



# CSL

## CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES

National longitudinal cohort study of primary schooling in Ireland

### CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES: CHILDREN'S WELLBEING IN IRISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS (2019 TO 2023)

UCD SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, DUBLIN  
REPORT NO. 7  
2024

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NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Curraíom agus Measúnachta  
National Council for  
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## NCCA FOREWORD

This report marks the seventh in the series from the *Children’s School Lives* longitudinal study. *Wellbeing in Irish Primary Schools 2019–2023* presents experiences shared by almost 4,000 children in close to 200 primary schools, their teachers, school leaders, parents and, in the case of some children, their grandparents. Drawing on this rich data set from the two cohorts of children participating in the study, the report shines a light on children’s wellbeing from junior infants through to sixth class.

As highlighted in the report’s introduction, the term ‘wellbeing’ can be understood in different ways and is often strongly associated with physical health, mental health and socio-economic disadvantage. In this longitudinal study and drawing on the work of Seligman (2018), children’s wellbeing is conceptualised in a more holistic way and explored over their eight years of primary education. This broader and more nuanced approach enables us to learn from the children about how their wellbeing is nurtured and influenced by relationships, interactions and school experiences, all of which impact on how they feel about themselves and how they engage with learning in school.

As we saw in previous CSL reports, relationships lie at the heart of teaching and learning. This latest report affirms the importance of positive, caring and nurturing relationships. The report establishes that children in primary schools here in Ireland most often feel happy, feel good about themselves, feel cared for, and feel safe. Delving deeper into this, the children tell us very clearly that their friendships in school and the support they are given by their teachers are key sources of their happiness while also, at times, being a source of some stress. Unfortunately, some children also report experiences of bullying in primary school, which confirms the importance of teachers continuing their efforts to build positive relationships with children and to create environments in their classrooms where children feel welcome, respected and valued. This report is particularly timely given the educational policies and initiatives introduced in recent years to support and promote children’s wellbeing, for example the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2019) and *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying* (2022).

Some of the findings from the CSL report give us cause to pause and consider how, by working together, we can make children’s experience of primary education even better, particularly in the more senior years of school. These years appear to bring a decrease in children’s positive emotions with the main sources of anxiety linked to friendship issues and worries about school success. The report provides insights into wellbeing being experienced differently by particular cohorts of children. For example, the findings reveal gender differences whereby girls tend to report more positive feelings about school than boys, but also tend to be more anxious about schoolwork and their friendships. Furthermore, the research shows that factors such as socio-economic background and ethnicity shape children’s experience of wellbeing, while specific school and classroom cultures and practices influence a range of wellbeing outcomes for them.

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic to Irish shores in March 2020 marked the beginning of a period of very significant challenge for families, for schools, and for the education system. Children’s wellbeing was of utmost importance and concern as schools reopened that September and children and teachers could, once again, experience and enjoy face-to-face interactions. Due to its overlapping age cohorts, the *Children’s School Lives* study provides a unique window into the experiences of children and their wellbeing as reported in 2019 just before the arrival of COVID, and as reported in 2023. This current report reveals that children in second class in 2023 indicate liking school more and having a more positive attitude towards learning than similar aged children in 2019. The former cohort of children started primary school during the pandemic, having had their preschool experience

disrupted. Their first year of school was also hugely impacted. Yet, these children inform us that they have a more positive outlook on school than that of their peers pre-COVID. This finding really champions and spotlights the enormous efforts and successes of primary schools—their teachers, school leaders and parents—to mitigate against the potential negative effects of COVID on children’s wellbeing when they returned to school.

While the report clearly demonstrates that supporting children’s wellbeing is not confined to a set of curriculum experiences or lessons, the curriculum can make an important contribution. NCCA’s current work on the primary curriculum includes the development of a specification for Wellbeing as well as the embedding of seven key competencies across the curriculum, one of which is Being Well. Taken together, these are intended to support children’s social, emotional, physical and spiritual development and their self-awareness and knowledge, to build children’s life skills, to help them to see themselves as competent and resourceful, and to develop a strong sense of connectedness to their school, their community, and wider society. As with the other reports in the series, *Wellbeing in Irish Primary Schools 2019–2023* will help to shape NCCA’s ongoing work on the redevelopment of the primary curriculum.

*Children’s School Lives* is a ground-breaking study, the first of its kind in primary education in Ireland. A report such as *Wellbeing in Irish Primary Schools 2019–2023* is made possible through the breadth, depth and richness of the data gathered over time, the use of innovative research methods, and by inviting multiple voices into the study and being open to really hear what those voices are saying. NCCA remains indebted to the participating school communities which continue to demonstrate a deep, unwavering commitment to this research month after month, and year after year when so many other demands compete for their time and attention. Such commitment reflects the importance the schools attach to the research, and we thank them for that. Council expresses its gratitude to the children, their teachers, school leaders, parents and grandparents for giving their time so generously to the study, and for enabling us to hear and learn from their experiences of wellbeing in primary schools.

The 2023/2024 school year marks the end of the data collection. The researchers, however, continue to analyse and unearth findings that further enrich our understanding of children’s experiences in primary schools. As noted, this study would not be possible without the participating schools. Likewise, the study’s success is shaped by the expertise, experience, and the careful and respectful analyses brought to the work by the UCD Research Team led by Professor Dymphna Devine, Assistant Professor Seaneen Sloan, Assistant Professor Gabriela Martinez Sainz and Assistant Professor Olga Ioannidou. Their deep commitment to facilitating children’s voices and to documenting those voices authentically is a hallmark of this research. Responsibility now sits with us in the NCCA and with the wider education system to learn from the findings and to use them to help ensure that all children’s experiences of primary school are positive, engaging, and affirming, so that they are enabled to fulfil their potential.

Arlene Forster  
Chief Executive, NCCA



# INTRODUCTION

This is the 7th report from the *Children’s School Lives* (CSL) mixed methods, longitudinal study of primary schooling in Ireland. The focus of this report is children’s wellbeing. It draws on data collected between 2019 and 2023, with two cohorts of children, in almost 200 schools nationwide.

Over the past two decades, but particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic and extended period of remote learning, the inextricable link between children’s wellbeing and their school lives has been increasingly recognised. Indeed, the term ‘wellbeing’ has been progressively used in many areas of policy and practice relating to children and young people, in Ireland and internationally. Within the context of education in Ireland, wellbeing is understood as necessary in enabling children to fulfil their potential (DES, 2019). This is evident from early years through to second level education. ‘Well-being’ is one of the four themes of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009). At primary level, the 1999 *Primary School Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 1999) refers to the importance of wellbeing through strong teacher-pupil relationships, and through Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE). The updated 2023 *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education, 2023) has an explicit focus on wellbeing. ‘Being well’ is a key competency, and Wellbeing (which includes the subjects of PE and SPHE) is one of five broad curriculum areas. At second level, wellbeing was introduced as a subject area in the Junior Cycle in 2017 (NCCA, 2017) and the Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum was most recently updated in 2023 (NCCA, 2023).

As widely used as the term ‘wellbeing’ is, there is a general lack of consensus about what it is, or what it encompasses. Early descriptions of wellbeing (Oman, 2021) viewed it as experiences of *feeling good* (experiencing feelings of happiness, joy, etc.) and *doing well* (functioning). Today, wellbeing is understood in multiple ways such as social and emotional competence, spirituality, resilience, agency (see Nohilly et al., 2023 for a review) and linked to many related domains including physical health, mental health, and socio-economic disadvantage. In this report, children’s wellbeing is framed using the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). It recognises that wellbeing is a complex and multi-dimensional construct. Seligman’s PERMA model (2011) outlines the building blocks of wellbeing: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (Figure 1). Through this lens, children’s wellbeing is understood as developing through their school journey, and its trajectory is influenced by relationships, interactions, and experiences that shape their feelings of self and their engagement with their learning.

**FIGURE 1.** The PERMA model of wellbeing (Seligman, 2011)

<b>POSITIVE EMOTION</b>	Feelings of happiness and life satisfaction
<b>ENGAGEMENT</b>	Feeling involved or immersed in challenging and stimulating activities, and the ability to concentrate
<b>RELATIONSHIPS</b>	Feeling socially integrated, cared about and supported by others
<b>MEANING</b>	Feelings of fulfilment in life, setting meaningful goals and being involved in activities that have meaning
<b>ACCOMPLISHMENT</b>	Feeling capable and competent, having a sense of achievement and mastery of work



In this report, we present an overview of the Children’s School Lives research into child wellbeing. It draws 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). The data presented in this report connects to our earlier reports on teaching and learning during the pandemic ([Report 2](#)), pedagogy ([Report 5](#)), and on curriculum and assessment ([Report 6](#)). Following an overview of the sample and methods, the first part of the findings section presents our data on children’s wellbeing under each of the above PERMA headings. The second part of the findings presents data on school supports for children’s wellbeing and the school’s climate for wellbeing. Quantitative data from the large national sample is presented alongside qualitative data from the case study sample, adding depth to the analysis.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Positive emotions

- Most children reported they were usually happy. Overall, children’s feelings of happiness increased from 2nd to 4th class but decreased from 4th to 6th class.
- For Cohort B, girls reported higher levels of happiness than boys in 2nd class, but boys’ happiness was higher than girls’ happiness from 4th to 6th class.
- Children’s positive emotions about themselves tended to decrease between 2nd and 6th class, particularly for girls.
- Children reported that they ‘usually’ felt safe in general. Feelings of safety increased from 2nd to 4th class and then decreased slightly from 5th to 6th class.
- Children in Cohort B experienced an increase in feeling anxious from 2nd to 6th class. Girls tended to report higher feelings of anxiety, and the gender gap widened as the children progressed through school.
- Children in 2nd class in 2023 (Cohort A) had higher levels of worry and anxiety than children in 2nd class in 2019 (Cohort B).
- Interviews with children in the case study schools suggested that causes for worry and anxiety related to children’s interactions with their peers and worry about ‘getting things wrong’ in school. For younger children, in Cohort A, girls were more likely than boys to comment on feeling sad when difficulties arose in their friendships.
- Teachers reported low levels of emotional difficulties (e.g., complaining of headaches, stomach-aches, or sickness; seeming worried, unhappy, or tearful; nervous or clingy in new situations) among children in general. However, teacher reports tended to fluctuate over time, and by 6th class, teachers rated girls as having more emotional difficulties in general than boys.
- Teachers of 2nd class in 2023 (Cohort A) rated children in their class as having lower levels of emotional difficulties compared to teachers of 2nd class in 2019 (Cohort B).
- Most children in our case study classes across both cohorts expressed positive feelings towards school and talked about school as a key component of happiness in their lives.

- Teachers in the case study classes described their commitment to listening to and understanding children’s emotions. They emphasised the importance of letting children know that they can approach them when needed. Alertness to children’s wellbeing was especially emphasised following the closure and re-opening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Circular 0046/2020; DES, 2020).

## Engagement

- Children were generally positive about school, although liking towards school decreased slightly over time from 2nd to 6th class (Cohort B), and from 1st to 2nd class (Cohort A). Girls had more positive feelings about school compared to boys at all waves in both cohorts.
- For most subjects, children’s interest appeared to decrease over time (both from 1st to 2nd class, and from 4th to 6th class). PE and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) appeared to sustain children’s interest the most over time.
- Teachers rated boys as less attentive than girls at all time points and across both age cohorts. When ratings for both cohorts for 2nd class (Cohort A in 2023 and Cohort B in 2019) were compared, teachers rated boys as being less attentive in 2019 than in 2023.
- Children’s own reports of their attentiveness in 6th class showed that overall, they ‘sometimes’ found it difficult to stay focused on school work during the day. In contrast to teachers’ ratings, girls reported slightly more challenges in paying attention than boys.

## Relationships

- A large proportion of the children felt ‘undecided’ or ‘agreed’ that they felt they belonged in school, based on questions about how well they made friends, how much they felt liked by others in school, how often they felt left out of things in school, and how often they felt lonely, awkward, or out of place in school.
- School belonging scores decreased from 5th to 6th class, and in both waves, girls reported lower levels of school belonging when compared to boys.
- On average, at all time points, children ‘usually’ felt cared for in their lives in general. In Cohort B, children’s feelings of being cared for overall tended to decrease over time from 2nd to 6th class. Girls initially rated their feelings of being cared for as higher than boys, but by 6th class, boys had a higher rating of feeling cared for. The decrease in feeling cared for was significant for girls, but not for boys.
- Cohort B children rate their classmates as supportive between ‘sometimes’ and ‘usually’. Classmate support was rated as highest by Cohort B children during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown when they did not see their classmates in person, with ratings decreasing after that point until 6th class.
- Classmate support was rated higher by girls than boys in 2nd and 4th class, but by 5th and 6th class, there were no gender differences.
- Friendships and interactions with peers were referred to frequently by children in the case study schools as a source of happiness in their school lives, providing them with emotional and academic support.

- In the older cohort (Cohort B), interviews with children in 5th and 6th class highlighted how meeting up for social activities outside school had become important to them.
- Teacher ratings of children’s problems with peers showed a decrease during the period of remote schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic and an increase on return to in person schooling. At all time points, teachers rated boys as having more problems in their relationships with peers than they did girls.
- In the case study schools, children openly talked about the causes of stress in school. The shifting dynamics in friendships was a common theme impacting on their wellbeing. Children across all age groups used words like ‘sadness’, or ‘anxiety’ when referring to difficulties in their relationships with their friends.
- Children tended to report that bullying happened infrequently, although average scores increased across the sample from 4th to 6th class, and frequency of reported bullying increased more steeply for girls than boys. Boys tended to report more frequent bullying in 4th class, but by 6th class, this trend had reversed, with girls reporting witnessing more frequent bullying than boys.
- Seventy per cent of children said they had ‘never’ been a victim of bullying in school. However, this proportion was much lower for children in Cohort A (2nd class) where 49% said they had never been a victim of bullying. Girls reported being a victim of bullying themselves more often than boys in all waves, while boys reported taking part in bullying more often than girls in 5th class.
- Interviews with children confirmed that incidents of negative behaviours happened infrequently in school.
- However older children discussed incidents of negative physical, emotional, and psychological interactions they had witnessed in school, including name-calling, pushing, and hair-pulling.
- Six percent of children in 2nd class reported being bullied online or through social media around once a week or more, with a slightly lower figure reported by children in 6th class (4%).

## **Meaning and purpose in life**

- Children in Cohort B reported slightly higher levels of doing well in life as they moved through school from 2nd to 6th class.
- Children in 2nd class in 2023 scored slightly higher in terms of doing well than those in 2nd class in 2019. Girls’ feelings of doing well were consistent between the cohorts, while boys in 2nd class in 2023 reported higher feelings of doing well than boys in 2019.
- Children had generally positive attitudes towards learning in 2nd class, reporting high levels of agreement with statements emphasising the value of understanding and improvement in schoolwork. Children’s attitudes became slightly less positive over time, and girls were more positive than boys at all time points.

## **Accomplishment**

- Children’s academic self-concept appears to decrease from 2nd to 4th class, and then is stable until 6th class. Girls and boys reported similar levels of academic self-concept in 2nd class and 4th class, but by 5th and 6th class, boys reported a higher reported academic self-concept.

- Children’s perception of their own ability in reading did not change from 4th to 5th class but decreased from 5th to 6th class for both boys and girls.
- Children’s perceptions of their own ability in Mathematics did not change between 4th and 6th class, however at each time point, boys rated themselves higher than girls rated themselves.
- Children’s levels of grit (or ability to persevere with schoolwork) was highest in 2nd class, but by 5th class, self-ratings had significantly decreased, especially for girls.

## Support for children’s wellbeing in school

- Almost all teachers reported using some form of wellbeing programme with their class.
- Children in our case study classes were familiar with the idea of wellbeing and referenced in-class practices such as a daily emotions ‘check-in’, used to help support their emotional and psychological wellbeing.
- Children expressed mixed attitudes towards the effectiveness of the programmes. Older children in 5th and 6th class, described the inclusion of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) as text-based and not necessarily relevant to their own situations although they could spark relevant discussions about their wellbeing.
- Teachers in case study schools spoke of the benefits of wellbeing programmes and the priority they placed on supporting children’s wellbeing. However, queries were also raised about the need for professional development to support critical challenges in children’s wellbeing.
- Most teachers, principals and parents indicated that their primary schools promoted a positive school climate for wellbeing with schools identified as enjoyable, helpful and friendly places.
- Most children felt respected by their teachers and felt they were treated fairly in school although this declined from around 95% in 3rd class to between 78-83% in 6th class.

## NATIONAL STUDY SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

The Children’s School Lives national study sample involves two cohorts of primary schools (Cohort A and B) who were sampled and recruited over Autumn/Winter 2018. The schools were sampled so that each cohort was broadly similar to the profile of primary schools nationally, with respect to specific characteristics (school designed disadvantaged status,<sup>1</sup> school size, and school gender mix).

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

<sup>1</sup> Schools receiving funding through the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) scheme

**TABLE 1.** Description of the national study waves, timing of data collection and sample size<sup>2</sup>

COHORT A	CHILD AGE	DATA COLLECTION	SCHOOLS	CHILDREN		
			N	N	BOYS	GIRLS
<b>Wave 1 (Junior Infants)</b>	4–5 years	Autumn 2019	84	1,773	51%	49%
<b>Wave 2 (Senior Infants)</b>	6–7 years	Spring 2021	78	1,696	49%	51%
<b>Wave 3 (1st Class)</b>	7–8 years	Spring 2022	79	2,013	50%	50%
<b>Wave 4 (2nd Class)</b>	8–9 years	Spring 2023	78	1,778	48%	52%
<b>COHORT B</b>						
<b>Wave 1 (2nd Class)</b>	8–9 years	Spring 2019	100	2,062	49%	51%
<b>Wave 2 (3rd Class)</b>	9–10 years	Spring 2020	90	550	48%	52%
<b>Wave 3 (4th Class)</b>	10–11 years	Spring 2021	99	2,297	49%	51%
<b>Wave 4 (5th Class)</b>	11–12 years	Spring 2022	98	2,347	49%	51%
<b>Wave 5 (6th Class)</b>	12–13 years	Spring 2023	97	2,203	50%	50%

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>2</sup> Note on sample size: there were fewer participants during Wave 2 of Cohort B because children were attending school remotely during the fieldwork period, and data collection was amended to an online questionnaire rather than the usual in-class fieldwork.

<sup>3</sup> Schools in Ireland closed from 12th March 2020 and reopened in August 2020. Mainstream primary schools did not reopen again as usual after the Christmas break in December 2020/January 2021 due to the pandemic. There was a staggered return to primary schools during March 2021.

## CASE STUDY SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

A particular strength of the Children’s School Lives Study is the mixed methods design. This combined data collection across 189 primary schools with intensive immersion in 13 classrooms annually (except for the period during COVID-19 school closures when data collection moved to remote methods (see Donegan, Devine et al., 2023)) to capture everyday life in primary schools. This included a focus on 28 case study children (who were selected from each of the participating case study schools), and interviews with their parents annually, focus group work and participatory activities with the entire case study class, and extended periods of in-class observations, alongside interviews with class teachers and school principals annually. Interviews with principals, teachers and parents typically lasted from 50 - 75 minutes. The number and length of focus groups with children varied across cohorts and waves of data collection in response to children’s evolving capacities. Research sessions varied from 20 mins - 60 mins and included multi-modal participatory methods such as roleplaying, play-based activities, graffiti walls, drawings and board games (see Martinez-Sainz et al., 2024). In addition, photovoice was used and children were asked to take photographs of what they did like and do not like in school as well as the places they considered caring and not caring. These photographs served as the basis for subsequent group discussions with respect to children’s wellbeing in school.

**TABLE 2.** Case study school sample

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

<sup>4</sup> SNA = Special Needs Assistant

Teachers, interviewed annually, included class teachers who often changed yearly as children transitioned from one classroom to another, in addition to resource and Home School Liaison teachers in some schools. Principals were interviewed annually and, in some instances, involved new principals adding to the total number of principals in the sample. Over the five waves of the study, 541 interviews were conducted in the case study schools. Interviews were supplemented with observation of children's everyday lives in school in addition to structured observation of classroom lessons.

This report also includes qualitative data from an additional case study special school. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with parents (n=10; six mothers and four fathers), teachers (n=5) and special needs assistants (n=5) within this school between December 2020 and February 2021. Interviews focused on exploring the wellbeing of children with intellectual disabilities (moderate, severe, or profound).

## DATA ANALYSIS

For the National Study, data were analysed for this report using descriptive statistics (frequencies and means). In reporting means, figures were rounded up. We used statistical tests to determine whether the various aspects of wellbeing changed over time, between genders or between cohorts. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was used to categorise interview data into themes.

As detailed throughout the findings section, for some areas of analysis, the response to a single statement or question was analysed, e.g., "Do you feel happy in general?". For other areas, participant responses to multiple items, which reflected a single construct, were analysed. In these cases, average scores for each participant across the items were calculated. For example, children's perceptions of classmate support were measured by asking children to respond to three statements: "*Children in this class really care about me,*" "*Children in this class think it is important to get on well with me,*" and "*Children in this class care about my feelings.*" Each statement was measured on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 equalling '*never*' and 5 equalling '*always*'. An individual child's average score across the three items could range from 1 to 5, with higher scores reflecting higher feelings of classmate support. Where a set of statements included a mixture of negatively- and positively worded items, reverse coding was applied prior to computing mean scores.

Where the same questions were asked of both Cohort A and Cohort B when they were in 2nd class (2023 and 2019, respectively), we have drawn comparisons between this data to point to trends over time. This is of interest given that Cohort B experienced 2nd class in 2019, prior to the pandemic. Although we are careful in our interpretation of the data not to assert that any differences are because of the pandemic, the study offers a unique opportunity to shed light on differences in children's school experiences and wellbeing in the context of the pandemic.

For the case study analysis, all interviews were transcribed and analysed using Maxqda Software through a combination of inductive and deductive coding in line with the overarching themes of the CSL study.

# FINDINGS

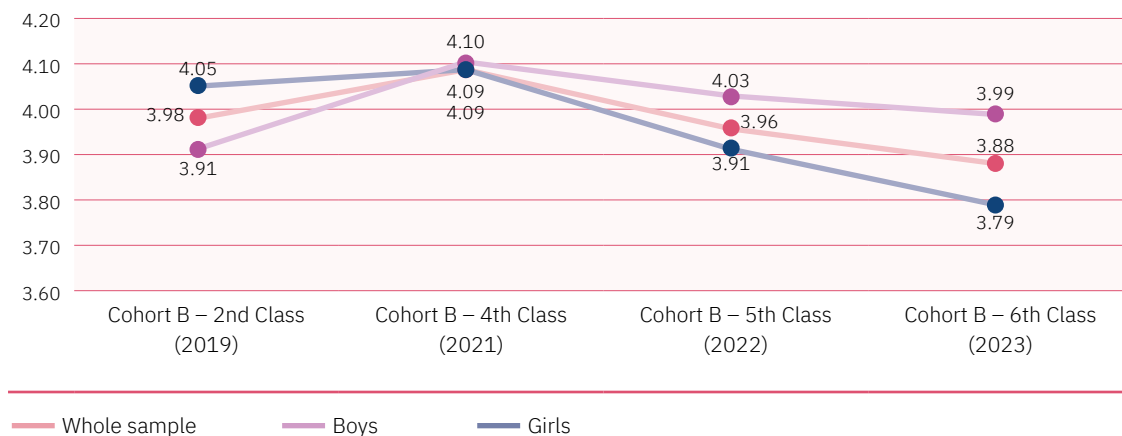
## Positive Emotions

Positive emotions are a core component of wellbeing. This section presents children’s ratings of their own feelings of happiness, feeling good about themselves, safety, and anxiety, as well as teachers’ ratings of children’s emotional difficulties.

