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**CHILDREN'S
SCHOOL LIVES**
National longitudinal cohort study
of primary schooling in Ireland

**CHILDREN'S SCHOOL
LIVES IN JUNIOR INFANTS**
REPORT NO. 3
2021

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Religion and religiosity
School teachers in the family
Level of education
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FOREWORD

This report is the third in the series from *Children's School Lives*, an innovative, longitudinal research study involving almost 4,000 children in 189 primary schools. One of the defining features of the study is the strong emphasis it places on listening to and learning directly from children about their experience of being in primary school in Ireland. This particular report introduces us to the youngest children in the study. The multiple perspectives gathered from the children themselves, their families, teachers and school principals, converge to provide us with a rich, detailed picture of the children's first year in school. Uniquely, this period incorporates the months just prior to the arrival of the Coronavirus on Irish shores and the weeks immediately after the commencement of the first national lockdown in Spring 2020.

Early childhood is a time of being and becoming, a time which provides important foundations for children's learning and for life itself. We know from research that the first six years of a child's life, their early childhood years, are particularly important for their holistic development. We also know from research that a positive transition from preschool to primary school is a predictor of children's future success in terms of social, emotional and educational outcomes. Yet, despite this knowledge, relatively little research exists in the Irish context on children's initial experiences in primary school. The *Children's School Lives* study responds directly to this research gap by capturing, through multiple voices, comprehensive insights into the children's initial weeks and months in their primary classrooms.

Collectively, the findings presented in *Children's School Lives* in Junior Infants, bring us right inside the doors of the classrooms and let us see, up close, what it looks like and feels like to be a child in their first year in school. We see the rich diversity of Irish society reflected in these classrooms. We learn about the children's positive experience of their transition to primary school. Unsurprisingly, relationships sit at the heart of this process with teachers in the study prioritising the building of positive relationships with the children and their families thereby helping children to enjoy their new setting. While ability grouping emerges as a feature of children's experience in junior infants, there is ample evidence of the importance teachers place on playful teaching and learning for this age group despite having few opportunities for professional development, limited resources and dealing with the challenge of time. The emphasis placed by teachers on creating and nurturing a happy, safe and positive learning environment for the children is also strong. This is hugely appreciated by the children's families as they recognise the dedication and enthusiasm of the teachers in helping the children to settle into school and to flourish socially and academically. The report also provides insights into the importance teachers place on planning and the demands of their work alongside the job satisfaction they derive from it. The demands of work is also a theme emerging from the principals as they strive to support the needs of each young child in their school.

The Council records its special thanks to the schools and families who, despite the challenging circumstances of the last 20 months created by the pandemic, continue to give their time so generously to this important study. The publication of the report coincides with the NCCA's second phase of consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* as part of the Council's high-level review of the primary curriculum. The report, along with those to follow, will be instrumental in feeding into and enabling us to ensure that the redeveloped primary curriculum supports positive transitions into school and appropriately rich, playful and challenging learning experiences for all young children as they begin their primary education.

The NCCA also thanks and commends the UCD Research Team led by Professor Dympna Devine, Associate Professor Jennifer Symonds, Assistant Professor Seaneen Sloan and Assistant Professor Gabriela Martinez Sainz. Their carefully chosen and executed research methodologies maximised the children's involvement giving prominence to these young voices and perspectives, a feature of the study to be celebrated.

Arlene Forster
Chief Executive, NCCA



OVERVIEW

Children’s School Lives (CSL) is a mixed methods, longitudinal study of primary schooling in Ireland, following two cohorts of children in representative samples of schools from 2019 to 2024. CSL was commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and is being carried out by the University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education.

The cross-sequential cohort design of CSL involves studying two cohorts simultaneously and as such, allows us to capture the full breadth of primary school, including the transition into and out of primary school, within a shorter time period. Within the sample of schools participating in Cohort A, the focus is on children who began Junior Infants in September 2019 and who will be followed through to 2nd Class. In Cohort B schools, children who started 2nd Class in September 2018 are being followed through to the first year of second level education (Table 1).

TABLE 1 COHORT TIMELINE

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Cohort A	Preschool	Junior Infants	Senior Infants	1st Class	2nd Class	-
Cohort B	2nd Class	3rd Class	4th Class	5th Class	6th Class	1st Year

Through data collection with children, their families, teachers and school principals, the CSL study is capturing rich information about how primary education in Ireland is experienced. Each year, questionnaires are administered with each of the participant groups in 189 schools. Thirteen of these schools are also case study schools, in which CSL researchers spend extended time exploring in-depth everyday practices in these schools. The data collected covers six overarching thematic areas:

1. School and teaching cultures
(including leadership, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment)
2. Equality, voice and inclusion
3. Wellbeing
4. Engagement
5. Learning outcomes
6. School transitions

This report represents the third CSL publication. Report 1 (Devine et al., 2020) presented a baseline profile of Cohort B schools and participants. Report 2 (Symonds et al., 2020) focused on participant experiences of remote teaching and learning necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. This third report is focused on introducing the participants in Cohort A of CSL who started in Junior Infants in September 2019. It draws on research with children in 128 junior infant classes in 83 primary schools across Ireland. This wave of data spans the school year, beginning with data collected before the COVID-19 pandemic in Autumn 2019, and ending with data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020.

