1st Class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

For the older cohort in 4th class, after COVID-19, many teachers discussed only using informal, or internal assessment tools and expressed avoidance of standardised testing. Following remote learning, they felt the need to ease children back into formal schooling sensitively but spoke of how several children had regressed and their concentration had been seriously impacted because of the pandemic.

“ So, we did just do internal assessments with Mathematics and literacy just to get some sort of feel. Now normally the children who get learning support will be quite ... will be pretty much the same from one year to another, it won't change drastically but we had to do something just in case anybody had particularly gone down or any one of the children that were already receiving support had come up and didn't need it anymore. So, we did have to do an internal assessment for both Maths and literacy

(Male teacher, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town) ”

“ A lot more work had to be put in than you normally would have to do in September, and even things like their spelling, their handwriting, the presentation of their work, everything had gone back a huge amount... (Female teacher, 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

“ ...well, we'd no assessment to go off from last year. So, we kind of had to see what level they were at... (Male teacher, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

”

“ Suppose they'd definitely be less formal assessments. It'd be more so kind of casual feedback and oral feedback. (Female teacher, 4th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

Assessment during remote learning was largely facilitated using technology as previously reported ([See Report 2 Covid](#)). Many of these technologies continued to be used by teachers once the schools reopened, but beyond the addition of new tools, there were no significant changes to assessment strategies and teachers relied on strategies they had previously used in their classrooms before.

Changes to assessment because of the pandemic were also discussed with principals in the case study schools. They confirmed that their schools were employing a range of different assessments tools to inform their planning in the absence of the regular tests. These tools helped to assess children's abilities as they returned to school and facilitated the assignment of mixed-ability pods in class (See Report 5 for further details on 'pod' pedagogies)

“ So, we had no standardised tests because they didn't take place the year before, yeah. So, what we would use is [assessment tool] a really, really comprehensive individual assessment. So, we do it on every child and we do it twice a year and that would be our normal, you know, par for the course. So, it gives you their comprehension level, it gives you the reading fluency, their accuracy, and it helps you determine you know, what is their best instructional level for you to work on in your literacy lift off groups in class support ... So, we did that when we came back you know and got a good measure of the children's literacy from that. (Female Principal, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

“ ...the assessment tool that I referenced for literacy, [...] ...it’s an easily applied standardised test that can be done over a large number of children and the records are all collated for you together so it’s easy to compare progress from one part of the year to the next because it’s all digital and the children can access it quite easily. We don’t have one of those for numeracy, that’s the thing. So, I’m on the hunt for one of them. (Male Principal, 2nd class A, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

In relation to standardised testing, some principals, especially in DEIS schools, spoke about the difficulties and managerial pressures associated with not having standardised tests or test results for children, when they returned to school, after the pandemic. They noted how it impacted on DEIS plans, SEN provision and even to capture what had changed for children between pre and post COVID-19 periods.

“ ...we have no standardised test results from last year, so even for the children that are in 4th class now going into 5th class, we have no standardised test results for them at all since they came in. They only got their test results for 2nd class. And in relation To our DEIS plans then it’s very difficult to plan when you don’t have any new data.

(Female Principal, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“ We didn’t do it in May of 2020 because obviously, we weren’t in school. But it would have been a nice way to capture just how far things have changed or how much they’ve changed. But all schools were directed not to do standardised tests again until May, 2021.

(Female Principal, 4th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

”

“ No, the Department did give guidelines on that. So, obviously everybody in the country missed the standardised testing, ...and they did say, we don’t want people going back and trying to catch up on the testing. ... Now look, we did ...more like teacher-designed tests ... But no standardised testing – it would just have been, for teachers. Now again, with the kids with additional needs and stuff, we did have alternative tests. And we were very (keen to) get some level of where they were at, and we did get that done very quickly.

(Female Principal, 4th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

Other principals, in contrast, welcomed the removal of expectations for standardised testing when the children returned to school, especially in terms of removing challenges about communicating standardised test scores to parents and managing their expectations. This was especially notable in middle class schools:

“ I think ... that having to report results has done huge damage over the years. ... So, we decided this year now, ... we're not doing them... we're only doing them in classes that we're supposed to do them in. ... So, I would think, given what we've been through at the minute, I don't see the point of that this year, to add more stress onto parents, who feel that they weren't in a position to help their children through the closure. And then, they have sort of in some way, disabled their child by not being able to help, and then this result comes out. (Female Principal, 1st class, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