### Children’s happiness

Children were asked “Are you happy in general?” and responded on a 5-point scale from 1 (‘never’) to 5 (‘always’). On average, during all waves of data collection, children ‘usually’ felt happy (4). In Cohort B (Figure 2), children’s feelings of happiness overall tended to increase between 2nd and 4th class (from 3.98 to 4.09), and then decreased from 4th to 6th class (from 4.09 to 3.88). This pattern of increased happiness in 2021 may reflect the fact that in 2021, children had returned to school after an extended period of remote learning. Girls tended to report being happier than boys in 2nd class but boys reported being happier from 4th class to 6th class.

**FIGURE 2.** “Are you happy in general?” (Cohort B)



Children in Cohort A were asked the same question in 1st and 2nd class and were also ‘usually’ happy. Girls reported being happier than boys in 1st class, but by 2nd class, there was no difference, as boys’ happiness levels increased from 1st to 2nd class while girls’ happiness remained the same during both years (Figure 3).

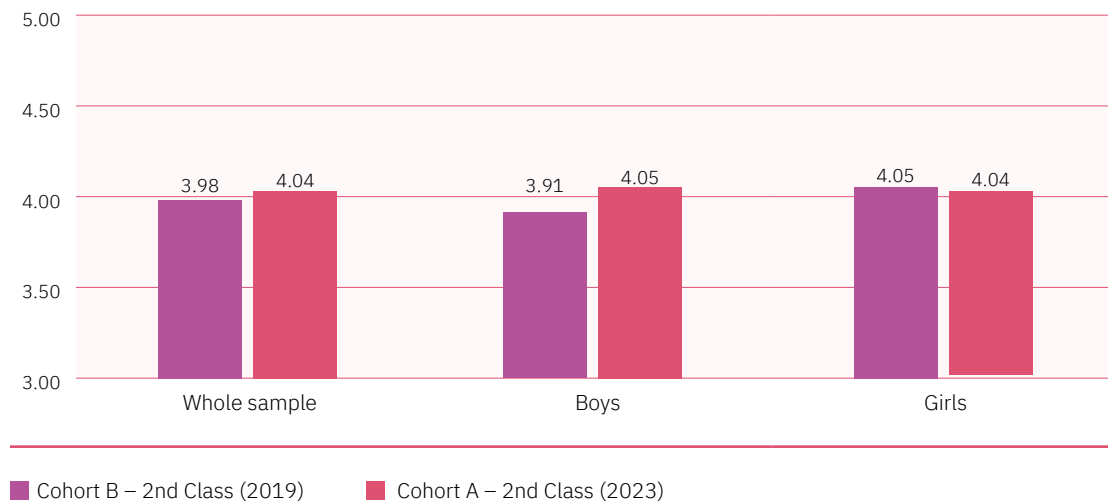


**FIGURE 3.** “Are you happy in general?” (Cohort A)



Comparing the two cohorts when they were both in 2nd class (Cohort B in 2019 and Cohort A in 2023), we can see boys in 2nd class in 2023 reported higher levels of happiness than boys in 2019, while for girls, happiness levels were relatively similar for both cohorts (Figure 4).

**FIGURE 4.** 2nd class children’s reports of feeling happy in 2019 and 2023



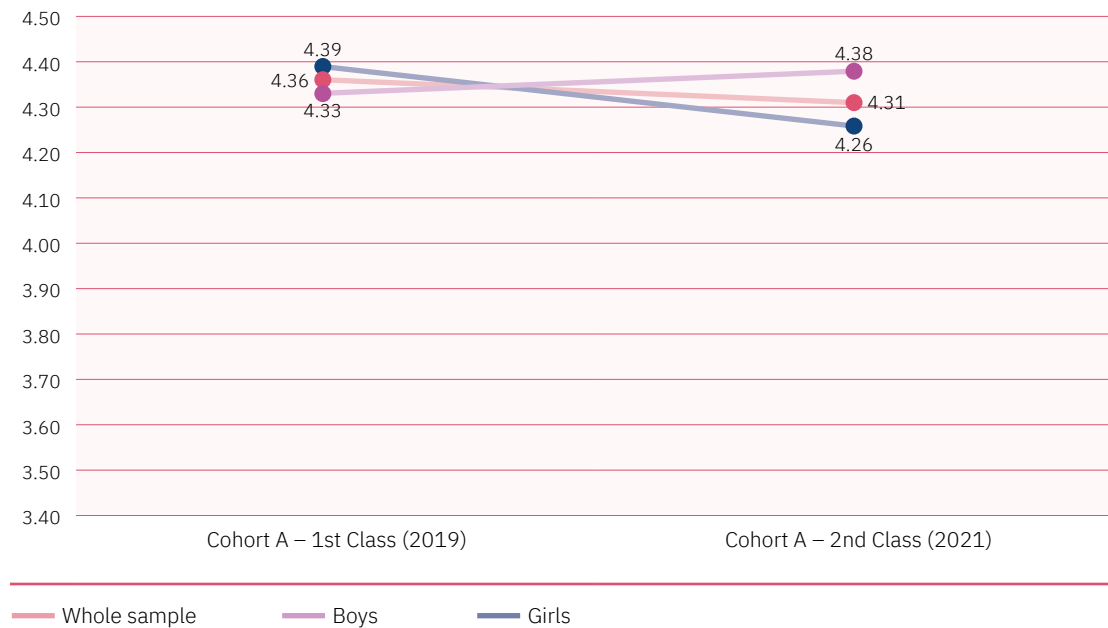
**Children’s feelings about themselves**

In response to the question “Do you feel good about who you are?”, children tended to respond ‘usually’ (4). However, on average, across the whole sample, there was a decrease over time in children’s positive feelings about themselves (Figure 5). Girls initially scored higher than boys but over time, there was a steeper decrease in girls feeling good about themselves compared to boys. This pattern was also reflected in Cohort A, between 1st and 2nd class (Figure 5). While girls and boys did not differ in 1st class, by 2nd class, a wider gender gap was apparent.

**FIGURE 5.** “Do you feel good about who you are?” (Cohort B)

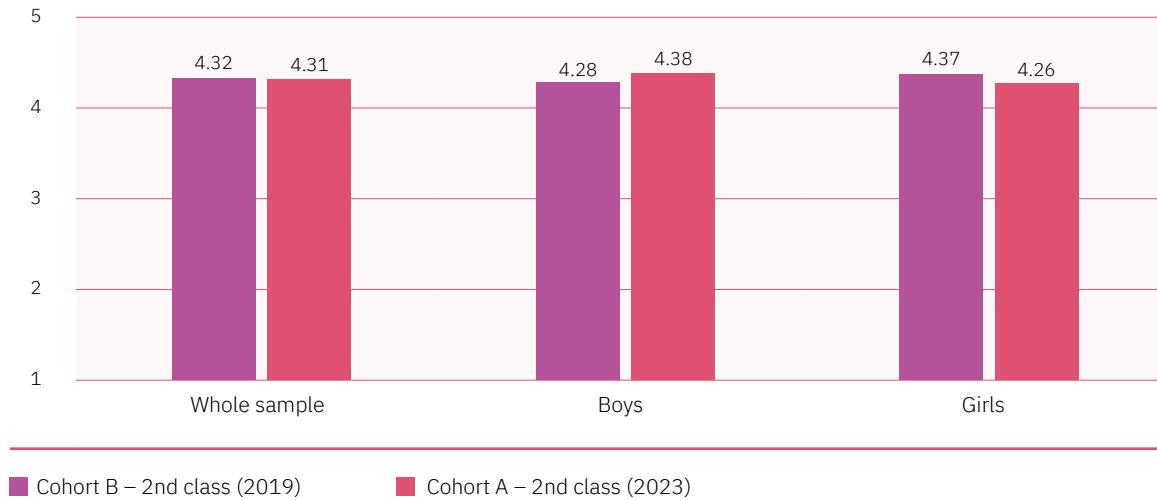


**FIGURE 6.** “Do you feel good about who you are?” (Cohort A)



Comparing the two cohorts when they were both in 2nd class (Cohort B in 2019 and Cohort A in 2023), boys in 2nd class in 2023 reported marginally higher levels of feeling good about themselves than 2nd class boys in 2019, while for girls the opposite trend was observed, however the differences between cohorts for both genders was not statistically significant (Figure 7).

**FIGURE 7.** 2nd class children’s reports of feeling good about themselves in 2019 and 2023



### Children’s feelings of safety

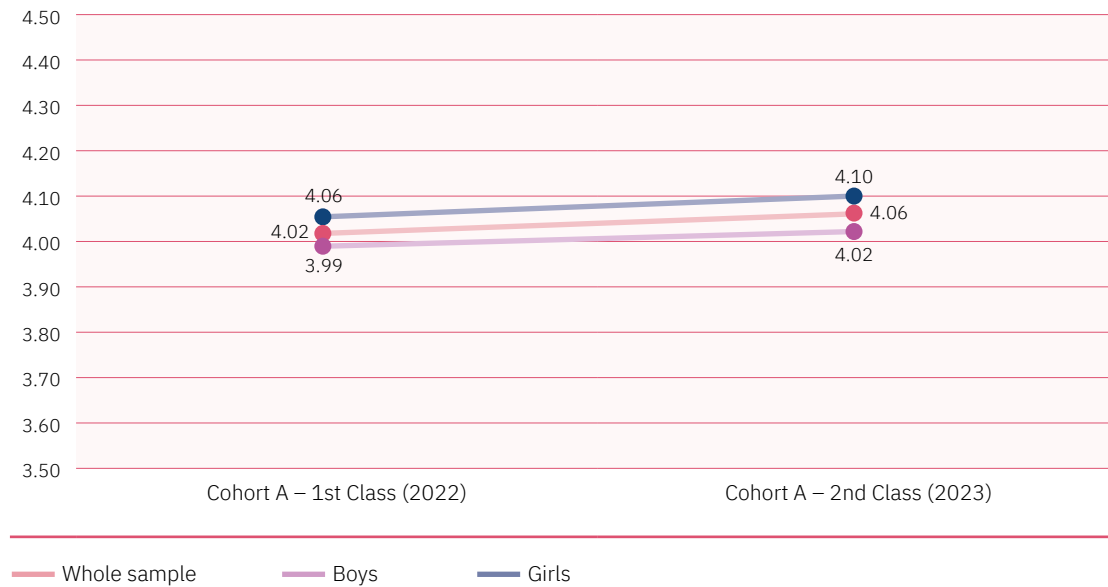
Children were asked “Do you feel safe in general?” and responded on a 5-point scale from ‘never’ (coded 1) to ‘always’ (coded 5). In general, children reported high levels of safety with average scores of around 4 (‘usually’). Children’s feelings of safety increased from 2nd to 4th class but were relatively stable from 4th to 5th class before decreasing slightly between 5th and 6th class, particularly for boys. Girls reported higher feelings of safety than boys in 2nd class. However, in subsequent years, there were no gender differences (Figure 8).

**FIGURE 8.** Children’s feelings of safety (Cohort B)



For children in 1st and 2nd class in Cohort A, feelings of safety were stable over time and there was no difference between boys and girls (Figure 9). Comparing the two 2nd class cohorts (Cohort B in 2019 and Cohort A in 2023) showed no difference overall or by gender in feelings of safety for the sample.

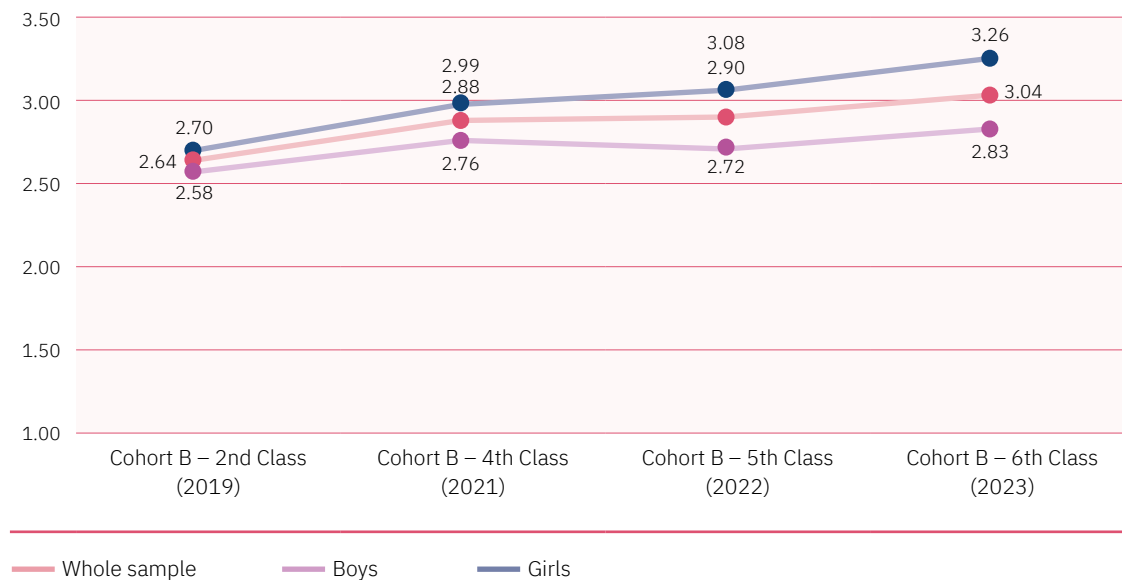
**FIGURE 9.** Children’s feelings of safety (Cohort A)



### Children’s worry and anxiety

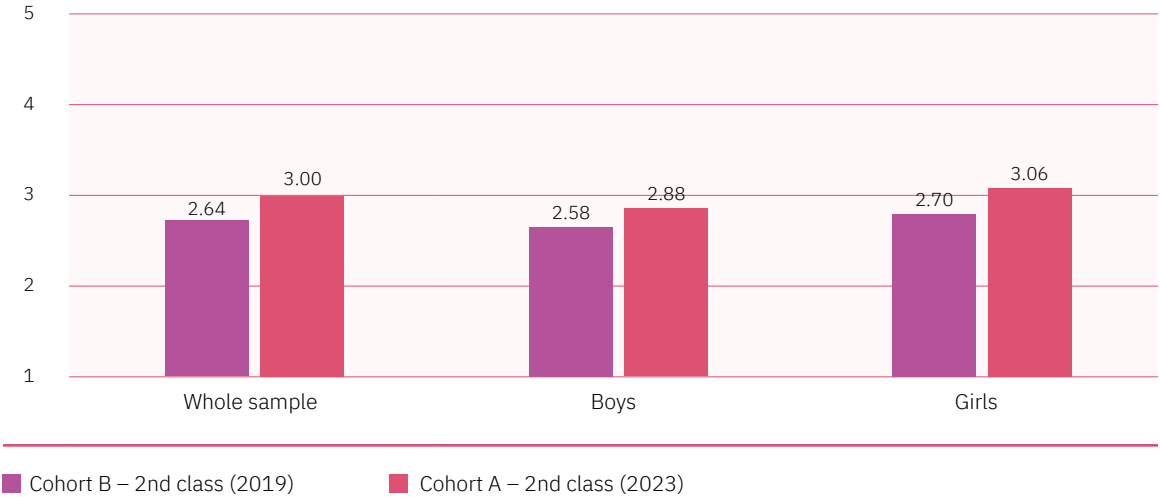
Children in Cohort B responded to three statements about (1) how much they worried about things, (2) if they worried that something bad will happen to them, and (3) if they worried about what was going to happen (Ebesutani et al., 2011). Responses were on a 5-point scale from 1 (‘never’) to 5 (‘always’). Average scores fell between 2 and 3, indicating that a large proportion of the sample were ‘rarely’ or ‘sometimes’ worried. Children’s reports of feeling anxious increased from 2nd class to 6th class. Girls reported higher levels of feeling anxious when compared to boys at each time point, with the gap between girls and boys widening over time (Figure 10).

**FIGURE 10.** Children’s feelings of anxiety (Cohort B)



Comparing both cohorts when they were in 2nd class (Cohort B in 2019 and Cohort A in 2023) showed that levels of anxiety tended to increase over time for both genders (Figure 11). For both cohorts in 2nd class, girls' anxiety levels were higher than boys'. Anxiety levels were higher for Cohort A (2023) in 2nd class for both genders compared to both genders in 2nd class in Cohort B (2019).

**FIGURE 11.** 2nd class children's feelings of anxiety in 2019 and 2023



Our case study work with children revealed some of the causes for worry and anxiety among children, particularly those in senior classes. This tended, in general, to relate to anxiety about their interactions with peers. For older children some reference was also made to worry and anxiety about 'getting things wrong', forgetting their work or homework and the possible negative consequences arising, such as missing yard time.

**“** Interviewer: *Is there anything that makes you feel anxious then?*  
 Boy: *What's anxious?*  
 Interviewer: *Like nervous or unhappy?*  
*When no one passes [the ball] to me.*  
 (Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)  
**”**

**“** Interviewer: *What kind of thing makes you anxious?*  
 Girl: *When [girl's name] and [girl's name] fights.*  
 Interviewer: *Really. Why, what's that like?*  
*Because one time they fought about who went on the monkey bars first and ... [name] started arguing with me because I went first.*  
 (Girl, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)  
**”**

**“** Boy: *When they're [teacher] like saying, no that's not correct or something.*  
 Interviewer: *That makes you anxious. Why?*  
 Boy: *It makes me because I know that I didn't get it right.*  
 (Boy, 2nd class, Non-DEIS, All-Boys, Urban)  
**”**

“ I have bad anxiety. I don't know what it's from, it's not like anything's after happening to me, I just always think the worst, what's ever going to happen.

Interviewer: *That's alright, like that's being human.*

Boy: *Because some of my friends wrote a message and when they do something, go in, don't talk to them.*

Interviewer: *You don't want to get involved in that?*

Boy: *No. ...And anytime I'm around them I always think that they're going to do something.*

(Boy, 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

“ I'd be anxious, I'd be really anxious that I got it wrong [...] I just in my head it's so fuzzy, I just mess up or I think I mess up, but I get anxious.

(Girl, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

“ Because everybody like starts to laugh, and I also have a stutter, so I like... I get confused when I'm talking.

(Boy, 5th class, All-boys, DEIS, Urban)

”

“ Interviewer: *Do you ever feel anxious about things in school?*

Child 1: *Yeah. Like some days like I always, like if I forget to bring in my homework or forget my copy at home.*

Child 2: *Yeah, I forgot my project one of the days. I was so scared. But then I forgot it was on my Chromebook.*

(Girls, 5th class, Co-Ed, DEIS, Rural Town)

”

### Teachers' reports of children's emotional difficulties

Teachers in both cohorts rated individual children on the emotional difficulties subscale of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997). This involved five items reflecting on how often children:

- complain of headaches, stomach aches, or sickness;
- appear worried;
- appear unhappy, downhearted or tearful;
- are nervous or clingy in new situations; and
- are fearful and easily scared.

Total scores on this scale could range from zero to 10, and the average score across both cohorts and all year groups tended to fall between 1 and 1.75, indicating that teachers perceived very low levels of behaviours linked to emotional difficulties.

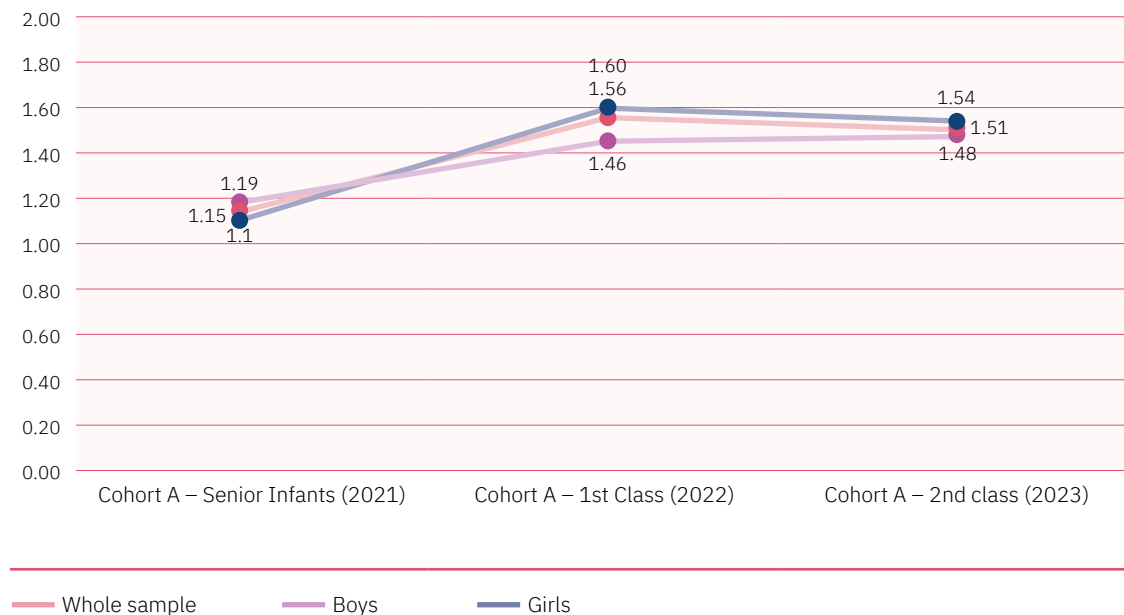
Teacher reports of emotional difficulties decreased in Cohort B between 2nd class and 4th class. This dip in scores coincided with the period of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, and so the scores may reflect teachers' lack of direct contact with children during this time. Emotional difficulties were rated by teachers as higher from 4th to 5th class, but were stable between 5th and 6th class (Figure 12). In Cohort B, teachers rated girls as having slightly higher levels of emotional difficulties than boys. However this difference was significant only for 6th class children, and this could reflect developmental changes relating to puberty that may impact girls at this age.

**FIGURE 12.** Teacher report of children’s emotional difficulties (Cohort B)



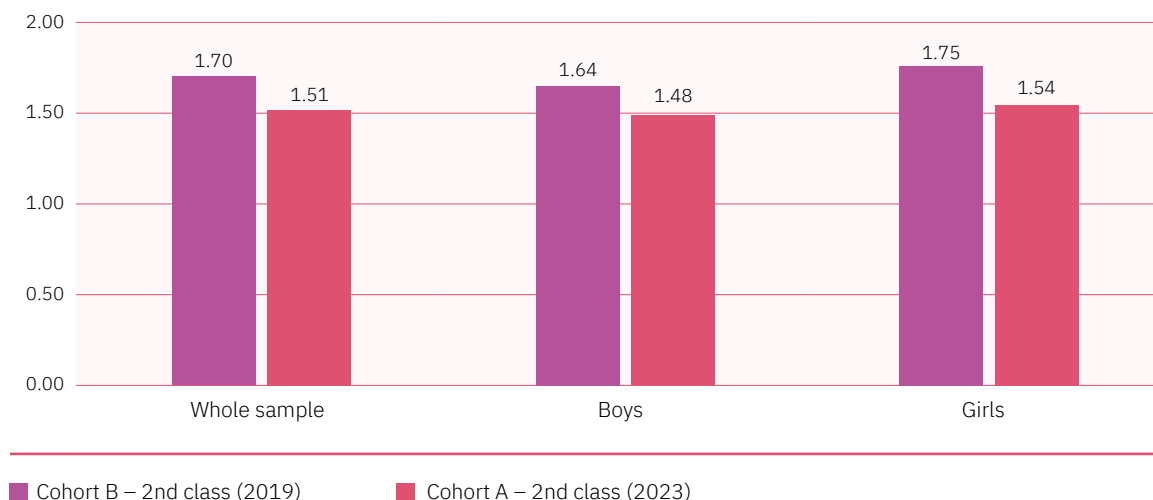
For Cohort A, emotional difficulties increased slightly between senior infants and 1st class, and then were relatively stable between 1st and 2nd class (Figure 13).