The information presented in this report draws on a number of data sources (summarised in Table 2). National study data were collected from adult participants (school principals, Junior

Infants class teachers and parents) predominantly via online questionnaires. For principals and teachers, the questionnaire captured information about their backgrounds, their school and their class. For parents, the questionnaire collected data on the family background and context, experiences of pre-school, preparing their child to start school, and parental perceptions of their child’s adjustment to school.

The transition to primary school marks an important phase in children’s school lives, and in order to capture experiences of this, data collection with children, parents and teachers was timed to take place shortly after children had begun school in September 2019. This was complemented by the case study data collection in which children in Junior Infants were observed during classroom and playtime periods with up to two weeks intensive immersion in each case study school during the data collection period.

TABLE 2 SUMMARY OF COHORT A NATIONAL STUDY WAVE 1 DATA COLLECTION

Participant group	Data collection	Timing of administration	Participation rate
Junior Infants children	1-1 administration	October - November 2019	1,640 out of a maximum of 1,771 children with parent consent (93%)
Junior Infants teachers	Teacher questionnaire (choice of online or paper)	October - November 2019	104 out of 132 (79%)
Parents	Online questionnaire	October - November 2019	477 out of 1,619 parents who consented and provided an email address (29%)
Principals	Online questionnaire	May 2020	60 out of 83 (72%)

COHORT A:

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

National study

Recruitment of schools to the national study began in November 2018. By February 2019, 85 schools had been recruited to Cohort A. One school withdrew from the study at the beginning of the first wave of data collection in October 2019, and a further school withdrew in 2021. Table 3 summarises the characteristics of the 83 participating schools in relation to the eligible population of primary schools in Ireland.

Case study

Recruitment of case study schools took place in Spring 2019 and schools were selected from the overall cohort of schools participating in the national study. Interviews were conducted with each of the principals in these case study schools (7), along with the class teacher of Junior Infants (7). In addition, parents of the case study children in each class were interviewed (13 in total) along with five grandparents (Table 4).

TABLE 3 CHARACTERISTICS OF COHORT A NATIONAL STUDY SCHOOLS

		Population (N = 2,510 schools)		Cohort A sample (N = 83)	
		N	%	N	%
School type	Junior school	91	3.6	5	6.0
	Vertical school	2,419	96.4	78	94.0
*DEIS status	Not-designated	2,009	80.0	55	66.3
	DEIS band 1	181	7.2	14	16.9
	DEIS band 2	86	3.4	7	8.4
	DEIS rural	234	9.3	7	8.4
Gender mix	Mixed gender	2,250	89.6	68	81.9
	Girls only	96	3.8	3	3.6
	Boys only	99	3.9	6	7.2
	Single sex with mixed junior classes	65	2.6	6	7.2
Irish classification	Irish medium	210	8.4	3	3.6
	English medium	2,275	90.6	80	96.4
	Some subjects through Irish	25	1.0	-	-
Ethos	Catholic	2,248	89.6	72	86.7
	Church of Ireland	119	4.7	4	4.8
	Multi-denominational	112	4.5	7	8.4
	other	31	1.2	-	-
Size	Up to 50 pupils	212	8.5	5	6.0
	51 - 100 pupils	626	24.9	13	15.7
	101-400 pupils	1,375	54.8	58	69.9
	401 or more pupils	297	11.8	7	8.4

* DEIS = Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools. The DEIS programme provides additional administrative and teaching resources to schools designated as disadvantaged by the Department of Education and Skills.

TABLE 4 COHORT A CASE STUDY SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

DEIS Boys Urban Catholic	Boys Urban Catholic
DEIS Girls Urban Catholic	Girls Urban Catholic
DEIS Co-Ed Urban Catholic	Co-Ed Rural town Irish medium
	Co-Ed Rural Multi-Denominational

These 7 case study schools also participate in the national study providing an additional rich comparative set of data.



KEY FINDINGS:

COHORT A SCHOOLS

Key Findings: Cohort A Schools

Counties

- Participating Cohort A schools are in 20 of the 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland.
- Dublin (22), Cork (7) and Mayo (7) had the most participating schools.

School type and patronage

- The majority of participating Cohort A schools are vertical (94%) which is similar to the proportion of vertical schools in the population.
- Reflecting patronage patterns in the Irish primary school system, most schools had a Catholic ethos (87%).