“ Obviously, they've been cancelled last year by the Department of Education, but they would be very much taken onboard and put on the reports, and we would definitely have queries ..., if a STen score had gone down there would very much be 'I'd like to have a word. I want to know why. I'm concerned.' And the children, particularly coming up to the end of upper primary, and I say this because I used to have sixth class, they're not doing the Leaving Cert, but it nearly felt as though there was a... they obviously wanted to do very, very well. (Male Principal, 1st class, non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

As previously reported ([See Report 2 Covid](#)), digital technologies created new opportunities in schools during the pandemic, and this included new forms of communication with parents over how their children are doing in school. Once schools reopened, principals explained that these new communication channels remained and general feedback to parents had moved online. One principal explained that it is an effective way to communicate regularly with families, about their individual children, or about what is happening in the class or school in general:

“ For me, there are a few ways of messaging families. Well, three ways, sorry. The most official is an email from Aladdin, followed by a text from Aladdin, and then maybe the most casual or the most informal for me is a Class Dojo, either a posting to the school story or the class story or a message to a parent via the Dojo. ... But I'm relying on the Dojo more and more to share celebratory things with parents ... The children ... They've been doing their absolute best. They've been bringing great joy to one another in school and have been very focused since their return, and I would want for that to be the headline message above any kind of potential losses or negativity. (Principal-female, 1st class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This report has detailed findings from the five years of the *Children's School Lives* Study in relation to the experiences and practices of both curriculum and assessment in primary schools in Ireland. Combined, the analysis provides key insights into children's experiences of what they learn as they transition through school, their engagement and enjoyment of subjects and how they perceive the importance and usefulness of curriculum subjects in their lives. A key impact on those experiences is children's evolving sense of competence as they progress through school, an important indicator to them of their 'smartness'. Experiences of pride and curiosity in learning particular subjects, sit alongside the challenges of confusion, boredom and a sense of curriculum overload that were especially evident as children progressed through to the more senior end of primary school. The interconnection between children's evolving sense of competence across different curricular areas and their experience of pedagogy is clearly evident, mapping to findings of our previous report ([See CSL Study Report 5](#)). Subjects that draw on playful, creative, and child-centred pedagogies are preferred, in contrast to subjects that are experienced by them as overly repetitive, and content driven. Teachers too had their curricular preferences and also referred to the pressure of curriculum overload, especially in the senior years. The impact of the pandemic on curricular priorities was also in evidence as was the responsiveness of both teachers and principals in making curricular adaptations as needs arose. Context was especially important here, in terms of the lived experiences of children and their families outside of school, and their capacities and 'know how' to support children in their learning.

Curricular experiences are also shaped by the assessment strategies used in schools and the level and nature of feedback provided on children's progress. Through children's eyes, the report has highlighted not only their awareness of the range of assessment strategies that are used in primary schools but also children's recognition of the importance of constructive feedback in supporting their learning. They prefer one to one feedback from their teachers and younger children especially valued the positive affirmation this brought from teachers and parents alike. As children progress through primary school, more ambiguous views are evident, especially in terms of some anxiety over testing, and experiences of failure. For others, testing provided an opportunity to display their growing confidence and competency, motivating them towards further learning. Evident across primary schools is a culture of formative assessment, with an emphasis on using assessment to support children's continued learning. Standardized testing is perceived as one among several assessment strategies to be used to support curriculum planning, with principals in more middle-class schools especially concerned at any over emphasis by parents on standardized test results. For parents, they signalled the importance of parent-teacher meetings and written feedback by teachers on children's work as key sources of information that enable them to support their children's learning. Evident also was a sense of trust and expectation by parents that teachers would keep them informed when their children were struggling. The introduction of online methods of communication between parents and teachers was perceived as a positive impact of the greater use of digital technologies in schools since the pandemic.

This report builds on earlier reports of children's experiences of homework by also incorporating parent's views, providing a lens into family dynamics and the struggles that can occur in busy family lives. While homework was primarily experienced in the earlier years as a platform for positive parental engagement with children's learning, in later years challenges were more evident, in terms of managing children's own resistances as well as having the time and capacity to support children who struggled. Such views highlight the wider context within which both curriculum and assessment practices in schools permeate into the everyday lives of children beyond the school gate. Central are processes of communication – the relationships that form between children and their teachers that fosters joy and curiosity of learning in all its challenges; between teachers, parents, and children in supporting children through their learning journey and within schools in creating cultures of inquiry around the best way to foster children's engagement with the curriculum.

ADDITIONAL PUBLICATIONS ON THE CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES STUDY

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