**FIGURE 13.** Teacher report of children’s emotional difficulties (Cohort A)



Teachers of 2nd class in 2023 (Cohort A) rated children in their class as having lower levels of emotional difficulties than teachers of children in 2nd class in 2019 (Cohort B). This pattern was reflected in scores for both genders, with ratings for both boys and girls being higher in 2019 than in 2023 (Figure 14).

**FIGURE 14.** Teacher report of emotional difficulties between the two cohorts in 2nd class



Teachers of Cohort A in 2nd class, described their commitment to listening to and understanding children’s emotions. Teachers also provided their perspectives on children’s wellbeing and anxieties. Teachers of Cohort B in 5th and 6th class emphasised their caring role and the importance of letting children know that they can approach them when needed and share any emotional concerns with them. For teachers in both cohorts, wellbeing was particularly important because of the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s experiences of school and learning:

“ So I think it’s easy for us to make judgments on how they’re feeling and how school is for them, when a lot has actually changed in their lives. [...] but I think it’s important to acknowledge that some of them might be stressed or worried.

(Teacher-female, 2nd class A, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

“ I think it’s great all the focus or chat about wellbeing. That they feel valued, that they feel loved, that they feel included in part of the class like their opinion matters, that was something that I was trying to get across ...

(Teacher-female, 2nd class A, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

“ All opportunities are taken [in the school] to promote wellbeing. There was a wellbeing week, and it’s emphasised so that... there’s a very pastoral approach when it comes to discipline and behaviour, and it’s emphasised so that they can approach their teacher, approach members of staff, their door is always open, they’re put at ease a lot, I would say.

(Teacher-female, 6th class, All-girls, Non-DEIS, Rural Town)

”



“ I really, really care for them, all of them..., I'd do anything for the 18 lads I have in my class, or anyone in the school, just to make their lives that bit better, and to give them some sort of head-up next year. And [that children know] that you're cared for as a person, as a human being, that you're not a number, you're not a student, you're not judged on the work that you've done, you're judged on the type of person that you are...

(Teacher-male, 6th class, All-boys, DEIS, Urban)



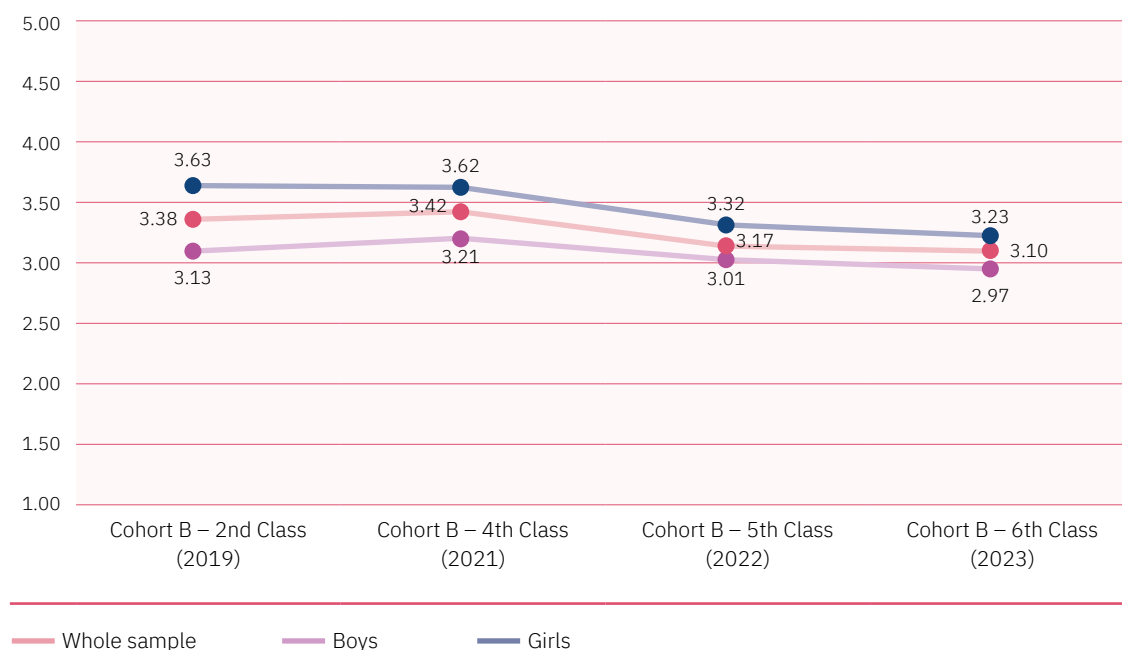
## Engagement

The engagement dimension of wellbeing relates to children’s involvement in activities in school. It typically includes the extent to which children actively engage and participate in their learning through cognitive engagement (e.g., paying attention or concentrating on tasks). Here, we have broadened the definition to include aspects of emotional engagement (e.g., enjoyment of learning and liking school).

### Children’s feelings about school

Children were asked to respond to four statements about how they felt about school (Rowe et al., 2010): “I look forward to going to school”, “I like being in school”, “I wish I didn’t have to go to school (reversed for analysis)”, and “I like many things about school”, with responses on a 5-point scale from ‘never’ (1) to ‘always’ (5). On average, children tended to respond between ‘sometimes’ and ‘usually’ (Figure 15). Positive feelings appeared to decrease between 4th and 5th class, with a less steep decline between 5th and 6th class. Girls had more positive feelings about school compared to boys during all waves.

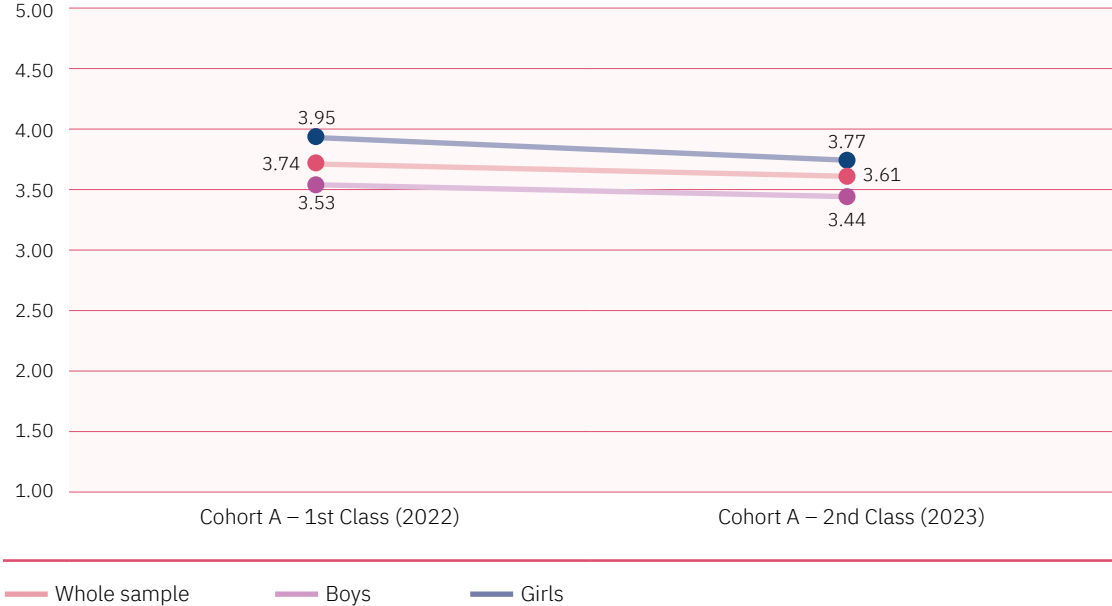
**FIGURE 15.** Children’s reports about liking school (Cohort B)



Due to the young age of children in Cohort A during the first and second wave, when they were in Junior Infants and Senior Infants, a simplified, single question about liking school was asked: “Do you like going to school?” Responses were on a 5-point scale. While not directly comparable, the average score for children in Junior Infants was 4.28 which corresponded to 82% of children agreeing that they liked school. In Senior Infants, the average score for the same question had decreased slightly to 4.13 (75% agreeing that they liked school), and in both year groups, girls reported higher scores, on average, than boys.

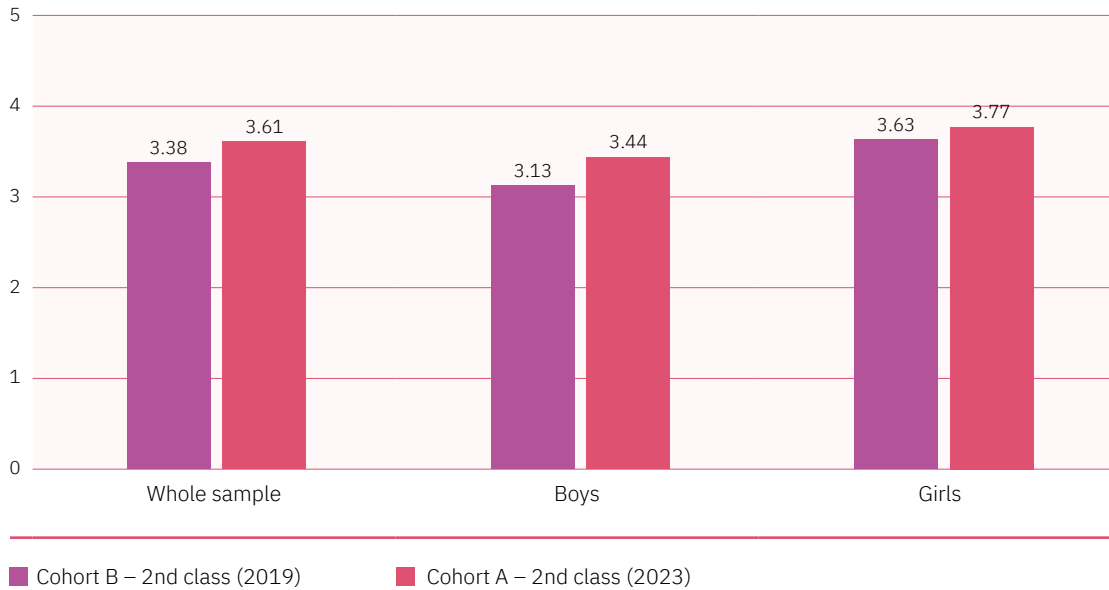
Children in Cohort A in 1st and 2nd class were asked the same four questions as Cohort B about liking school, and a similar pattern to Cohort B was reflected (Figure 16). Girls reported higher school liking than boys in both year groups. Overall, there was a slight decrease in scores from one year to the next (3.74 to 3.61).

**FIGURE 16.** Children’s reports about liking school (Cohort A)



Comparing the two cohorts when they were both in 2nd class, four years apart (2019 and 2023), we can see that children (overall and split by gender) in 2nd class in 2023 had significantly higher levels of liking school, than those in 2nd class in 2019 (Figure 17).

**FIGURE 17.** 2nd class children’s reports of liking school in 2019 and 2023



Interviews and focus groups with children in the case study schools confirmed their positivity regarding school. Children from the younger cohorts expressed positive emotions when explaining what they liked about school and agreed that school had a positive impact on how they felt about themselves. Children in 1st and 2nd class, from DEIS and non-DEIS schools, regularly spoke about loving school and feeling happy ‘just being there’. The source of the children’s positive emotions and overall happiness in the early years of primary school was related to the opportunities they had to socialise with their peers in class and during playtime, to make friends and to learn new things. As previously reported, this younger cohort showed positive emotions as a response to their evolving competency in literacy (Report 5), and learning to read and write:

“ Interviewer: *What makes you happy in school?*  
 Boy: *Everything.*  
 (Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“ Interviewer: *Do you feel happy coming into school most days?*  
 Child 1: *Yes, most days.*  
 Child 2: *I love it, it is literally the best thing.*  
 (Girls, 2nd class A, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”

“ Interviewer: *Why are you happy in school most days?*  
 Girl: *... You get to learn new things every day.*  
 (Girl, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-Girls, Urban)

”

“ *Whenever I go into school I’m happy because I can learn.*  
 (Boy, 2nd class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”

“ Interviewer: *Do you like coming to school [name]?*  
 Girl: *I would like it if there was more time in the class.*  
 (Girl, 2nd class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”

Children in Cohort B expressed more nuances about their feelings about school as they transition to more senior classes. Some wariness was expressed about challenges in their learning which led to a dislike of certain subjects as well as challenging learning material. Children also articulated how their happiness was strongly impacted by their friendships as well as other personal experiences outside of school:

“ Interviewer: *Do you feel happy most days in school?*

Child 1: *Well, it depends what we're learning for example if we're doing art today, I might have something to look forward to [...]*

Child 2: *And if I got a good sleep, most of the time, I'm fine in the morning anyway or it matters what's on my mind, stuff could be going on at home.*

(Girls, 5th-Class, All-girls, Non-DEIS, Rural town)

”

“ *I can be myself at school but like... Yeah, maybe I can be myself at school, like I feel happy most days.*

(Girl, 5th class, All-girls, Non-DEIS, Rural town)

”

“ Interviewer: *What makes you happy about being in school?*

Girl: *Friends.*

(Girl, 5th class, All-girls, Non-DEIS, Rural Town)

”

“ Interviewer: *What makes you happy about being in school?*

Boy: *I don't really feel happy that much.*

Interviewer: *Why?*

Boy: *I actually don't know, I just don't.*

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

”

“ Interviewer: *Are you happy most of the time?*

Boy: *If I get in the class with my mates, I'm grand.*

(Case study child 1, boy, 5th class, Boys, DEIS, Urban)

”

“ *Most of the times it goes too quick. [...], like sometimes it just feels like three hours. It's five hours. If you're doing something... having fun and it lasts all day then I would love that school day then I would want to stay at school all day.*

(Girl, 5th class, All-girls, DEIS, Urban)

”

For Cohort B, the disruption of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to mixed feelings once schools reopened. Children emphasised how much they missed the fun of school and learning, yet they also shared their worries and anxiety:

“ Interviewer: *Okay, and how about you? Were you excited to go back to school, or how did you feel about that?*

Girl: *Yeah, I was excited but also at the same time I was pretty nervous, because I hadn't seen nearly half of the class because of COVID.*

(Girl, 4th class, Non-DEIS, Co-ed, Urban)

”

“ *Home-schooling is a pain. I'd rather go to school on weekends than do home schooling.*  
(Boy, 4th class, Non-DEIS, Co-ed, Rural)  
”

In 6th class some children expressed positive emotions about the upcoming transition to secondary school. They emphasised some of the changes that they were looking forward to:

“ Child 1: *You challenge and prepare for it [transition to secondary school]. I'm excited actually.*  
Interviewer: *What excites you?*  
Child 1: *I don't know..., going into different classes instead of just sitting in one class.*  
Child 2: *That's what I love the most about it. Instead of sitting down all day like day, after every hour you have to go to a different class.*  
(Boys, 6th class, All-boys, DEIS, Urban)  
”

“ Interviewer: *So, do you think you're going to miss this place or are you just so ready to leave?*  
Child 1: *I wouldn't say –*  
Child 2: *I'm not going to miss it much.*  
Child 1: *I'm not going to miss the school itself.*  
Child 2: *I'm going to be sad that I'm leaving.*  
*Why are you sad that you're leaving?*  
Child 2: *Because we've spent like the majority of our life here.*  
*Yeah, are you pretty cool with it or?*  
Child 1: *Yeah, I'm happy we're leaving. I think it's time for a change.*  
Child 2: *Yeah, I think so.*  
(Girls, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)  
”

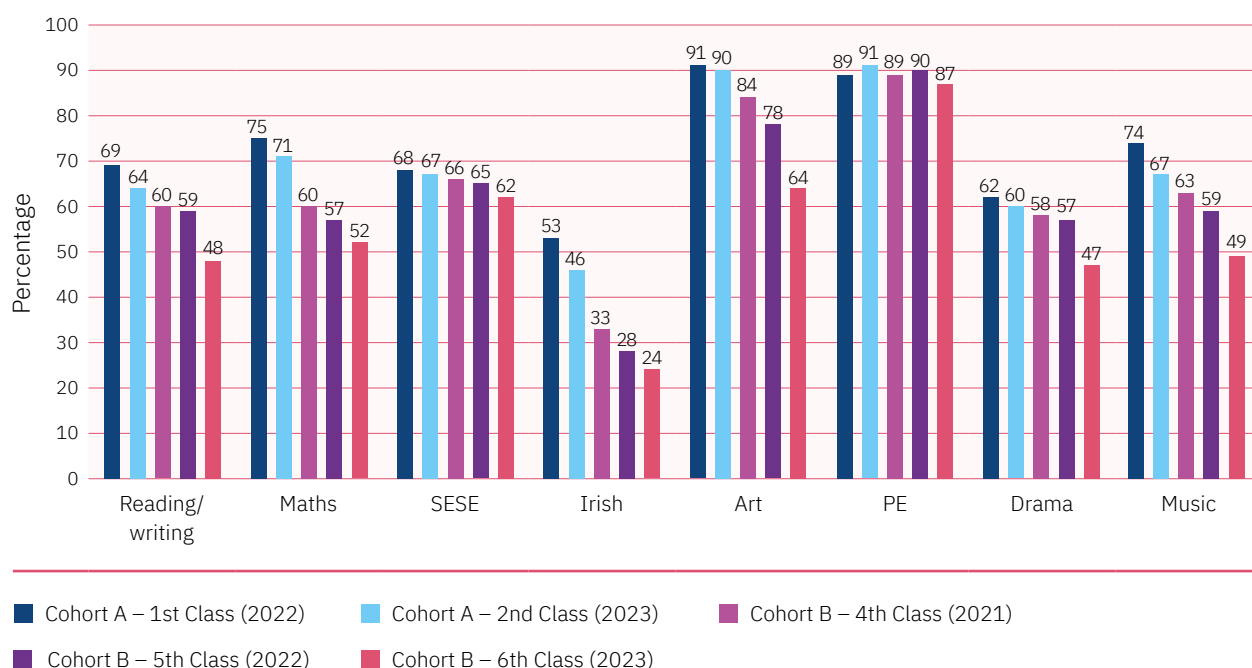
A parent of a child attending the case study special school referred to enjoyment of school and activities outside of school as being centrally important to their child's wellbeing:

“ *...that she enjoys going to school and that she enjoys her activities outside of school. Yeah, that would be what wellbeing means to me.*  
(Special school parent)  
”

### Children’s interest in school subjects

Children in Cohort A (in 1st and 2nd class) and in Cohort B (from 4th to 6th class) were asked about how interested they were in learning their subjects. The proportion of children ‘agreeing’ or ‘strongly agreeing’ that they found their subjects interesting varied between subject and year group (Figure 18). PE was the most interesting overall. For most subjects, children’s interest appeared to decrease over time (both from 1st to 2nd class, and from 4th to 6th class), particularly between 5th and 6th class (for reading/writing, Art, Drama and Music). The subjects that seemed to sustain children’s interest the most over time were PE and SESE.

**FIGURE 18.** Percentage of children agreeing or strongly agreeing that they are interested in learning each subject (Cohort A and B)



In general, children in both cohorts demonstrated an enthusiasm for learning as they progressed through primary school. They talked about how much they enjoyed different activities in class, loved being engaged in shared interests with their peers, and the excitement they derived from learning new things. As previously reported (Reports 5 and 6), children’s levels of enjoyment in school were strongly connected to subject preferences, specific pedagogical practices and the type of activities they were doing:

“ Interviewer: *What makes you happy in school?*  
 Girl: *Everything.*  
 Boy: *PE.*  
 (Girl & Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

“ Girl: *Seeing my friends.*  
 (Girl, 2nd class A, Non-DEIS, Girls, Urban)

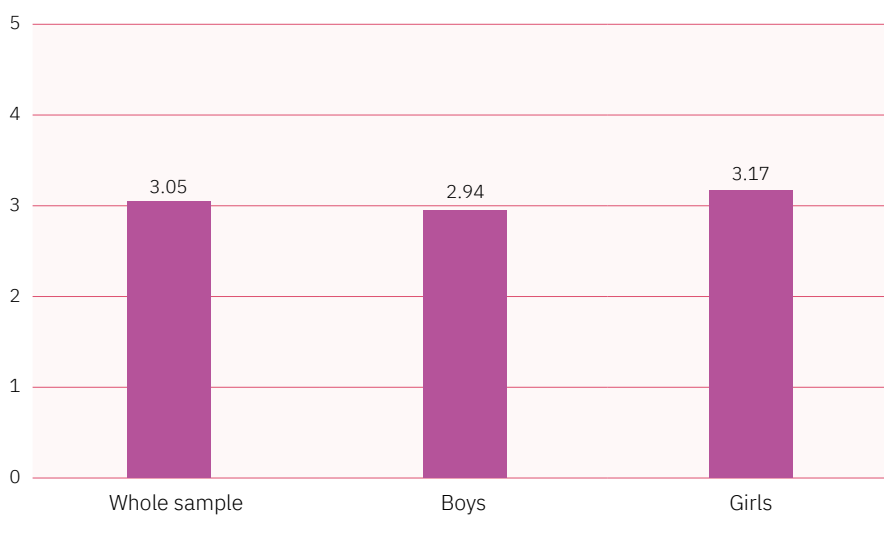
“ Interviewer: *Do you like it when he [teacher] hangs your art?*  
 Boy: *Yeah, I feel proud that I've done a good art.*  
 Interviewer: *And what about your project? Do you feel proud of your project?*  
 Boy: *Yeah, I definitely feel proud of my project.*  
 Interviewer: *What was it about?*  
 Boy: *Pompeii, so a disaster of when Mount Vesuvius that exploded and killed like sort of all of Pompeii.*  
 (Boy, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town)

“ Interviewer: *What do you like most about school? ...*  
 Girl: *I like the library in the school, like it's not a library but it's like a shelf.*  
 (Girl, 6th class, Co-Ed, Non-DEIS, Rural)

### Children's attention in class

In 6th class, children rated the extent to which they generally had difficulty focusing on learning, by responding to five statements (“I have difficulty keeping focused on simple or repetitive work”, “I have to read things again because I've been thinking about something else”, “I do things without paying full attention”, “I find myself listening with one ear, thinking about something else at the same time”, and “My mind wanders in class”; Phillips et al., 2013). Responses were on a 5-point scale from 1 ('never') to 5 ('almost always'), therefore higher overall scores reflected higher levels of inattention. The mean score across the whole sample was 3.05, indicating that most children felt that they 'sometimes' engaged in these behaviours. Higher levels of inattention were reported by girls than boys (Figure 19).

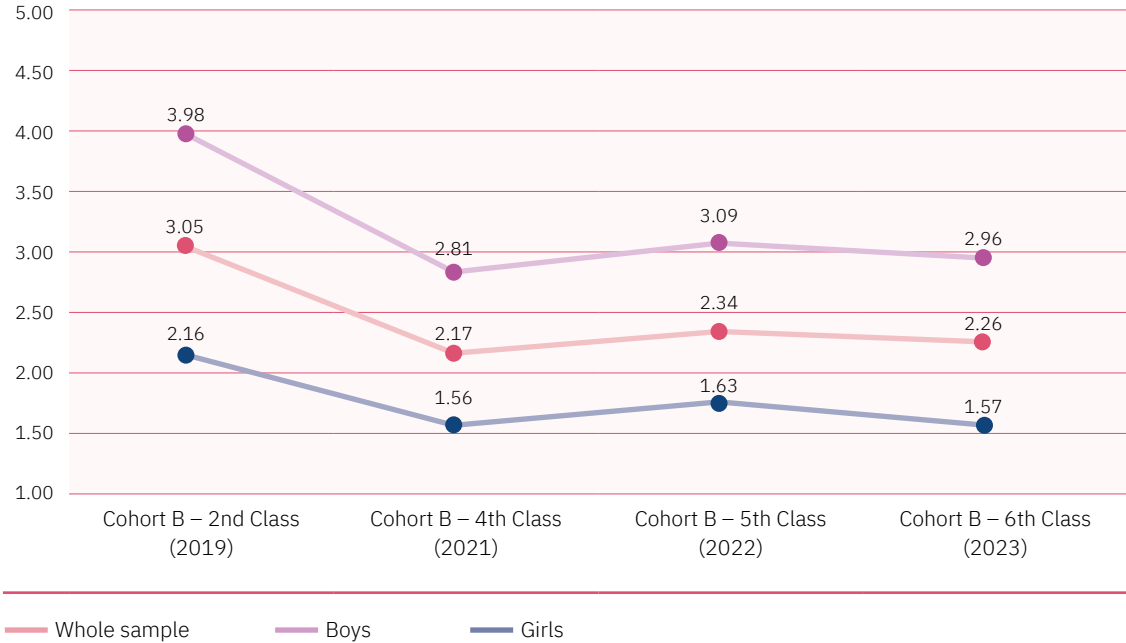
**FIGURE 19.** Children's reports of their inattention in class (Cohort B)



Teachers in both cohorts rated individual children’s behaviour in class on five items from the inattention/hyperactivity subscale from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997). Total scores can range from zero to ten, and higher scores reflect more restlessness, fidgeting, distractibility, not thinking before acting, and poor attention span. Teachers rated children as having low levels of inattention overall, with average ratings across both cohorts and all year groups falling between 2 and 4.

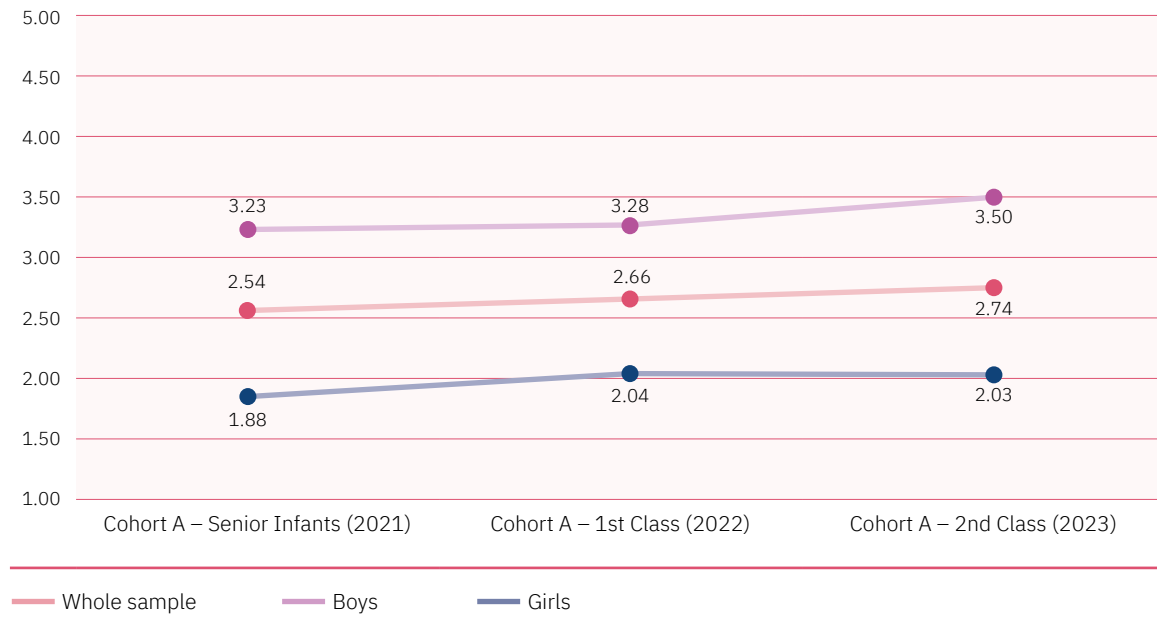
For Cohort B, teacher ratings of inattention decreased between 2nd class and 4th class. Teacher ratings then increased slightly (for boys, but not for girls) from 4th to 5th class, but stayed stable across the sample from 5th to 6th class. Teachers rated boys as more inattentive than girls at all time points (Figure 20), and this pattern was also reflected in Cohort A from Senior Infants to 2nd class (Figure 21). When ratings for both cohorts for 2nd class (Cohort A in 2023 and Cohort B in 2019) were compared, levels of inattention increased overall, but the increase was greater for boys (3.5 in 2019 vs. 3.98 in 2023) compared to girls (2.16 in 2019 vs. 2.03 in 2023; Figure 22).

**FIGURE 20.** Teacher ratings of inattention for Cohort B

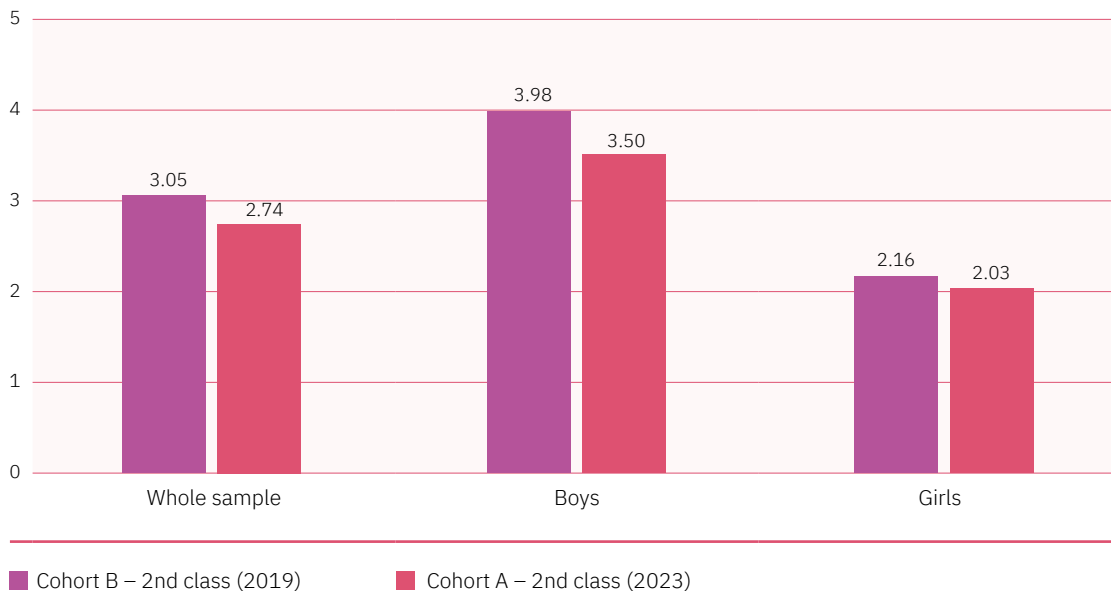




**FIGURE 21.** Teacher ratings of inattention for Cohort A



**FIGURE 22.** Teachers’ ratings of inattention for 2nd class children in 2019 and 2023



## Relationships

Previous reports have emphasised the centrality of relationships to children’s school lives, and how it influences both their interest in and engagement with their learning (Report 5). In this section we consider relationships in the wider context of children’s wellbeing, describing their relationships with their peers and teachers, as well as their sense of belonging in school and their feelings of being cared for more generally.

### School belonging

In waves 4 and 5, Cohort B children in 5th and 6th class responded to six items about their feelings of belongingness in school, including how well they made friends and were liked in school, whether they felt left out of things in school, and whether they felt lonely, awkward or out of place (OECD, 2019). Children responded on a 5-point scale from 1 (‘strongly disagree’) to 5 (‘strongly agree’), with ‘undecided’ as the midpoint. Average scores across all items were generated (with higher scores reflecting stronger feelings of belonging). For the sample as a whole, the average belonging scores were 3.76 (5th class) and 3.6 (6th class), indicating that a large proportion of the sample felt undecided or agreed with the items. School belonging scores decreased from 5th to 6th class, and in both waves, girls reported lower levels of school belonging than boys (Figure 23).

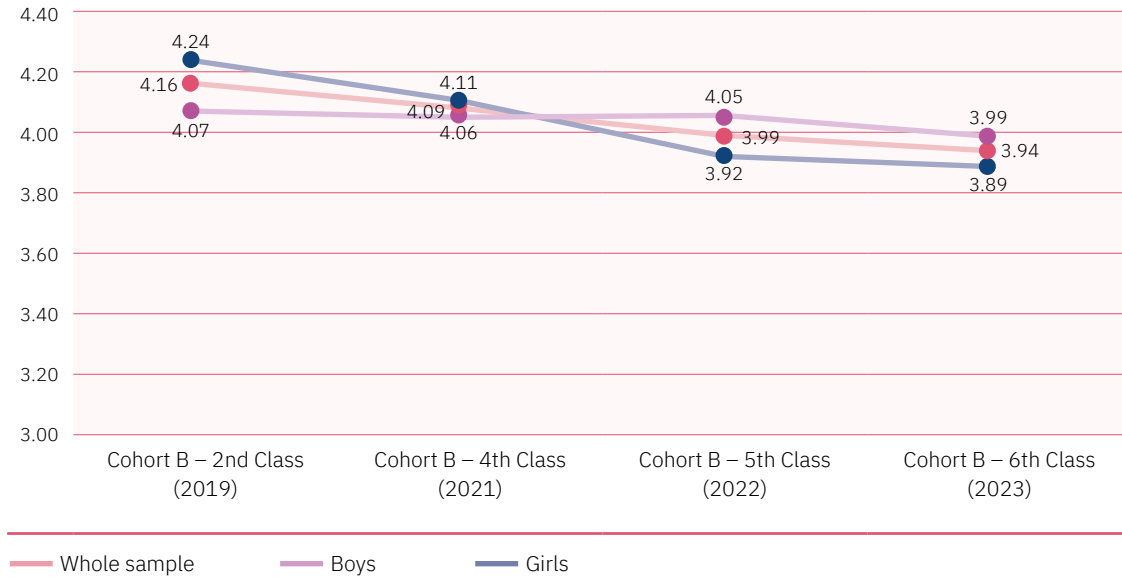
**FIGURE 23.** Children’s feelings of school belonging (Cohort B)



### Feeling cared for

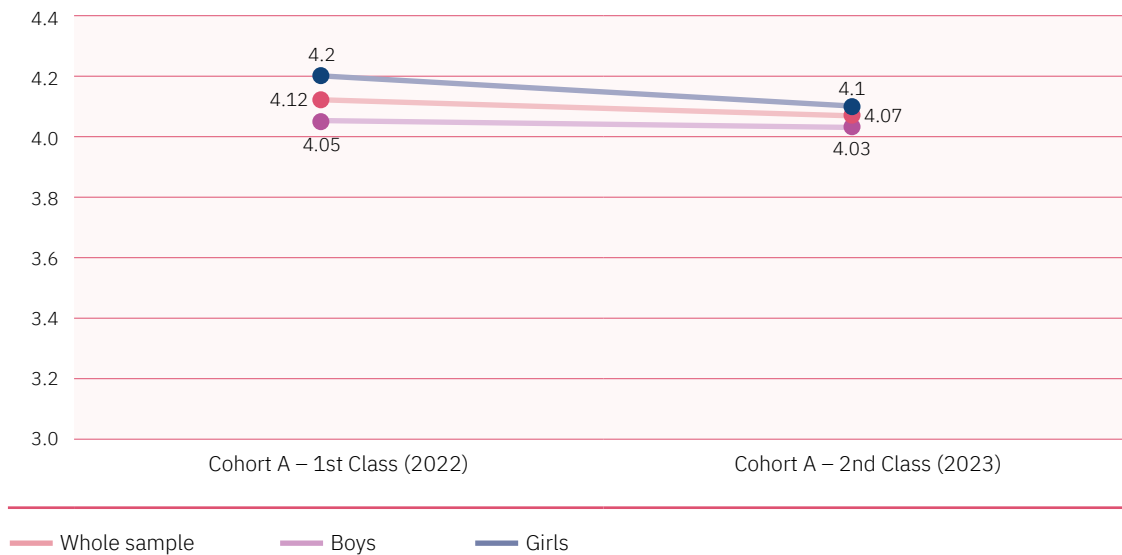
Children were asked about the extent to which they felt people cared about them in general, and responded on a 5-point scale from 1 (‘never’) to 5 (‘always’). On average, at all time points, children ‘usually’ felt cared for (4). In Cohort B (Figure 24), children’s feelings of being cared for overall tended to decrease over time from 2nd to 6th class. Girls initially rated their feelings of being cared for as higher than boys, but by 6th class, boys had a higher rating. The decrease in feeling cared for was significant for girls (-0.25), but not for boys (-0.08).

**FIGURE 24.** Children’s feelings of being cared for (Cohort B)



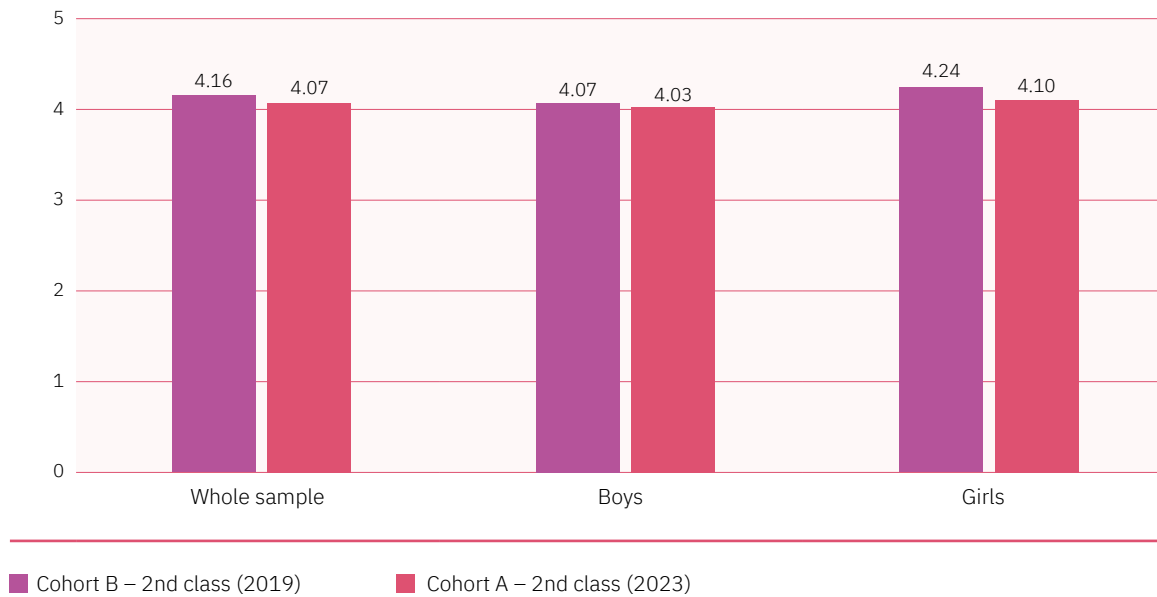
Children in Cohort A were asked the same question about feeling cared for when they were in 1st class (2022) and 2nd class (2023). Overall, there was little difference over time for this cohort, and girls reported slightly higher scores than boys, particularly in 1st class (Figure 25).

**FIGURE 25.** Children’s feelings of being cared for (Cohort A)



Comparing children’s feelings of being cared for when in 2nd class in 2019 (Cohort B) and 2023 (Cohort A), revealed that girls in Cohort B reported feeling cared for more often than girls in Cohort A, however there was no difference for boys (Figure 26).

**FIGURE 26.** 2nd class children’s feelings of being cared for over time



In our case study schools when the children were in 2nd class (Cohort A) we further explored their experiences of care within school through the use of photovoice which involved children taking photographs of places in school that they felt were caring or uncaring. Children highlighted the priority they place on caring relations in school not only with their peers but also with their teachers:

**“** Interviewer: *Do you think it’s more important that a teacher teaches you your work or is caring to you?*  
 Girl: *Caring.*  
 Interviewer: *Why?*  
 Girl: *No actually, if they don’t be caring then they’re not a teacher, because you don’t need work to learn, all you need is caring to learn.*  
 Interviewer: *Okay, why?*  
 Girl: *Because caring can help you.*  
 (Girl, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban, focus group)

**”**

**“** Interviewer: *Do you ever think it is hard for [teacher] to be caring?*  
 Girl: *Yeah, because there are 23 or 24 kids in our class and there is only one of her and then when everyone wants to come to her desk it is like 209 soldiers coming.*  
 (Girl, 2nd class, DEIS Co-Ed, Urban, focus group)

**”**

**“** Interviewer: *Do you think your teacher is caring towards the boys in your class?*  
 Boy: *Yes.*  
 Interviewer: *Why? How?*  
 Boy: *Because sometimes he lets us do, sometimes he does work but that does mean teachers have caring too. So sometimes we do work and sometimes we play.*  
 (Boy, 2nd class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban, focus group)

**”**

Figures 27 to 32 highlight some of the places children identified as caring spaces including the fish tank, a sensory room and the teacher’s desk; but they also identified places that brought more negative feelings including the school yard and the principal’s office:

**FIGURE 27.** Photo 1



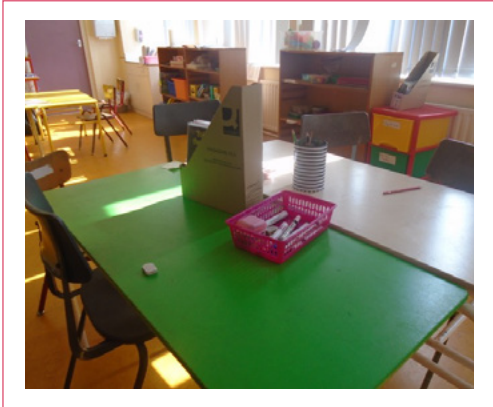
“ Interviewer: *Why do you feel cared for by the fish tank?*  
Boy: *Because I like it when the fish swim and for me this part is satisfying.*  
Interviewer: *Go on, what is satisfying about it?*  
Boy: *Because it has different colours.*  
(Boy, 2nd class boy, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)  
”

**FIGURE 28.** Photo 2



“ Interviewer: *What’s caring about it [sensory room]?*  
Girl: *Because the lights are blue and there’s little fake fishies and there’s bean bags.*  
Interviewer: *Why is that caring?*  
Girl: *Because it’s – you’re so relaxing.*  
(Girl, 2nd Class, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)  
”

FIGURE 29. Photo 3



“ Interviewer: *What is the most caring thing that he does when you are with him?*

Girl: *He helps me read.*

Interviewer: *Do either of you go to his room, girls?*

Girl: *I have never been to his room.*

Interviewer: *You have never been until yesterday. What do you think happens that is caring in there?*

Girl: *Like we do maths and then he helps me.*

Interviewer: *Really and is that really caring when he helps you with your maths?*

Girl: *Yes.*

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

”

“ Interviewer: *Why do we feel cared for in [Special Education Teacher's] room?*

Girl: *I took the picture because he helped me learn and he minds us.*

Interviewer: *Does he?*

Girl: *And we get stickers.*

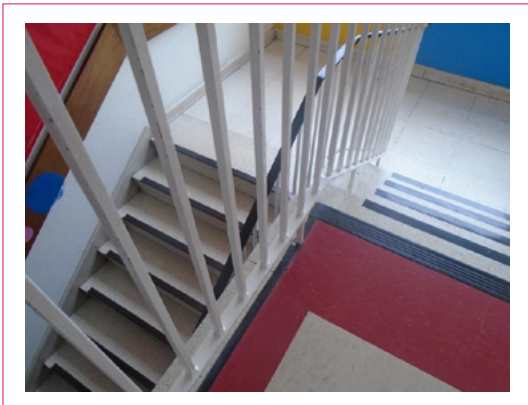
Interviewer: *Girls, what is caring about that?*

Girl: *That he minds us, and he helps us learn.*

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

”

FIGURE 30. Photo 4



“ Interviewer: *Why do you feel not cared for when you are walking up and down the stairs?*

Boy: *Because it makes my legs tired.*

Interviewer: *Does it? Why, what is tiring about it?*

Boy: *When I am walking up, it just makes me tired and walk slower.*

Boy: *No on, we are now with the classrooms upstairs.*

*But when we get into third class, we won't have to do that.*

Interviewer: *You will be back downstairs next year, will you?*

Boy: *Yeah, I think we will be back downstairs.*

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

”

**FIGURE 31.** Photo 5



“ Interviewer: *Why is it uncaring on the yard?*  
Boy: *Because I got slammed by a whole piece of wood.*  
Interviewer: *When and how?*  
Boy: *It was over where the fence is.*  
Interviewer: *Oh, I saw that earlier on. But generally what is uncaring about the yard? Why don't you like the yard?*  
Boy: *Because you can get hurt.*  
(Boy, 2nd class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

**FIGURE 32.** Photo 6



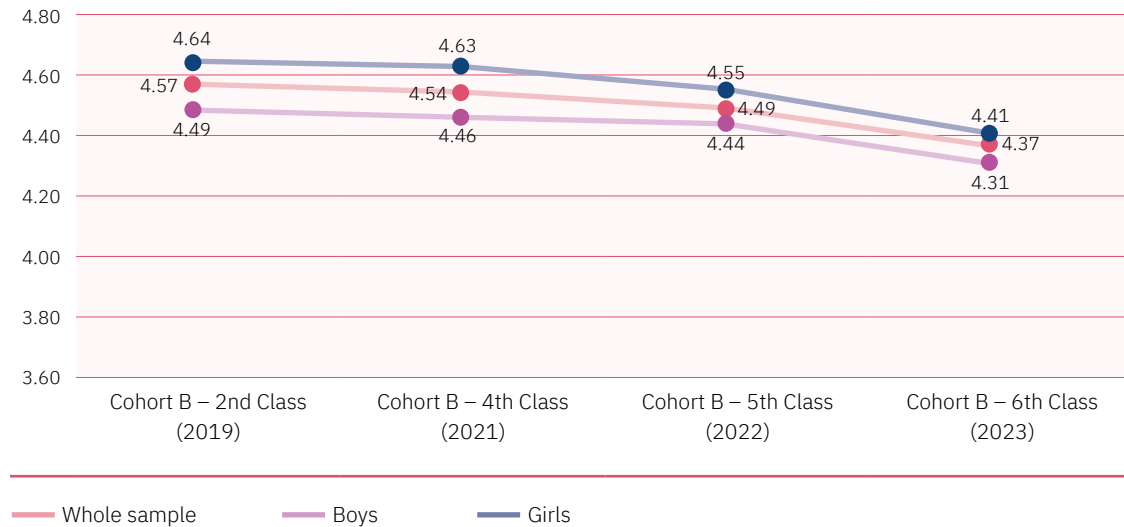
“ Interviewer: *Why is the entrance to the principal's office uncaring?*  
Girl: *Because you might get detention.*  
Interviewer: *You might get detention when you are there. Have you ever gotten detention?*  
Girl: *Never.*  
Interviewer: *Do you know of anyone that has or have you heard of anyone that has?*  
Girl: *No, but I never went up there yet...*  
(Girl, 2nd class, DEIS, Co-ed, Urban)

”

### Teacher-child relationships

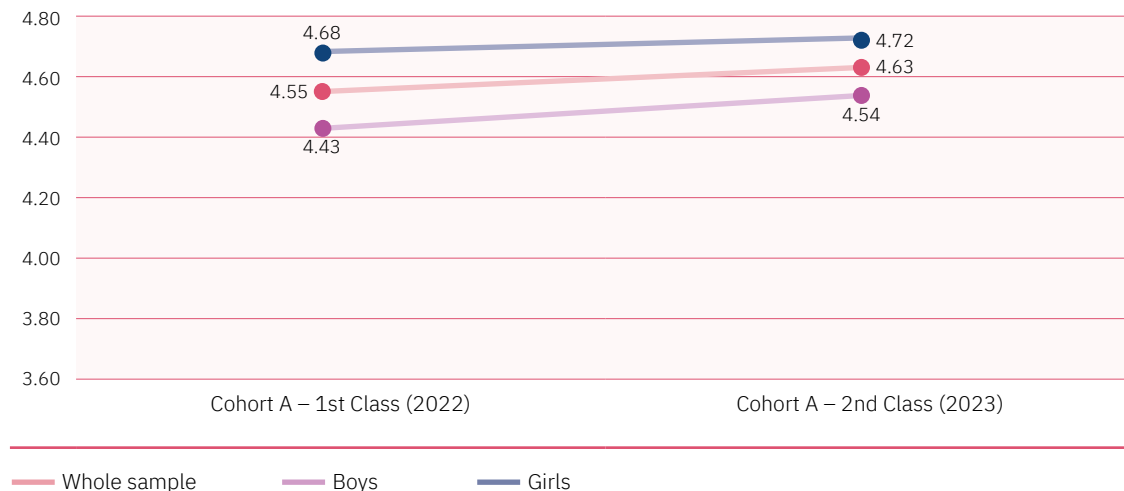
Children’s perceptions of their relationship with their teacher were reflected in the item “My teacher likes to help me learn”. Reports of teacher support were high, with the average rating between ‘usually’ (4) and ‘always’ (5). Children’s ratings of teacher support stayed relatively stable from 2nd to 4th class, and then decreased from 4th to 6th class. Girls gave teachers higher ratings than boys at all waves (Figure 33).

**FIGURE 33.** “My teacher likes to help me learn” (Cohort B)



Children’s perceptions of whether their teacher likes to help them learn was similarly high for children in Cohort A in 1st and 2nd class. A similar pattern was evident for gender as with Cohort B, with girls rating their teacher’s support as higher than boys (Figure 34).

**FIGURE 34.** “My teacher likes to help me learn” (Cohort A)





Across the waves of the study, interviews with children in the case study schools indicated the level of warmth and care children experienced in their relationships with their teachers (see also [Report 5](#)). Teachers were reported to act as a source of emotional and psychological support for children in the older case study classes, managing or reducing their anxiety by providing opportunities to release any stress children may have felt in school. This teacher support for children's wellbeing plays a significant role in preparing children to engage with their learning, as they felt listened to and supported:

“ Girl: *She always helps us with problems that we don't know. And always gives us... And always she helps us feel happy when we are sad.*

Interviewer: *Okay, really, does she?*

Girl: *And she makes us feel calm.*

(Girl, 5th class, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

“ *She's kind.... she takes us to yard, she takes us to the playground, she takes us boxing, she takes us to a lot of places, and she cares about us and she helps us work.*

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

”

“ *If she is looking at my work I wouldn't be worried or anything because she is a really nice teacher, like. She won't give out to you or anything, she'll just explain what you may have done wrong or what you did right [...] And if you get it right, I kind of feel like happy with myself and that I've been focused on that and that I never feel worried or sad or angry or anything if I get something wrong that's just small. In a test I might feel a little angry at myself but other than that I'm kind of fine.*

(Girl, 4th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

“ *Say three people put up their hand and she would go to all three of them. She would never just forget about one of them. And our teacher, she would care about every student, I feel like. ... She really does care about everyone ... She wants everyone to learn and she wants everyone to know everything. She helps out a lot of people.*

(Girl, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“ *She does little prizes for us. And for some of us who don't say a lot, some of us don't really understand something, she would always try to help us figure it out.*

(Girl, 5th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“ Interviewer: *Does your new teacher, does he help you learn?*

Boy: *Yeah.*

Interviewer: *How?*

Boy: *He comes down and sits beside you.*

Interviewer: *Is that nice?*

Boy: *Yeah...*

Interviewer: *Have all your teachers*

*helped you like that or is that new?*

Boy: *I'd two teachers that helped like that.*

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

”

“ Interviewer: *Very good and what is it that you think makes a good teacher? ...*

Boy: *He's very good at teaching, he knows what to explain and what's good for us and not.*

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

”

Also evident however was some frustration among children in 6th class regarding school rules and what they perceived as unfair treatment. Children in this cohort also shared their views about higher demands for learning in the senior classes of primary school:

“ Interviewer: *Where does the pressure come from?*

Girl: *The teachers.*

Interviewer: *In what way?*

Girl: *It's like just that you have to go up to some standard that's really, really high.*

(Girl, Case Study Child 2, 6th Class,

DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

”

“ *Yeah. So, like, I know I don't get any work done a lot, but say ... me and [Child-name] were talking because we're normally talking and she tells us to stop talking, a couple of minutes later, you just hear a couple of people talking, she wouldn't say anything to them.*

(Boy, 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

Staff interviewed in the case study special school spoke of the centrality of promoting positive relationships between children and their peers and school staff, as well as the importance of the home-school relationship:

“ *I think one of the key areas when it comes to supporting wellbeing in special schools is through home-school communication.*

(Special school staff)

”

Further, supporting the communication needs of all children was seen as vitally important to their wellbeing within the special school context, particularly for non-verbal children:

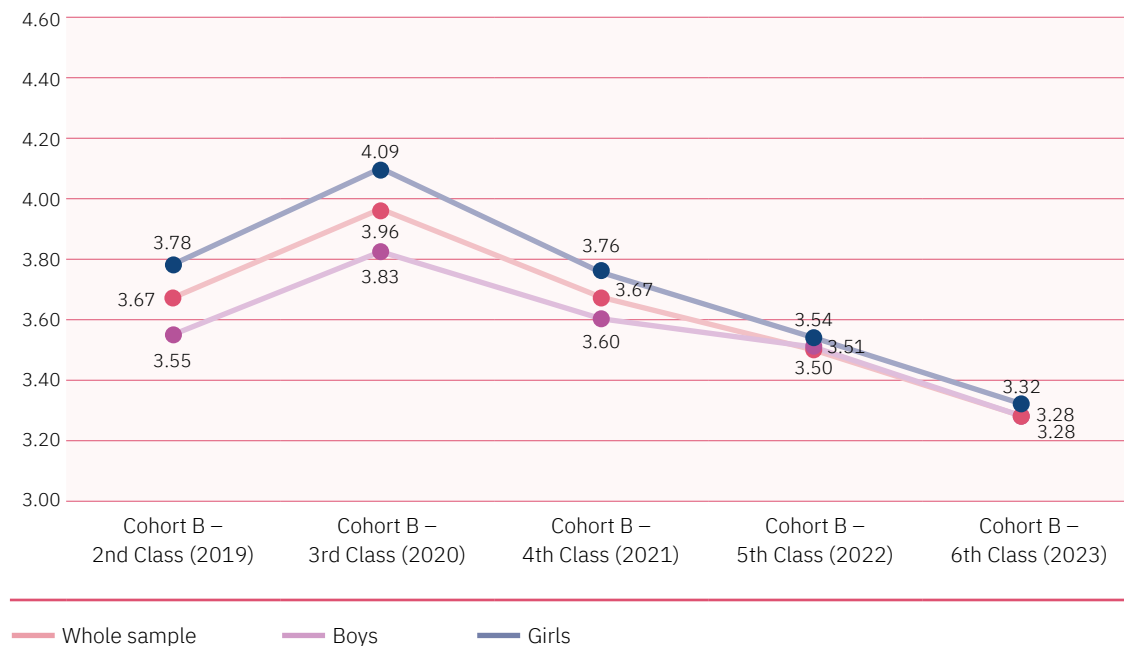
“ If you can't tell someone when you're hurt, what you like, what you don't like, and what you want to eat, it's really gonna diminish your quality of life.  
(Special school staff)

“ If they don't have any sort of means of communication whether it's Lámh that they're taught from an early age or PECS or whether it's a tablet... it would just make their lives so much easier.  
(Special school staff)

### Children's friendships in school

Our previous reports ([Report 5](#)) have highlighted the centrality of social relationships to children's experience of schools. Here we connect these to issues of wellbeing. Children responded to three statements reflecting the nature of their interactions with peers in their class (Rowe et al., 2010): “In my class, other children cared about my feelings”, “In my class, other children think it is important to be my friend”, and “In my class, other children really care about me”. Responses were on a 5-point scale, from 1 ('never') to 5 ('always'). Cohort B children rated their classmates as supportive between 'sometimes' (3) and 'usually' (4) on average, between 2nd class and 6th class. Classmate support was rated as highest by Cohort B children during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown when they did not see their classmates in person, with ratings decreasing after that point until 6th class (Figure 35). Classmate support was rated higher by girls than boys in 2nd and 4th class, but by 5th and 6th class, there were no gender differences.

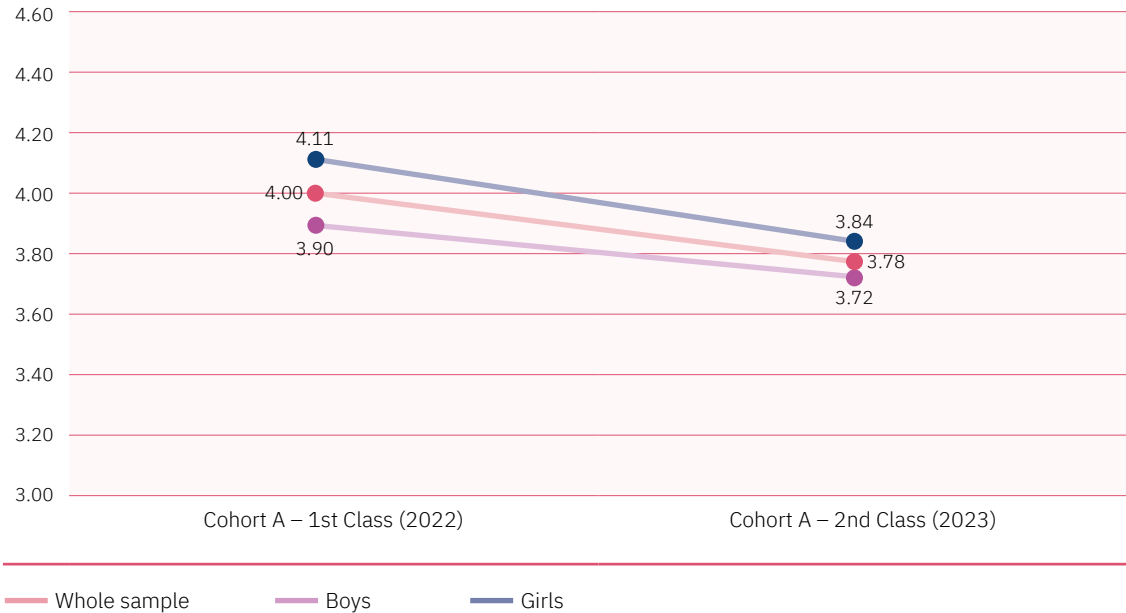
**FIGURE 35.** Children's ratings of peer personal support (Cohort B)



Due to the young age of children in Cohort A during the first and second wave, when they were in Junior Infants and Senior Infants, a simplified, single question about liking school was asked: “Have you made good friends in class since you started?”, with responses on a 5-point scale. While not directly comparable, the average score for Junior Infants was 4.7 which corresponded to 93% of children agreeing that they had made good friends. In Senior Infants, the average score for the same question was 4.75 (94% agreeing that they had made good friends), and in both year groups, girls reported higher scores on average than boys.

Children in Cohort A in 1st and 2nd class were asked the same three questions as Cohort B about their experiences of support from classmates. On average, children rated classmates as ‘usually’ supportive in 1st class. Scores decreased slightly for both boys and girls by 2nd class. Similar to the earlier waves of Cohort B, girls reported experiencing higher levels of classmate support than boys (Figure 36).

**FIGURE 36.** Children’s ratings of peer personal support (Cohort A)



In 1st and 2nd class, in interviews and focus groups, children most frequently talked about the time they spent with their friends as a source of happiness in school. 2nd class children from Cohort A specifically talked about playtimes as important aspects of their emotional and social wellbeing. Girls and boys identified less structured times in the school day where they were free to socialise including yard time, ‘golden time’ (free time), and talk time as particularly enjoyable.

**“ Interviewer: *What makes you happy in school?***  
**Boy: *I suppose because you get breaks and like in your house you normally wouldn't just go outside and play with your friends, you can't really get access to your friends because you're not, they're normally not as close and your parents might not let you. So, I think school's an opportunity to play with your friends.***  
 (Boy, 2nd class, Non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)



“ Interviewer: *What makes you happy in school?*

Girl 1: *When we have golden time.*

Girl 2: *Golden time.*

Girl 3: *When you play with your friends.*

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

”

“ Interviewer: *Boys, what makes you feel happy in school?*

Boy: *Going to yard!*

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

”

“ *I like how they try to help you learn more and I like doing everything what we are supposed to do, and I like everything about it.*

(Girl, 1st class, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

Also evident was some concern over being excluded from groups and the anxiety this could create and this became more evident in our interviews with children as they transitioned from 2nd class into more senior grades:

“ *Sometimes when you get in a fight with your friend, and you come into school, and you feel like they are going to tell the teacher or something like that and it wasn't even your fault. Then you feel you want to get back friends with them, but you feel they are just going to do some more things and more things and more things that you don't like.*

(Girl, 2nd class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town)

”

“ Interviewer: *What do you think about making friends in your school?*

Girl: *I feel okay at making friends. Sometimes it's a little bit hard and sometimes it's not.*

Interviewer: *What can make it hard sometimes?*

Girl: *If someone already made friends with them, they would be always playing with them. And then they might not want to play with me.*

(Girls, 3rd class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town)

”

“ Interviewer: *Would you like to tell me about your friends?*

Boy: *I don't really have that much friends.*

(Boy, 3rd class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“ *But like I remember last year she kept tripping me, her and our friend [Boy] up, and I told her I was going to kick her... and she went in and she told the teacher, but she started making stuff up as well... and she told me that I had no friends and all.*

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

”

In the older Cohort B, children were clearly able to document the traits and characteristics they loved about their friends, signalling their importance to their everyday lives:

“ *[My friends] are funny, caring, nice, cool, amazing, great, wonderful, did I say amazing? Also kind, understanding, lovely, unique, smart, friendly and awesome.*

(Girl, 6th class, Non-DEIS, All Girls, Rural Town)

”

“ *Me and [name] share a lot in common and we joke a lot. We play VR together, play chess and have fun.*

(Boy, 6th class, DEIS, All Boys, Urban)

”

“ *She’s my one and only best friend! She is funny! She is life! She is silly!*

(Girl, 6th class, Non DEIS, Co Ed, Urban)

”

“ *[My friends are] very supportive, nice and always helps me when I am sad.*

(Boy, 6th class, DEIS, Co Ed, Urban)

”

Children in 4th, 5th and 6th class also talked about how important socialising outside school was for their wellbeing, including enjoying shared interests with their class/school friends. Aspects of friendships, such as having fun, and academic and emotional support were especially referenced by the children in this cohort.

“ Interviewer: *What do you guys do outside of school?*

Boy: *Sometimes we all go to the astro.*

Interviewer: *What’s the astro?*

Boy: *Astroturf and play football...just with the boys.*

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

”

“ Interviewer: *Who do you share your results with and how does that make you feel?*

Boy: *I share my results with some of my friends and then like my mum or my dad or my sister and my brother, and I mean... it makes me feel kind of... it depends – embarrassed if I’ve got like nearly everything wrong, but then happy if I’ve got like only two wrong.*

Girl: *Well, I share with my friends and my family as well. It makes me feel okay.*

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

”

“ Boy 1: *We used to do this thing as well where we used to go to the cinema every month, like every month if there was a new movie.*

Interviewer: *Ah nice. Who would take you?*

Boy 2: *This month we’re going to Creed or something, aren’t we?*

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



“ Interviewer: *Do you like sitting on your own, still?*

Boy: *I love sitting on my own.*

Interviewer: *Why is that good?*

Boy: *It’s just peaceful and then sometimes I like sitting with people that have a lot of knowledge and they can help you a bit with work.*

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

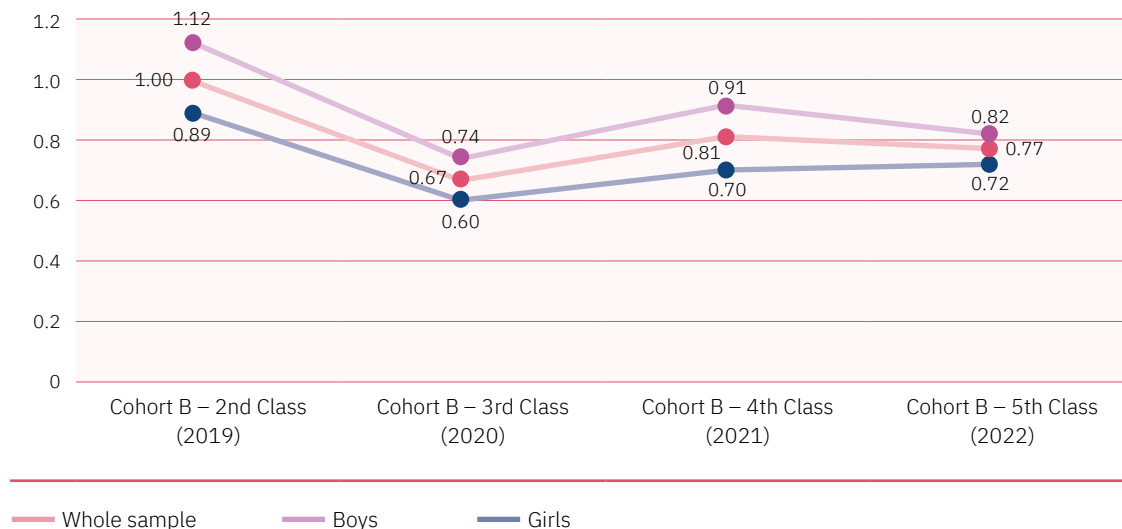


### Teachers’ ratings of children’s peer relationships

Teachers were asked to provide their perspectives on children’s peer relationships along a scale that measured whether each child often played alone, had at least one good friend (reversed for analysis), was generally liked by other children (reversed for analysis), was picked on or bullied by other children, and got along better with adults than with other children (Goodman, 1997). Each of these questions was rated between zero (‘not at all true’) and three (‘completely true’). The scores across the five questions were summed to give a total maximum score of 10 (with higher scores indicating more difficulties with peer relations).

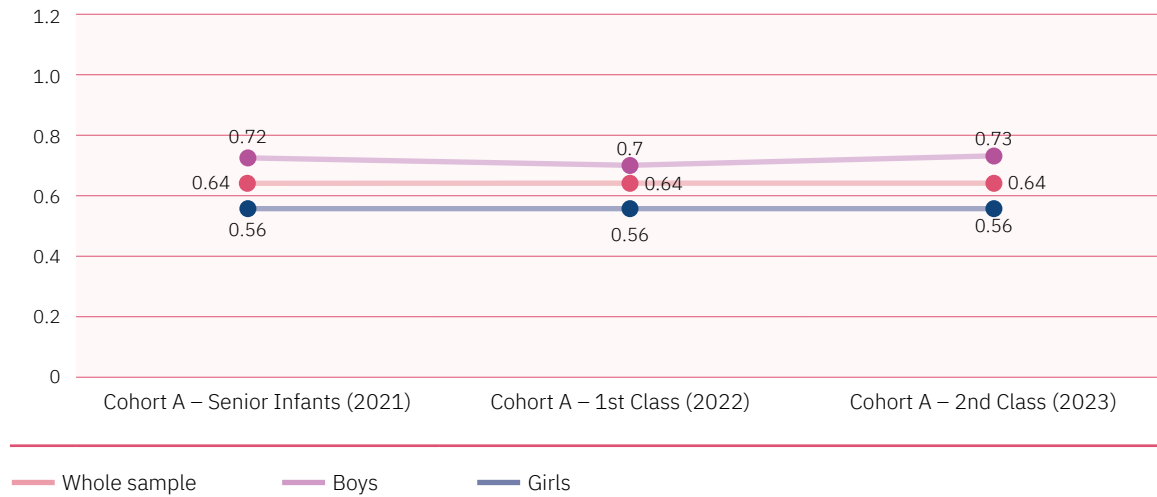
Teacher ratings of children’s difficulties with peer relationships decreased from 2nd class to 4th class, and then increased from 4th to 5th class. This pattern may reflect the nature of peer interactions during 2021 when COVID-19-related absences and school closures would have been impactful. From 5th class to 6th class, teachers’ ratings of peer problems decreased for boys but stayed stable for girls. At all time points, teachers rated boys as having more problems in their relationships with peers than girls (Figure 37).

**FIGURE 37.** Teacher ratings of difficulties with peer relationships (Cohort B)



There was no change in teacher ratings of children’s peer relationships from Senior Infants to 1st class, with levels of difficulties reported by teachers being low overall, and lower for girls compared to boys (Figure 38).

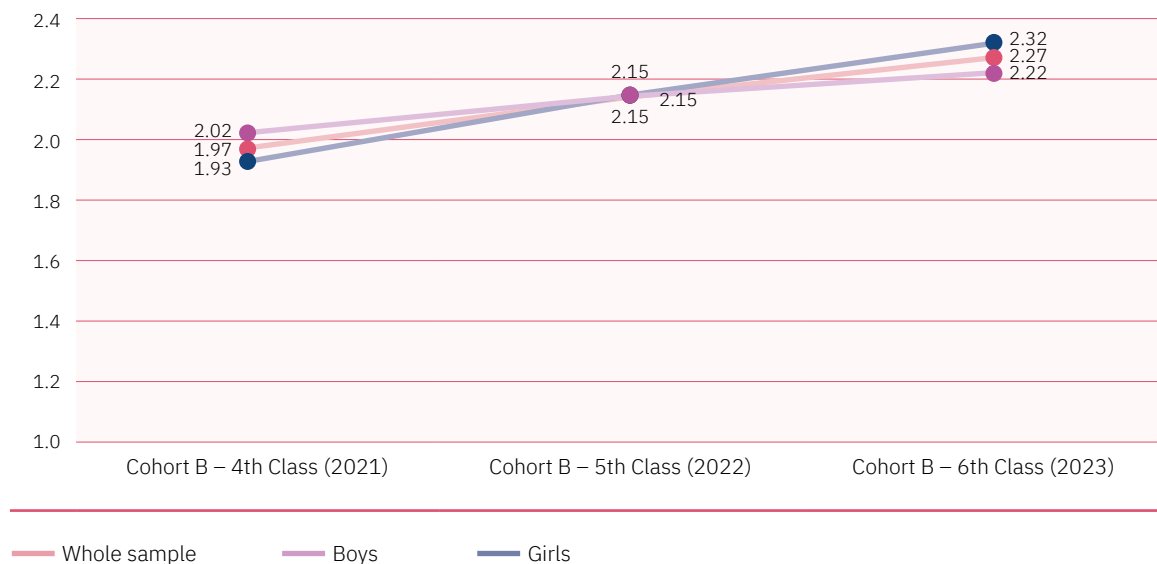
**FIGURE 38.** Teacher ratings of difficulties with peer relationships (Cohort A)



### Bullying

From 4th to 6th class, children in Cohort B were asked how often six different types of bullying behaviours happened in their school (talking behind each other’s backs, excluding children from play, children purposely ignoring other children, fighting, verbal aggression, threatening behaviour; Olweus, 2006). Behaviours were rated on a 5-point frequency scale from ‘never’ (1) to ‘several times a week’ (5). Children tended to report witnessing such behaviours relatively infrequently (‘once or twice’ to ‘a few times’), although average scores increased from 4th to 6th class. Girls’ reports of witnessing bullying increased more steeply over time compared to boys’ reports (Figure 39). Boys tended to report witnessing bullying more often than girls in 4th class, but by 6th class, this trend had reversed, with girls reporting witnessing more bullying.

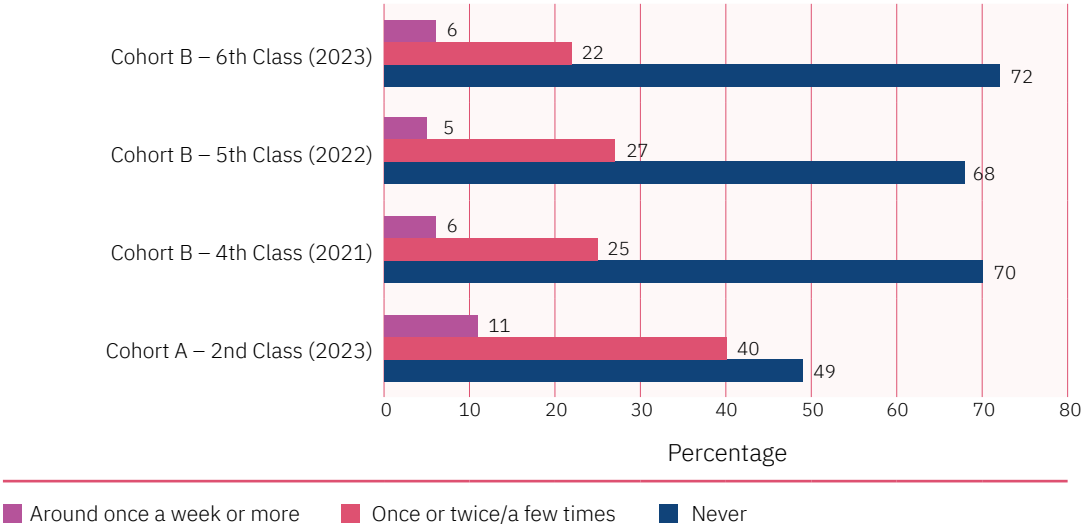
**FIGURE 39.** Children’s reports of the frequency of bullying in their school (Cohort B)





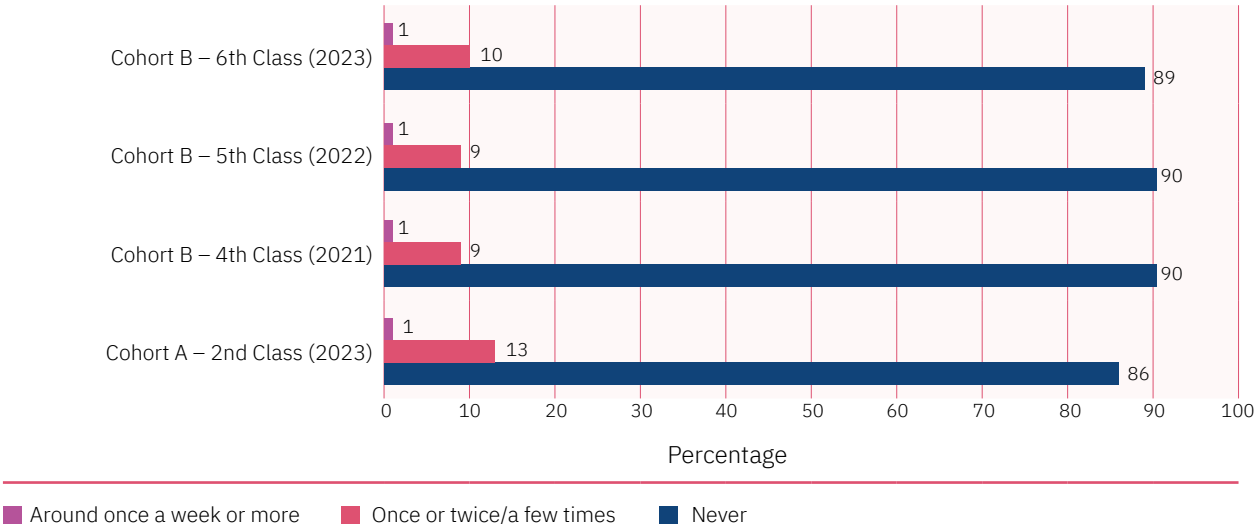
Children were also asked whether they had bullied other children at school and whether other children had bullied them at school. These questions were asked of Cohort B children in 4th, 5th and 6th class, and of Cohort A children in 2nd class. In the three waves of Cohort B, around 70% of children said they had ‘never’ been a victim of bullying (Figure 40). However this proportion was much lower for children in Cohort A (2nd class) at 49%. Around double the proportion of children in Cohort A reported being bullied around once a week or more in 2nd class (11%) compared to Cohort B in 4th to 6th class (5% to 6%).

**FIGURE 40.** How often have you been bullied at school in the last couple of months?



Children were also asked if they had taken part in bullying others. Possibly due to social desirability bias, fewer children reported bullying others, with around 90% saying ‘never’ in 4th, 5th and 6th class (Cohort B), and 86% of children in Cohort A saying that they had never bullied others (Figure 41).

**FIGURE 41.** How often have you taken part in bullying another child at school in the last couple of months?



Data from the case study schools highlighted how children's relationships with peers is central not only to children's school lives but also their wellbeing. Cohort B children, in 5th and 6th class, openly talked about the causes of stress in school and the shifting dynamics in friendships that played out in the classroom as well as the school yard. They referred to negative physical and psychological interactions such as: name-calling, fighting, pushing, 'hair-pulling' and kicking, but also drew distinctions between incidents of 'name-calling' versus 'banter' or 'messing'.

“ Interviewer: *What kind of stories do you have?*

Girl: *There's people, they're like friends for a week, and then one person says something ...and then they're like, not friends anymore.*

(Girl, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed Urban)

”

“ Girl 1: *So, there is name calling and sometimes a swear word is like it slips but whenever, I know a few people who did but I think they didn't really mean it, they just kind of said it ... yeah, they might just let it slip, I don't think, there's only a few people who'd actually mean it to like at someone.*

Girl 2: *Yeah. You have certain mean girls in our class.*

Interviewer: *In your class?*

Girl 1: *Or in the other class, but I don't really talk to them.*

Girl 2: *Mostly in the other class.*

(Girls, 6th class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town)

”

“ Interviewer: *Are children, are boys and girls ever mean to each other in the school?*

Boy: *Yeah, a good few.*

Interviewer: *A good few? And where would that happen?*

Boy: *On the yard mostly.*

*Well, a lot of people mess whenever they're pushing each other.*

Boy: *Yeah, but there's a lot of people get called names...*

Interviewer: *They don't use bad words, do they?*

Boy: *Most of them.*

Interviewer: *Really?*

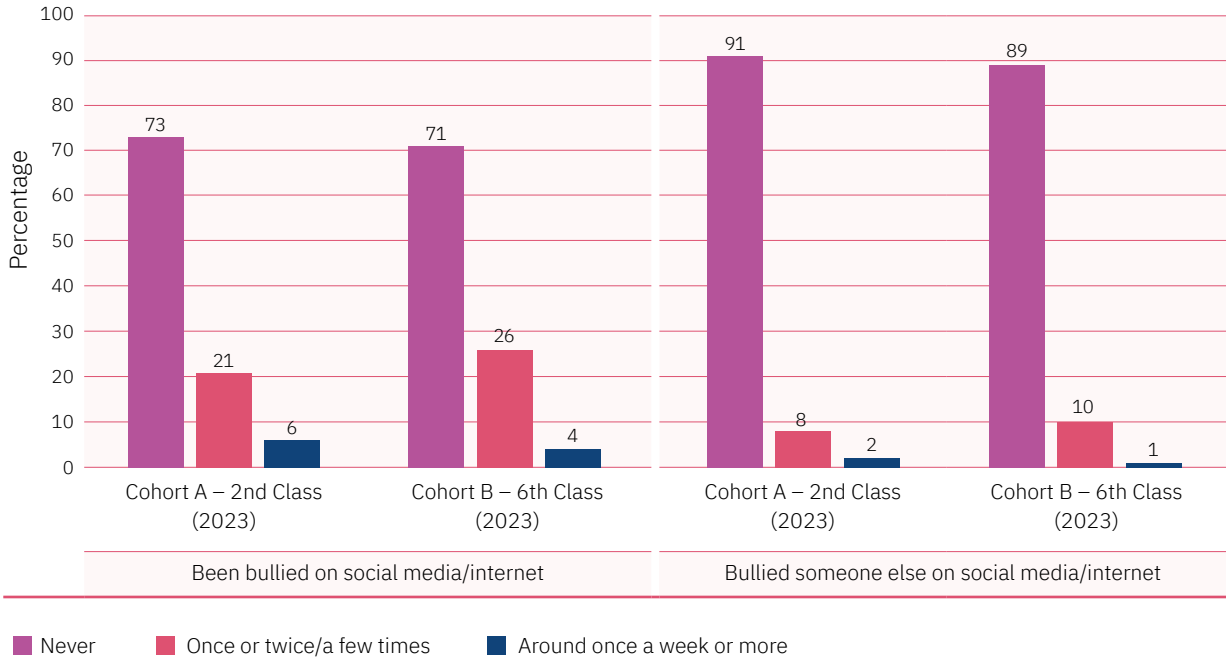
Boy: *Yeah, an awful lot.*

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

”

In the 2023 waves of data collection with both cohorts, children in 2nd class and 6th class were asked about their experience of bullying online or through social media by someone they know. Six percent of children in 2nd class reported being bullied online or through social media around once a week or more, with a slightly lower figure reported by children in 6th class (4%) (Figure 35). Just under three quarters of children in both 2nd class and 6th class had never been bullied online or through social media. When asked if they had ever bullied someone known to them online or via social media, the majority of children in both cohorts reported that they had never done this (Figure 42).

**FIGURE 42.** Children’s reports of bullying on social media/internet (Cohort A and B in 2023)



Of the 72 children in 6th class who indicated they had been bullied online around once a week or more (4% of the total sample), 61% of these were girls (n=44). However, the opposite was evident in the younger cohort (Cohort A in 2nd class). Of the 95 children in 2nd class in Cohort A who indicated they had been bullied online around once a week or more (6% of the total sample), 67% were boys (n=64).

Our participatory activities with the children in 6th class case study schools suggested online bullying was something they were familiar with:

**Interviewer:** *Is there much teasing, or slugging, or anything like that in 6th Class?*  
**Girl 1:** *Well, it’s depending if it’s playful or really like threatening.*  
**Girl 2:** *Yeah.*  
**Girl 1:** *Because the other class, I know for a fact that they’re mean, and there are a lot of the other 6th class that are mean, and I know that because I’ve seen messages, they’ve sent to people in group chats.*  
**Girl 2:** *Oh yeah.*  
**Interviewer:** *Really?*  
**Girl 1:** *Yes, there’s a... group chat, and... I didn’t know it was happening, because I don’t actually look in group chats, I just get added to them, but there was something that happened in there that [there was trouble about].*  
 (Girls, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural town)



Interviewer: *Does anyone ever get teased because they find things difficult here?*

Boy 1: *We don't get bullied, no.*

Boy 2: *No, there's none.*

Boy 1: *There's just some outside school though.*

Interviewer: *...outside school?*

Boy 1: *Well like outside school some of my friends probably bully other friends and my friends.*

Boy 2: *Or like sometimes people in our class like over Snapchat and stuff, people get into arguments, and they never really talk about in school like it never really happened and then.*

(Boys, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)



Girl 1: *I haven't seen much cyber bullying. Well, there was last year with that school thing... There was an account.*

Interviewer: *There was an account.*

Girl 1: *On Tik Tok.*

Interviewer: *Was it Tik Tok?*

Girl 1: *Yeah.*

Girl 2: *Yeah.*

Girl 2: *It was called the [... ...]. Some girl in 4th Class made it, but she was just kind of making fun of kids in our year specifically.*

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



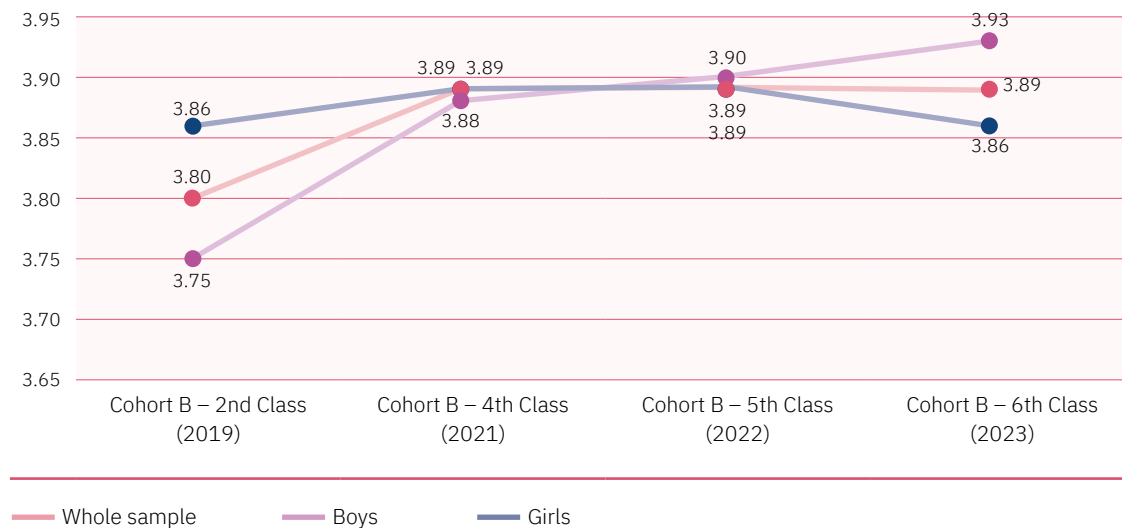
## Meaning and purpose in life

This aspect of wellbeing refers to the extent to which children feel that they are ‘doing well’ in life, that what they are doing in school has value for their lives, and that they have a positive attitude towards learning.

### Children’s feelings of doing well in life

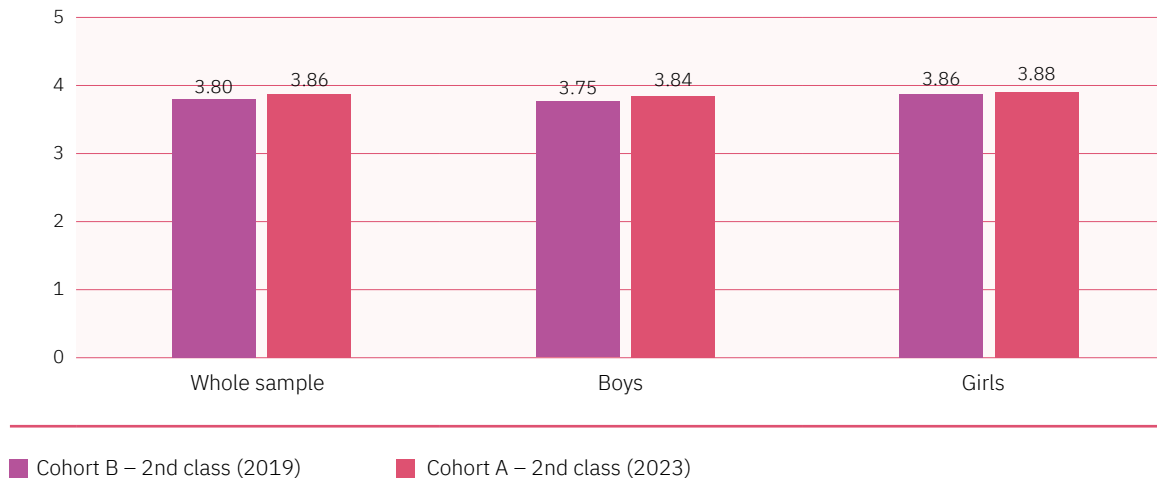
Children were asked about how they felt they were doing in their lives, using four questions that explore different dimensions of wellbeing (Symonds et al., 2022; 2023): “Can you do things well for yourself?” (competence), “Can you do the things you want to do in your life?” (autonomy), “If you have a problem, can you find a way to deal with it?” (resilience), and “Do you think you are helpful to other people?” (helpfulness). On average, children ‘sometimes’ (3) to ‘usually’ (4) felt that they were doing well. Average scores across these four questions were used to examine trends over time and by gender. Children in Cohort B reported slightly higher levels of doing well as they aged from 2nd to 6th class (Figure 43). In 2nd class, girls reported higher levels of doing well but by 6th class, this pattern was reversed, with boys reporting higher levels. There was no difference between genders in 4th and 5th class.

**FIGURE 43.** Children’s feelings of ‘doing well’ (Cohort B)



There was a small (but statistically significant) difference in scores for ‘doing well’ between the cohorts overall when they were both in 2nd class: children in 2nd class in 2023 scored slightly higher than those in 2nd class in 2019 (3.80 versus 3.86; Figure 44). When split by gender, the difference over time was apparent for boys rather than girls; girls’ feelings of doing well were consistent between the cohorts over time, while boys in 2nd class in 2023 reported higher feelings of doing well than boys in 2nd class in 2019.

**FIGURE 44.** Children’s feelings of doing well in 2nd class over time

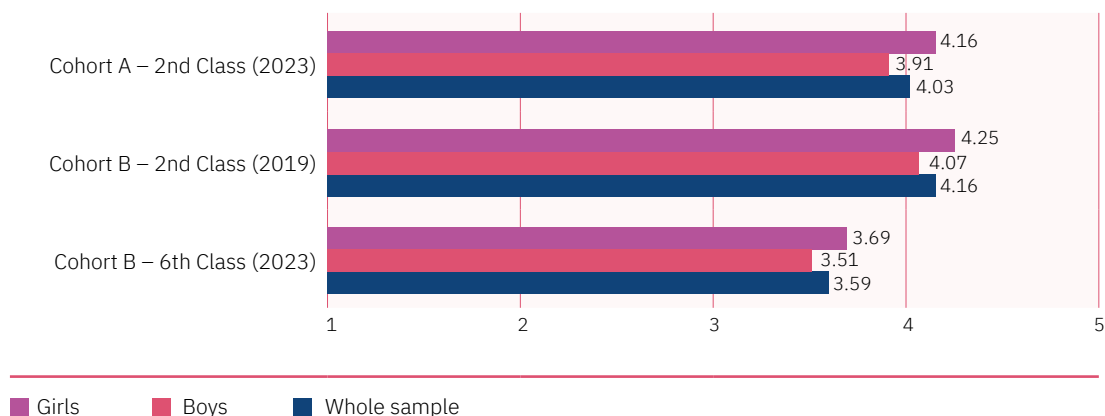


**Perceived relevance of school**

Children in Cohort B (in 2nd class and 6th class) and in Cohort A (in 2nd class) responded to three statements about their feelings about the purpose of their school work (“What I am learning in class is important for what I want to be when I grow up”, “If I work hard at school, I know I will get a good job when I grow up”, and “School will help me do the things I want to do when I grow up”; Appleton et al., 2006). Responses were on a 5-point scale from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) to ‘strongly agree’ (5) and average scores across the three items were generated.

Overall, children tended to ‘agree’ (4) with the statements, although for Cohort B, there was a decrease in scores between 2nd and 6th class (Figure 45). In both cohorts and at all time points, girls rated the relevance of school as higher than boys.

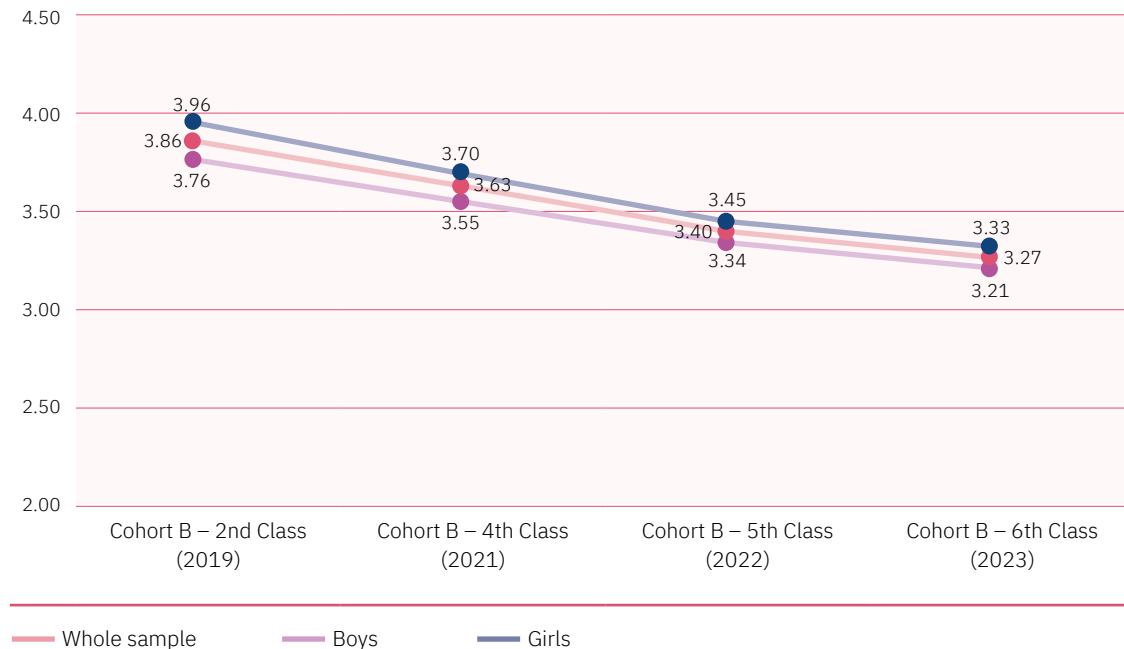
**FIGURE 45.** Children’s perceptions of the relevance of school (Cohort A and B)



### Children’s motivation towards learning

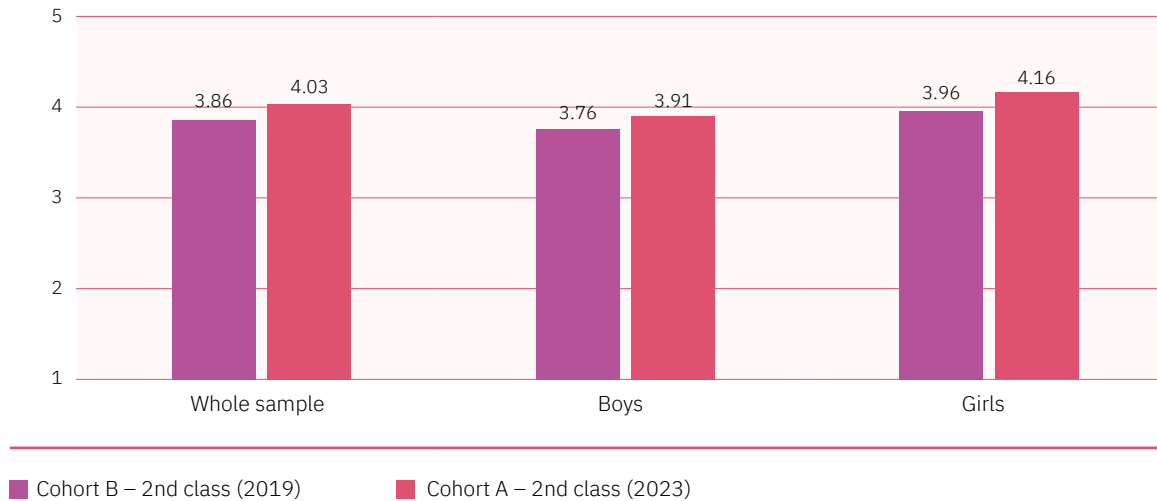
Children’s experiences of learning were previously explored in [Reports 5](#) and [6](#), detailing how they experienced pedagogy, curriculum and assessment practices in their primary schools. Here we report on their motivation towards learning, a key component of and contributor to their overall wellbeing. Children’s motivation towards learning, specifically, their orientation towards learning for mastery (that is, an emphasis on understanding and improvement in their learning), was captured through three items (“I do my classwork because I like to learn new things”, “I like classwork best when it really makes me think”, and “An important reason why I do my classwork is because I want to get better at it”; Midgley et al., 2000). Responses were on a 5-point scale from 1 (‘strongly disagree’) to 5 (‘strongly agree’), and average scores across the three items were generated. Average scores were close to 4 for the sample as a whole, indicating that children tended to agree with the statements and were motivated. Scores tended to decrease slightly as children progressed through the year groups 2nd class to 6th class (Figure 46), suggesting that orientation towards learning for mastery decreases over time during primary school. At all time points, girls scored higher than boys.

**FIGURE 46.** Children’s orientation towards learning for mastery (Cohort B)



When scores for the two cohorts in 2nd class (Cohort A in 2023 and Cohort B in 2019) were compared, overall and for both boys and girls, children in 2nd class in 2023 had slightly higher orientation towards learning for mastery than those in 2nd class in 2019 (Figure 48).

**FIGURE 47.** Children’s orientation towards learning for mastery in 2nd class in 2019 and 2023



## Accomplishment

This aspect of children’s wellbeing relates to children’s feelings of being capable and competent, and having a sense of achievement. It builds on findings from our previous reports ([Report 5](#) and [6](#)) that highlighted the importance of children’s growing sense of competency in shaping their engagement with their learning in school.

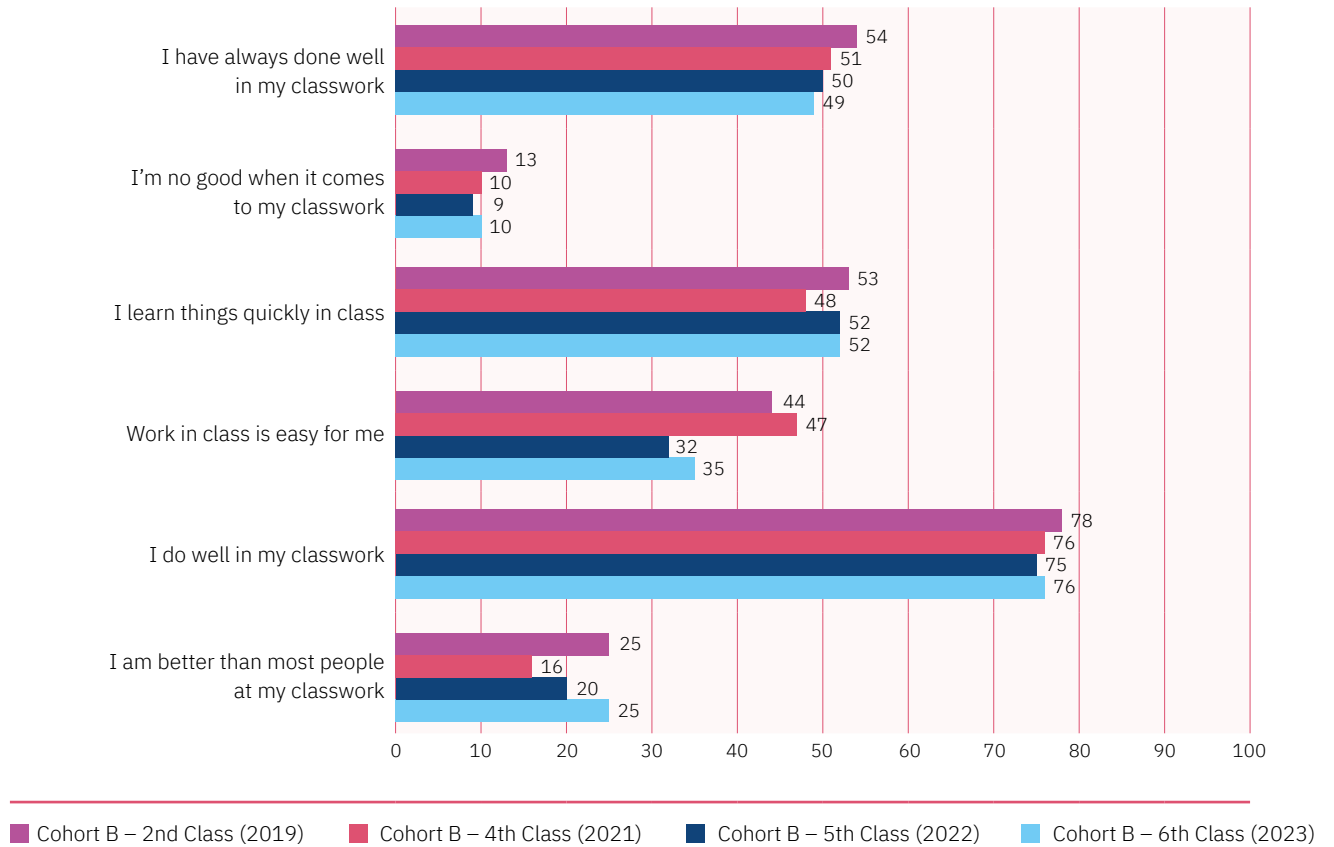
### Academic self-concept

Academic self-concept was measured in Cohort B, and in Cohort A (1st and 2nd class) through six items (“I am better than most people at my classwork”, “I do well in my classwork”, “Work in class is easy for me”, “I learn things quickly in class”, “I’m no good when it comes to my classwork” (reversed), and “I have always done well in my classwork”; Marsh, 1990). Children responded on a 5-point scale from 1 (‘strongly disagree’) to 5 (‘strongly agree’) and average scores across all items were calculated.

Figure 48 displays the proportion of children in Cohort B responding ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ to each statement, and which show a degree of continuity across the four waves. Around three quarters of children tended to agree with the statement “I do well in my classwork” but much fewer (16-25%) agreed with the statement “I am better than most people at my classwork”. Children reported higher agreement with the statement “Work in class is easy for me” in 2nd and 4th class compared to in 5th and 6th class, which may reflect the progressively challenging nature of the work as children up through the grades.

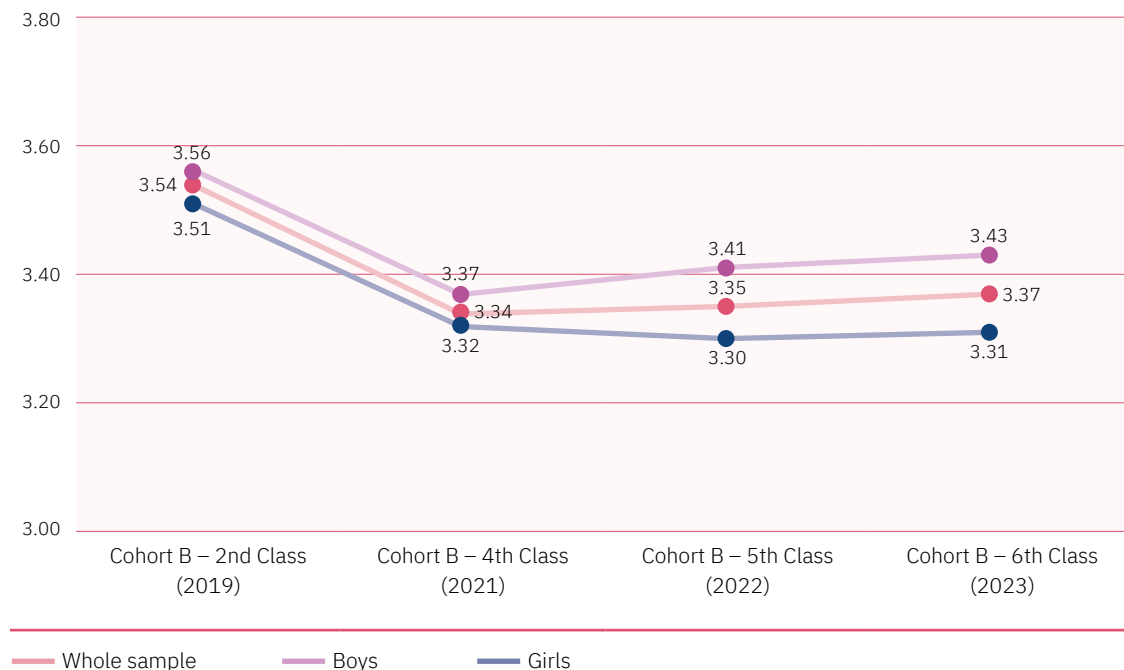


**FIGURE 48.** Children’s responses to academic self-concept items (% responding ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’) (Cohort B)



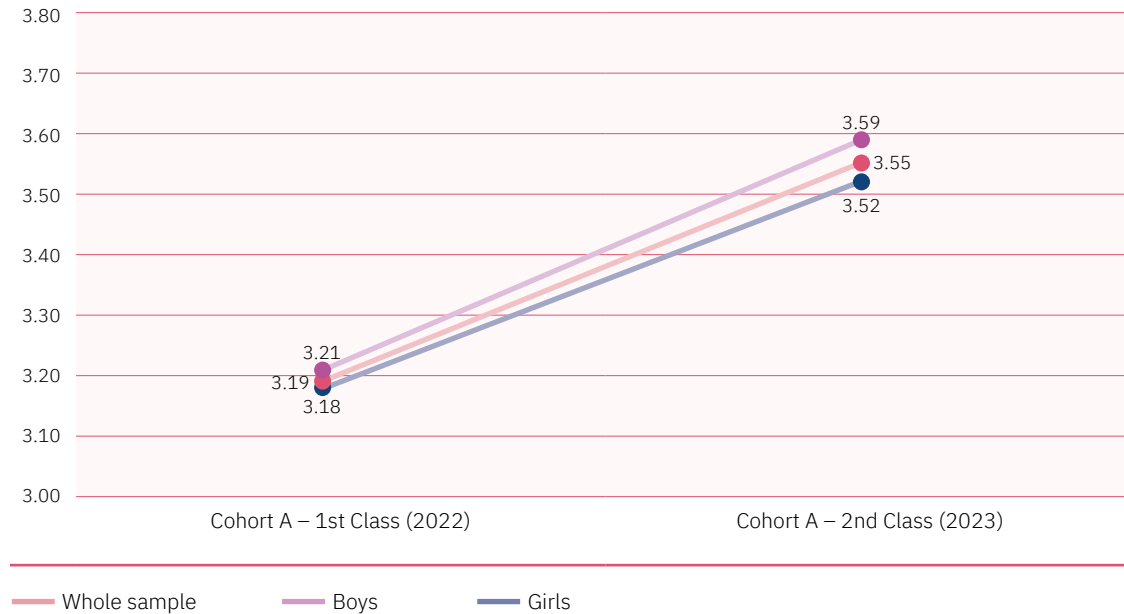
Children’s academic self-concept decreased significantly from 2nd to 4th class, but did not change significantly from 4th to 6th class. While boys had higher self-concept scores at each wave, the difference was not significant in 2nd and 4th class, but was significant in 5th and 6th class (Figure 49).

**FIGURE 49.** Children’s academic self-concept (Cohort B)



For children in Cohort A, academic self-concept appeared to increase from 1st class to 2nd class, and increased slightly more so for boys than girls, meaning that a small gender gap was apparent by 2nd class, with boys reporting higher feelings of academic self-concept than girls (Figure 50).

**FIGURE 50.** Children’s academic self-concept (Cohort A)



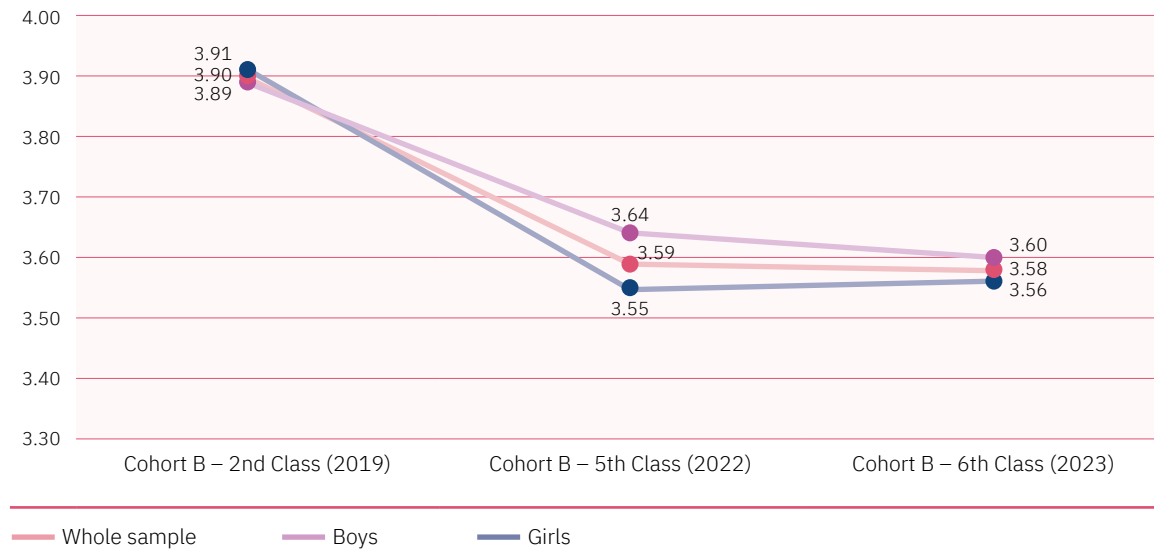
Children were asked to rate how they felt they were doing in reading and mathematics compared to their peers, on a 5-point scale from 5 (‘a little bit better’) to 1 (‘struggling a lot’). For the sample as a whole, there was no change in self-rated ability in reading from 4th class (mean score 3.34) to 5th class (mean score 3.32), but children’s ratings decreased from 5th and 6th class (mean score 3.22). At each time point, there was no statistically significant difference between boys and girls in their self-ratings.

For mathematics, there was no change in ratings over time (mean score in 4th class was 3.13; 5th class was 3.11 and 6th class was 3.10). However at each time point, boys rated themselves as higher than girls. In 4th class, the mean score for boys was 3.31 compared to 2.95 for girls. This pattern was repeated in 5th class (boys = 3.33, girls = 2.90) and 6th class (boys = 3.30, girls = 2.91).

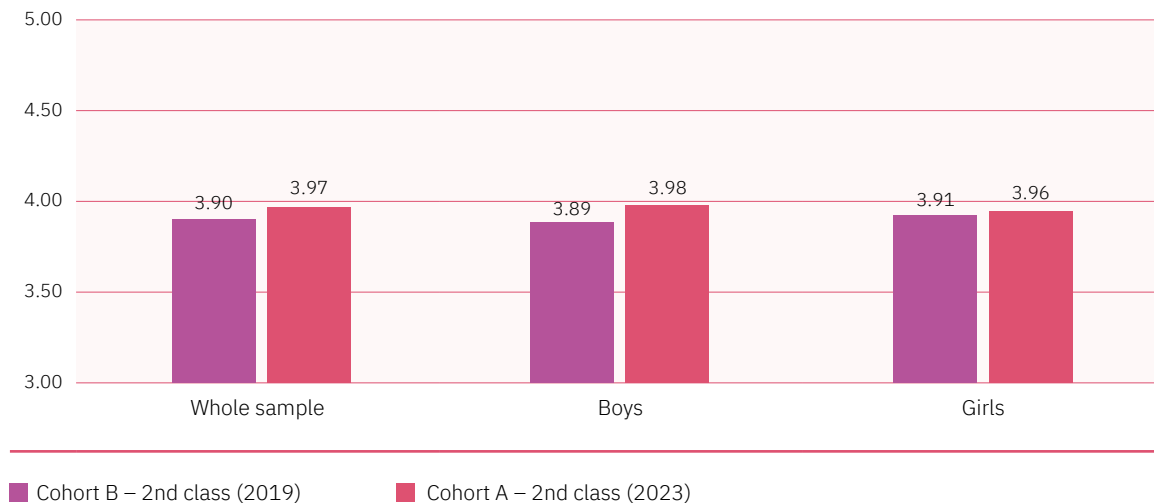
**Grit (perseverance)**

Children’s self-rating of their ability to persevere with tasks (or ‘grit’), was measured through three items used with Cohort B in 2nd class, 5th class and 6th class: “I am a hard worker”; “When I start something, I always finish it”; and “If something doesn’t work the first time, I always try again” (Duckworth et al., 2009). Children rated their perseverance levels as highest in 2nd class, and by 5th class, self-ratings had significantly decreased (Figure 51), especially for girls who scored lower than boys in 5th class. Comparing scores for the two cohorts when both were in 2nd class (in 2019 for Cohort B and 2023 for Cohort A), there was a very small difference in levels of grit, which were slightly higher in 2023 (Figure 52).

**FIGURE 51.** Children’s levels of grit (Cohort B)



**FIGURE 52.** Children’s levels of grit - comparisons between 2nd class over time



Our previous analysis of children’s perspectives in the case study schools confirms the importance for children of developing a sense of competence and accomplishment and how their learning and skills makes them feel ‘smart’ (Report 5). As they progress through primary school, children’s perceptions of accomplishment and competency impact their attitudes and engagement towards specific subjects. Anxiety was often reported to be connected to a sense of failure or element of surprise (Report 6). In-class tests and assessments were considered for some as challenges and opportunities to learn. Combined these highlight some of the dynamics in children’s school lives that contribute to and/or detract from the development of a positive sense of self and wellbeing.

During the interviews and focus groups, some of the children explained how they prepared themselves for these learning experiences emotionally. Children expressed feeling relief when a test was finished and preferred to ‘move on’ and leave the worry behind them, rather than ruminate over their performance:

“ Interviewer: *Okay and can you tell me how do you feel before the tests and how do you feel after the tests?*

Boy: *It depends how I do.*

Interviewer: *Okay.*

Boy: *So, before the test I'm feeling like okay, let's just calm down, do this. And then if I fail at the tests, I'm not very happy with myself. But if I get them all right or even like nine out of ten or whatever I'd be pretty happy with myself.*

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

”

“ Interviewer: *[Girl], and what does it feel like after you do a test?*

Girl: *At first, I feel worried that I might get everything wrong. And then after the test, I don't feel worried, I just feel okay after the test. I just hope that I get most of the things right.*

(Girl, 4th class, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Rural Town)

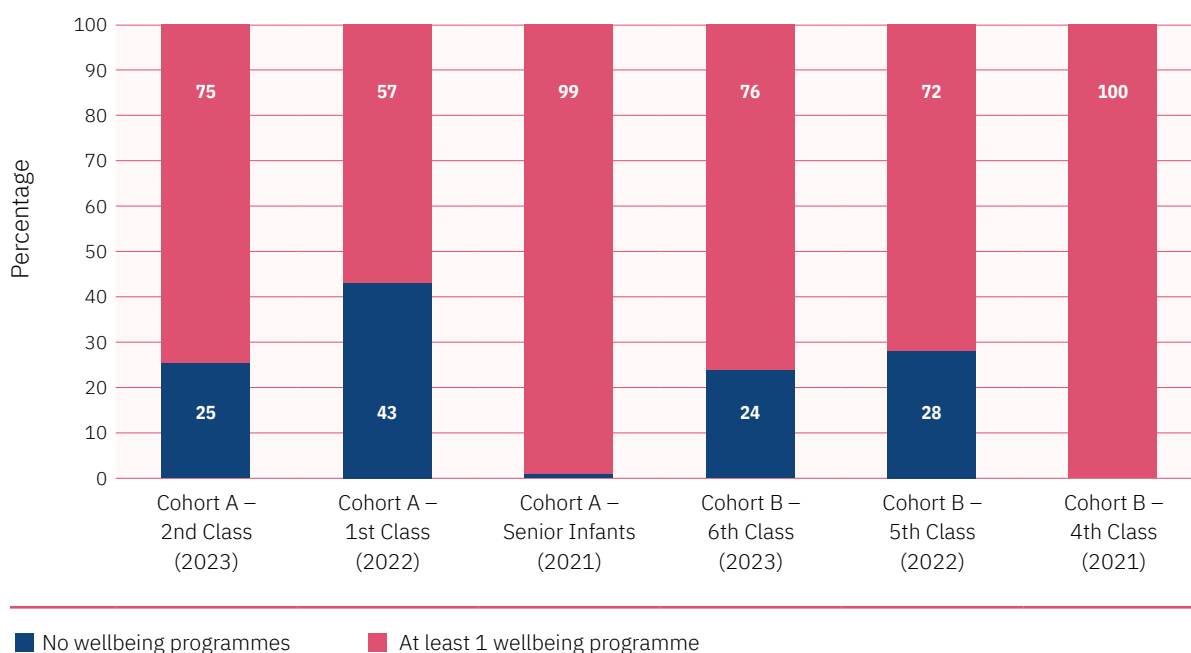
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## Support for children’s wellbeing in school

### Wellbeing programmes

Our previous report on pedagogy ([Report 5](#)) highlighted the strong commitment to care among teachers in primary schools. We explore this further with specific reference to practices that support children’s wellbeing. Class teachers were asked if they used wellbeing programmes with their classes in 2021, 2022, and 2023. In 2021, 100% of Cohort B (4th class) teachers and 99% of Cohort A (Senior Infants) class teachers reported using at least one wellbeing programme with their class (Figure 53). Use of wellbeing programmes appeared to decrease in 2022, particularly for Cohort A (57% of teachers reported using a wellbeing programme with 1st class). In 2023, around three quarters of teachers in both cohorts (2nd class and 6th class) reported using a wellbeing programme.

**FIGURE 53.** Use of wellbeing programmes reported by teachers in 2021, 2022, and 2023



Children in our case study classes were familiar with the idea of wellbeing, and referenced in-class practices and programmes teachers used with them, to help support their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

**“** Boy: *...it’s like a book like we, like, learn about character, like strengths and so like some are like leadership, some are like kindness and like all that.*

**Interviewer:** *And what do you think, is that helpful to learn about feelings in school?*

Boy: *It would be helpful because if you have character traits, you’ll probably get you know well, you probably get awards like if you’re really nice and stuff, you’ll probably get Dojo points.*

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

**”**



Interviewer: *Did you ever learn about feelings or emotions in school?*

Girl 1: *A lot. We do that in [commercial programme name].*

Interviewer: *How is it helpful, [commercial programme]?*

Girl 2: *Well because sometimes when me and my friend would get into fights. So, when we are listening to the emotions, we all know how to control our emotions when this is happening. When your friend might be bothering you and you don't know what to do then the teacher teaches you [commercial programme]... and how to deal with it.*

Interviewer: *How to deal with it? So, you figure out how to solve the problem with your friends?*

Girl 1: *Yeah.*

(Girls 2nd class A, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town)



In the younger classes (Cohort A), in-class practices, such as a daily emotions 'check-in', were referenced by some of the children, who in general expressed positive attitudes towards talking about their wellbeing, feelings and challenges in class. Children explained that these processes helped them to share, understand or give voice to their emotional struggles. However, some, most often boys, expressed negative attitudes and resistance to expressing or sharing emotions more broadly:



Interviewer: *Is it embarrassing to talk about feelings in class?*

Girl 1: *No.*

Girl 2: *You see people cry before.*

Girl 3: *Yeah.*

Interviewer: *Why were they crying, do you know?*

Girl 1: *Because I missed [friend's name].*

(Girls, 2nd class A, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)



Interviewer: *Do you learn about feelings with your teachers?*

Girl 1: *Oh yeah, so every time, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. It's good. It's everyone put their things down, "good morning Múinteoir (name-female)", and everyone says, good morning. And then we go, feelings second. And then you ask the person how you feel, if they have any news or what. And if they feel sad sometimes, you're allowed to tell teacher.*

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



Interviewer: *Can you give me an example of what you might find helpful?*

Girl: *Because sometimes you get ideas about if you're feeling happy, sad or mad.*

(Girl, 2nd class A, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural town)



“ Interviewer: *Is it ever embarrassing to talk about your feelings in class?*  
Boy: *No. It's not embarrassing.*  
Interviewer: *Why not?*  
Boy: *Because I like people to know what I'm feeling like. Because then they get to know how I'm feeling.*  
Interviewer: *And how is that helpful?*  
Boy: *They could care for me.*  
(Boy, 2nd class A, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“ Interviewer: *Is it embarrassing to talk about your feelings in school?*  
Boy 1: *Sometimes.*  
Interviewer: *Okay, can you give me an example.*  
Boy 2: *Well, like, say I'm really nice to my mum and it's kind of embarrassing to say that, like it's kind of embarrassing if my mum likes me, you know. It's kind of because, like it's kind of embarrassing talking about your mum and stuff like I mean I love my mum like.*  
Interviewer: *And what's embarrassing about it, if that's okay to ask?*  
Boy 2: *Because well, I mean what's embarrassing about it it's because I'm talking about my mum, I'm like it's just kind of weird.*  
Interviewer: *Does your teacher ever talk to you about your feelings?*  
Boy 1: *No.*  
Interviewer: *Ever?*  
Boy 1: *No.*  
Interviewer: *Do you think it would be weird to talk about your feelings?*  
Boy 1: *Yes.*  
(Boys, 2nd class A, Non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

Children from 5th and 6th classes in Cohort B, also reflected on their experiences of wellbeing programmes and practices in their classes. They described the inclusion of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) learning content as challenging as it can be text-based and not necessarily relevant to their own situations. Children recognised that these can be helpful to initiate conversation relevant to wellbeing, but that there were challenges for their implementation in class.

“ Interviewer: *They [wellbeing programme] deal with emotional problems, or is it only about schoolwork?*  
Girl 1: *Yeah, it deals with emotional problems.*  
Girl 2: *Yeah, sometimes they would.*  
Girl 1: *Like at one point we had 'Wellbeing Wednesday', didn't we?*  
Girl 2: *Yeah, like we'd have these books and like you'd have... we'd have like... we'd have to do it every Wednesday, like you'd have to do an activity in the wellbeing book or something.*  
(Girl, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“ Girl 1: *It was helpful, but it's kind of like a kind of cliché now almost, and you're like 'Oh, well I know about that' and you told me about that phrase that you can use to get yourself up sometimes, but that's not going to work because I know [phrases to get myself up] now.*

(Girl, 6th class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

### Teacher preparedness to support and teach children about wellbeing

Teachers in both cohorts, referred to their own responsiveness to the children in our case study classes, when wellbeing issues arose in class. In general, teachers felt prepared to support children who struggled with wellbeing issues and felt confident about implementing ideas to promote wellbeing in their classrooms.

“ *I would feel quite prepared I mean I think but that's me personally and I think it's good that there's so much talk about it and talking about emotions.*

(Teacher-female, 2nd class, A, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

“ *Yeah, I would quite enjoy... now I don't know if I'm trained in it, but I would enjoy talking about it with them.*

(Teacher-female, 2nd class A, Non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

“ *...(Child), had been talking to me one day and she was like, 'But sure I'm no good at anything', and I was like, 'You're so good at this and', and I was listing off things she was so good at and another child came up at the same time and was like, 'And you're a really good friend'.*

(Teacher-female, 2nd class A, Non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

“ *We do a little kind of energy check in the mornings we've started and you know a little, 'How are you feeling today?', so Mindful Monday, a little meditation on a Wednesday, mindful colouring, trying to do like a little gratitude jar, Thankful Thursday, Friday then we do our little assembly where they give good news.*

(Teacher-female, 5th class, Co-Ed, Non-DEIS, Rural)

”

“ *I definitely [work on] wellbeing as much as I can. My 'Kindness' Jar, we would definitely try do a lot of kind of physical activity to get us our wellbeing you know, clear our heads. We did, I did yoga with them for a few weeks at the start of the year, they actually loved it. [We have the] mindfulness room downstairs, with mats and everything like that and even just our mindfulness colouring, just for you know a little treat on a Thursday or a Friday just to clear their heads and that. So yeah, we would do it, I would try and bring it in as much as I can.*

(Teacher-male, 5th class, DEIS, Boys, Urban)

”

“ *[Wellbeing] It's just so important, I'm big into that anyway, [...], I just think it's so important and I think there should be curriculum times for that as well you know like a certain amount every week.*

(Teacher-female, 5th class, Co-Ed, Non-DEIS, Urban)

”



Other teachers spoke about the challenges they faced supporting children’s wellbeing. Some mentioned the curriculum and the content of the available programmes. Others referred to their perceived lack of training or proficiency when coping with some of the more profound issues children were presenting with, such as anxiety or behavioural issues or when children are experiencing critical situations, e.g., bereavement:

“ **Teacher:** *Yeah, so in 6th class here, there is a huge emphasis on the pastoral care and the SPHE curriculum. We do the wellbeing programme, we do the [programme name], and the regular SPHE curriculum.*

**Interviewer:** *What are your impressions of these kind of whole-school programmes? Do you think are they beneficial?*

**Teacher:** *Some of it – maybe not all of it. Some of it ... I find, just dragged out...the other day, for example, they had to think about a skill they need more of, and then they needed to think of a time where they lacked that skill. The children really, really struggled to articulate that, really struggled. I would probably struggle to think of a time when I lacked a skill... It was just all very complex, and I wonder is it just more of a tick-box than actually effective.*

(Teacher-female, 6th class, All-girls, Non-DEIS, Rural town)

”

“ *And then I came here, and it was behavioural issues beyond my wildest experiences. So, it was a big shock, a culture change.*

(Teacher-male, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

“ *I know I wasn’t trained in like bereavement, I wasn’t trained in like, what to do when the kids are like, what to do in a critical situation and like surely there should be some sort of emergency intervention of some kind.*

(Teacher-female, 2nd class A, DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

“ *I have one definitely who is like gets very upset when she can’t do something, is like way too hard on herself, it’s so sad because I don’t even know how to help anymore, I’m always [highlighting] what her strengths are but she is really feeling it and I’m trying to comprehend where this is coming from.*

(Teacher-female, 2nd class A, non-DEIS, All-girls, Urban)

”

For staff within the case study special school, provision of external support to the school was seen as necessary for supporting the wellbeing of their students with intellectual disabilities, however the challenges in accessing this were noted:

“ *And as a school, we try our very best to support a student and their wellbeing, but when you’re not getting the outside support from a psychologist or an OT or a physio, you know, little things like that, that’s where the breakdowns start.*

(Special school staff, Non DEIS, Rural Town)

”

Parents and staff within the case study special school referred to other whole-school approaches to wellbeing promotion included exercise and healthy eating, mindfulness, promoting independence, and supporting sensory processing differences.

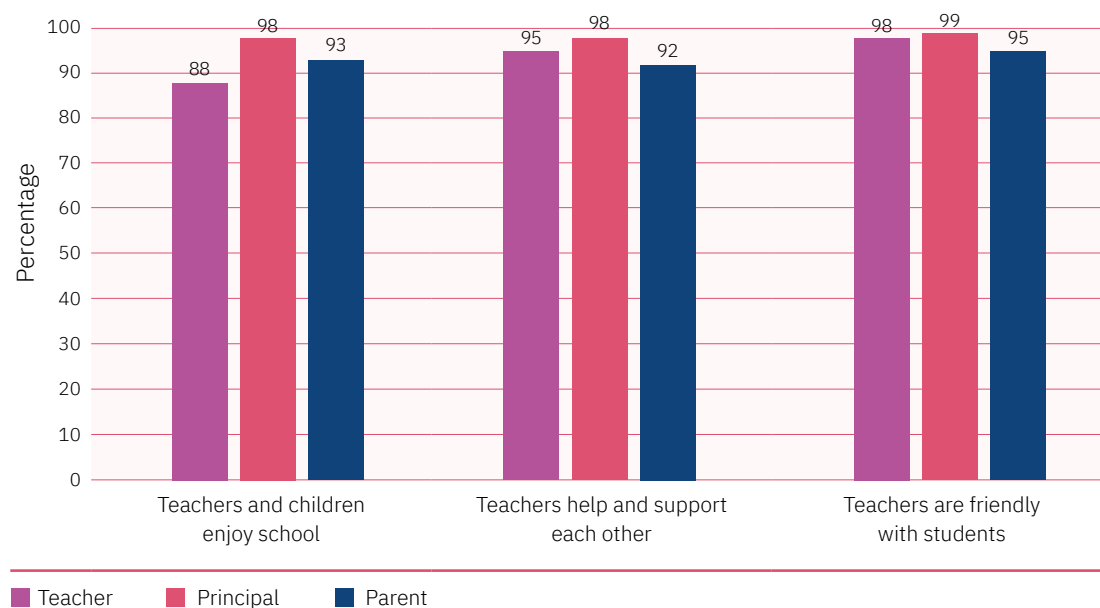
“ There is a big emphasis now on kids with what they eat and keeping healthy and getting exercise. I think we would like for [child] to be as healthy, happy, and just as self-independent as he could possibly be.  
 (Special school parent, Non DEIS, Rural Town)

“ We try and incorporate you know music and movement during the day and then we try and incorporate a little bit of mindfulness as well.  
 (Special school staff, Non DEIS, Rural Town)

### School climate for wellbeing

The relative success of schools in creating supportive and caring environments is evident from the kind of school climate that is promoted. In 2022, in Cohorts A and B, teachers, principals, and parents were asked about the social and emotional climate in their schools, rating the frequency of specific behaviours on a 4-point scale (‘rarely occurs’ (1), ‘sometimes occurs’ (2), ‘often occurs’ (3), and ‘very frequently occurs’ (4).). Nearly all adult participants felt that teachers were helpful and friendly, and reported that teachers and children enjoyed school. Teachers reporting on their levels of enjoyment were slightly lower than those reported by principals and parents but were still overwhelmingly positive (Figure 54).

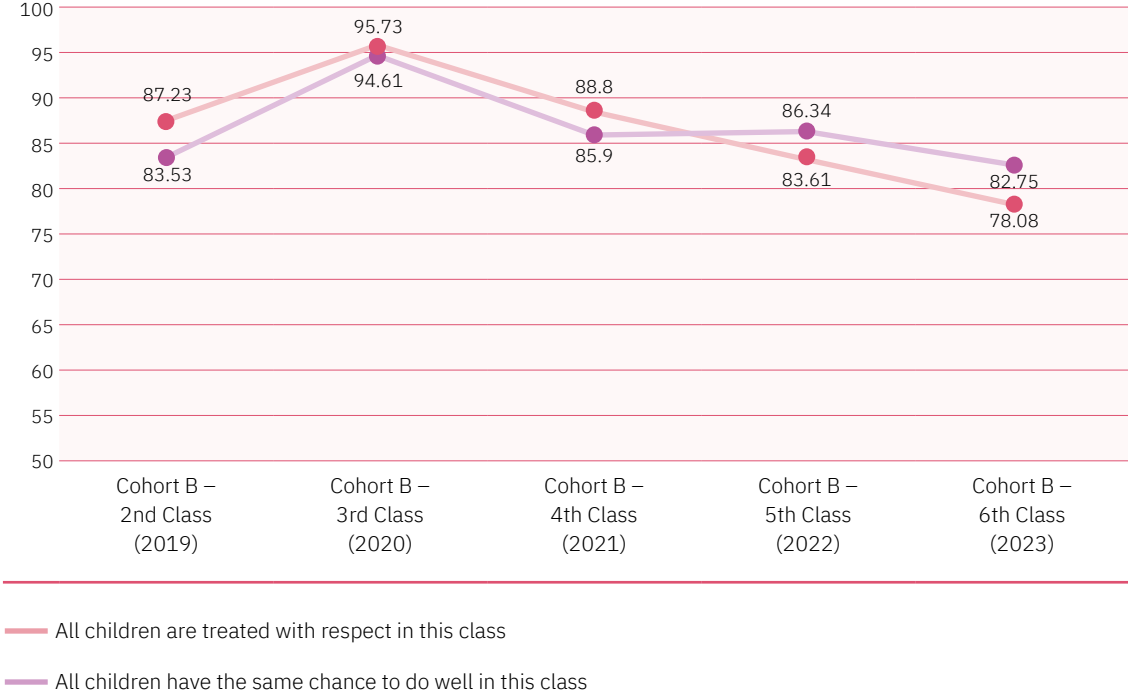
**FIGURE 54.** School social and emotional climate reported by teachers, principals, and parents (percent rating the behaviour as ‘often’ or ‘very frequently’ occurring)



**Note:** Enjoyment question for teachers and principals was “Teachers enjoy working here” and enjoyment question for parents was “Children enjoy coming to this school.” Questions were adapted from Hoy et al., (1990).

Cohort B children also reported on whether their teachers were respectful and fair in class in 2nd class (2019), 4th class (2021), and 5th class (2022) (questions adapted from (Zullig et al., 2015). Children’s experiences were mixed but mainly positive. They reported that their teachers were most respectful and fair in 3rd class (data collection occurred in Spring during the first school closure), with around 95% responding ‘usually’ or ‘always’. Children’s feelings about their teacher’s respectfulness and fairness remained high across all years but decreased from around 95-96% responding ‘usually’ or ‘always’ in 3rd, to around 6th class 87-83% responding in this way in 6th class (Figure 55).

**FIGURE 55.** Children’s reports of inclusive teaching (% of children responding ‘usually’ or ‘always’) (Cohort B)



Teachers in our case study classes, believed that school environments played an important and broad role in supporting children’s wellbeing. They talked about enabling children to pursue what brings them joy in their lives, fostering their resilience and acting as a safe space for them while modelling empathy and vulnerability:

“ To me it means that the children in my class are happy. That they have the initiative to tell me if they are not. That they are confident enough to recognise and deal with their own feelings.  
 (Teacher-female, Junior Infants, non-DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

“ Oh, definitely. Look, I think part of wellbeing is encouraging everyone, teachers and children, to do what they love and pursue what they love and find things that bring them joy. So, yes, it’s important. Should it be playing an even more formal, explicit role in my classroom? Yes.  
 (Teacher-female, 1st class, Non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

“ This is their happiest time. So they leave those troubles at the door, they know they’re not going to follow them into school [...] It really is, it’s like an escape for them.

(Teacher-female, 2nd class B, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

“ If a child is feeling sad, feeling lonely, feeling they’ve no friends, I do a lesson on friendship and feelings. How can we manage our feelings.

(Teacher-female, 5th class, DEIS, All-boys, Urban)

”

“ I’ve joked about how I’m no good at art in front of the class and, you know, joked, oh god, it’s art we have next. But I think they kind of see that as a fun thing then. That, oh, a teacher showing a bit of vulnerability. That, you know, we can all have things that we need to improve on. [...] So, I suppose with time and experience, I’ve learned that maybe if I’m just a bit more honest with them and I show them my vulnerability that, look, I’m not perfect and this but look, we’re going to try it and give it a lash anyway, as opposed to trying to avoid it.

(Teacher-male, 5th class, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

“ Interviewer: *What does wellbeing look like for you or for this school?*

Teacher: *I suppose wellbeing is in some ways that you’re able to function that you’re well enough to be able to function, that you’re happy in the space that you’re at, as best you can, [...] that we can cope and that we have coping mechanisms [...] that you’re able to keep on a, I don’t know.*

(Teacher-female, 6th class, non-DEIS, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This report provided an insight into the wellbeing of children in primary schools in Ireland, drawing on data collected with children at all stages of primary school. Conceptually, wellbeing is one of the key anchors of the *Children's School Lives* study. We conceive it as both influencing as well as being influenced by the core practices within primary schools – of curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy and fundamentally the kind of relationships that these practices support and promote between teachers and children, between children themselves within the wider community, all within the wider social contexts of their lives. In this report, children's wellbeing is understood as multi-dimensional and underpinned by a number of building blocks: experiencing positive emotions, engaging with daily activities, experiencing positive relationships, having a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and experiencing accomplishment through achieving goals and developing a sense of competence through this (Seligman, 2018).

The longitudinal nature of *Children's School Lives*, following children through their primary school journey, is a particular strength of the study design, and in this report, we present findings related to children's wellbeing across two cohorts that covers the full time span of primary schooling – from junior infants through to sixth class. This report builds on our earlier reports of experiences of Pedagogy ([Report 5](#)), and Curriculum and Assessment ([Report 6](#)) in children's school lives, framing these experiences in the context of their wellbeing and importantly how this changes over time. It prioritises children's voices and experiences, taking account also of teacher perspectives in order to deepen our understanding of processes and practices in school.

This report shows that children in primary schools most often feel happy, feel good about themselves, feel cared for, and feel safe – central dimensions of their wellbeing. However, in general, these positive emotions tend to decrease over time. Most children report experiencing worry or anxiety at some point, and levels of anxiety overall appear to increase as children progress through primary school. Interviews with children suggest that the main sources of anxiety are friendship issues and worries about school success, these issues coming especially to prominence in the later stages of primary school and as the transition to secondary school comes on the horizon. In contrast, while many children report experiencing some level of anxiety during their time in primary school, teachers report relatively low levels of emotional difficulties among the children in their classes, suggesting that children may not always share their anxieties with adults in school and/or that children's felt anxieties do not detract from their overall engagement with their learning in school. Interviews with teachers highlight their efforts to support children's wellbeing, with participants describing how they work to create a climate for wellbeing within their classrooms and that this was a particular focus following the period of pandemic-related school closures. The interconnection between teacher pedagogies and children's wellbeing, detailed in [Report 5](#), is evident in the teacher's strong commitment to the holistic development of children in their care as central to their concepts of 'good' teaching and their own self-efficacy as teachers.

Reflecting this emphasis placed by teachers on children's wellbeing, children tended to report very positive feelings about school and about learning. They highlighted the interconnection between their academic wellbeing and experiences of pedagogy, as detailed in [Report 5](#). There, the rich pen pictures of individual case study children illustrated how children recognise the importance and purpose of education for both their present and future lives. However, it was evident that as children progressed to the later stages of primary school, overall ratings of school enjoyment and interest in most subjects decreased, at varying rates, from 1st through to 6th class. This may reflect a change in the nature of teaching and learning as children get older, as we noted in [Report 5](#), where children shared how they experience learning as more content-driven and less playful as they progress through grade levels. Yet, on a positive note, children's academic self-concept was relatively stable over time (from 4th to 6th class), suggesting that how children feel about themselves as learners is distinct from their enjoyment of particular subject areas. While

there was a drop in academic self-concept for children in Cohort B from 2nd class (2019) to 4th class (2023), the COVID-19 pandemic was likely a contributing factor here, with the school closures leading to very different dynamics in terms of peer comparisons and feedback from teachers.

The complex nature of children's relationships in school is evident throughout this report and central to children's experiences of their school lives, and ultimately their wellbeing. In interviews, children spoke of their friends as a key source of happiness and support in school, and most children felt that their classmates cared about them. However, friendship or peer issues could also be a source of stress for children, reflected in the variation we see around children's sense of belonging in school. For some children, 'fitting in' and being included amongst peers is a challenge, and around  $\frac{1}{4}$  of children in 4th, 5th and 6th class reported being a victim of bullying at least once. Our separate, more in depth analysis of school bullying based on CSL data (see D'Urso et al., 2022) showed that classrooms with lower overall levels of 'caring' amongst classmates were associated with higher levels of bullying, and so efforts to combat or prevent bullying might focus on building social cohesion within classes. An unexpected finding was the higher levels of bullying reported by children in the younger cohort, in 2nd class in 2023, compared to the older cohort (in 4th, 5th, and 6th class). Around half of the Cohort A children reported that they had *not* been a victim of bullying in the previous couple of months, compared to two thirds of Cohort B children who said they had not been a victim of bullying. It may be that children in the younger cohort are more comfortable to disclose their experience of bullying. However, another potential explanation is a decline in children's social skills in these earlier years with less social cohesion at this stage of primary school. Indeed, this may have been exacerbated by the prolonged school closures and social restrictions which limited the extent to which children could physically interact, inside and outside school. Our previous analysis ([Report 5](#)) highlighted teachers' concerns with this younger cohort of children arising from school closures and their emphasis on building collaborative and team building pedagogies into their classroom practices on children's return to in-person learning. The implications of this period of pandemic lockdowns for children's social skills is worthy of further investigation in relation to school relationships and peer dynamics.

An additional strength of the *Children's School Lives* research design is the accelerated cohort design, which facilitates a comparison of two groups of 2nd class children (age 8–9 years) at two points in time (four years apart). Throughout the report, we highlight comparative points between 2nd class in 2019 and 2nd class in 2023, and while an obvious influence on children's environments and learning between these two years was the COVID-19 pandemic, caution must be exercised in assuming that this explains any differences in these two cohorts. Children in 2nd class in 2023 reported higher levels of anxiety compared to 2nd class children in 2019, and while this may suggest levels of anxiety are higher post-pandemic, it is also possible that, compared to four years ago, there is a greater culture of openness in discussing or disclosing feelings in schools. Indeed, an increasing emphasis on children's social and emotional wellbeing on the return to school following the pandemic may also mean that children of this age are more aware of and empowered to articulate their feelings and thus more likely to acknowledge them within the questionnaires. We also found that 2nd class children in 2023 report liking school more and having a more positive attitude towards learning than similar aged children in 2019. This could be because the children in 2nd class in 2023 would have experienced remote teaching and learning for significant periods of Junior and Senior Infants classes, predisposing them to more positive views on school. As we document in our previous reports, children missed the daily interactions with teachers and their peers during the school closures.

In addition to highlighting trends over time for children in general, this report has also highlighted key gender differences. Girls tend to report more positive feelings about school than boys, but also tend to be more anxious about schoolwork and friendships. While this may suggest a gender difference, it is also possible that boys and girls may differ in the extent to which they are willing to report strong (positive or negative) emotions. Children's

daily experiences and interactions, both inside and outside school, inform their developing sense of self, and it was interesting to note gender differences in the development of children's positive emotions about themselves and their sense of competency. While girls and boys had similar levels of self-acceptance in 2nd class, girls' feelings of self-acceptance decreased with each year group and were significantly lower than boys' by 6th class. This picture is consolidated when we look at gender differences in children's academic self-concept, with boys reporting higher levels of self-concept than girls at all time points. This is of concern and may be an important area for development within wellbeing programmes or curricula.

This report presents a compelling picture of children's school lives and the centrality of their school experiences to their wellbeing. Further analysis in subsequent reports will situate these findings in the wider social context of their lives and how factors related to gender, socio-economic background and ethnicity mediate their experiences, as well as how specific school and classroom cultures and practices influence the range of wellbeing outcomes for children in primary schools.

## ADDITIONAL PUBLICATIONS ON THE CHILDREN'S SCHOOL LIVES STUDY

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