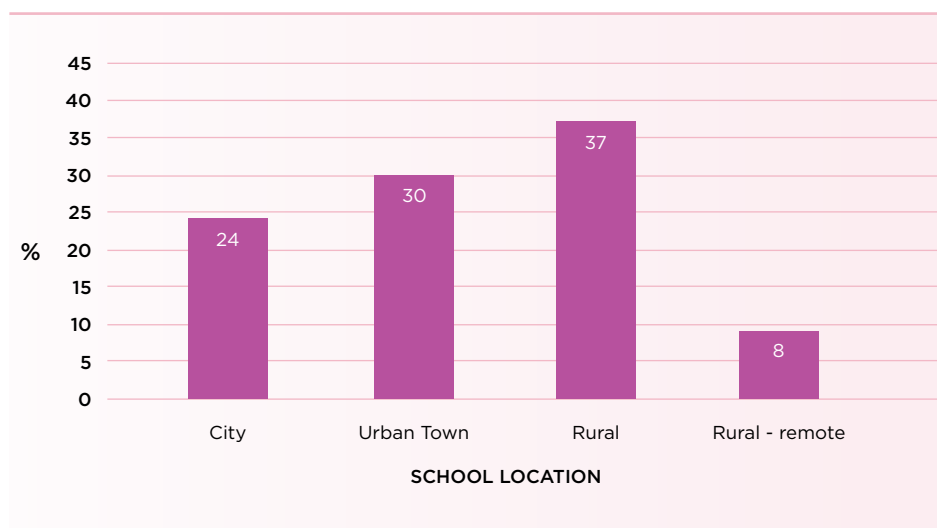
Language of instruction

- The majority of Cohort A schools were English medium schools (96%), with three Irish medium schools participating.

School size and urban/rural location

- About 6% of participating Cohort A schools were very small (under 50 pupils in total), and 8% were large (over 400 pupils).
- School Eircodes were used to categorise the sample based on location, using the CSO classification (Figure 1). Over a third of schools were based in rural locations (37%), and a further 8% were in remote rural locations. Just under a third (30%) were based in urban towns, and 24% in cities.

Figure 1 Cohort A school location



Gender composition

- Mixed gender schools accounted for 82% of the sample; 4% were girls only schools, and 7% were boys only schools. A further 7% were single sex with mixed junior classes.

DEIS status

- A third of participating schools had DEIS status (34%).

- Principals were asked if they believed their school had the appropriate DEIS classification; 29% of those who responded (n = 12 out of 42) believed that their school did not have the appropriate DEIS classification. Eight of these 12 schools did not have DEIS status.

Minority group prevalence

Figure 2 shows the *estimated* prevalence of different minority groups in the schools based on the principals' reports (N = 42 out of a total of 83 schools). While estimates, they do provide an indication of variation across CSL schools in the pupil composition and profile.

- Over three quarters of these schools had some children of immigrant background, but these were not evenly distributed. Some clustering was evident, with 12% of these schools having over 40% of their school comprised of children from immigrant backgrounds with a further 22% having over a quarter of children from immigrant communities. Conversely, a quarter of schools had no children of immigrant background.
- Over a third of these principals reported that they had children from a refugee background in their school, but this was less than 5% of the school population, with a further 5% of schools indicating that up to 10% of their school comprised of children who were refugees. A majority of principals who responded (62%) indicated they had no refugee children in their schools.
- Just over half of principals who responded (55%) indicated they had no children from the Travelling community in their school, with just over a quarter estimating they had a small number, less than 5% of the school population. 17% of principals estimated that the proportion was 5-10%.
- Just under three quarters of principals (74%) reported that there were some children not proficient in the language of instruction attending their school. There was considerable variation across schools, with 7% of principals estimating that over 40% of their school population were not proficient in the language of instruction, and 29% estimating that the proportion was less than 5%. Just over a quarter of principals estimated they had no children who were not proficient in the language of instruction.
- All principals reported that there were children needing special education provision within their school. Approximately half of principals estimated that 26-40% of their school population needed additional learning support, and a further 37% estimated that 11-25% needed additional learning support.
- About three fifths of principals (61%) estimated that fewer than 5% of their school population was academically gifted, while 32% estimated that the proportion was 5 - 10%.
- The prevalence of behavioural difficulties was estimated to be relatively low (<5%) by 46% of principals. A further 27% of principals estimated the proportion to be slightly higher (5-10%), while a further 22% estimated that at 11-25% of children had behavioural difficulties.
- Over half of principals (56%) reported that there were no children experiencing homelessness among their school population, while 5% of principals estimated the proportion to be 5-10% and 2% estimated that as many as 11-25% of their school population was homeless.
- A small proportion of principals (10%) reported that they had some children (<5%) on reduced timetables.

Our case study data, which are representative of the diversity and range of schools in the national study, highlights elements related to the clustering of children in certain schools. As Figure 2 notes, while this applies predominantly to the clustering of children of immigrant background in addition to children needing learning support, principals also made reference to children's family circumstances including homelessness:

“

'So, even in our very small school, we've a number of nationalities, a number of cultures but we also see I think a pretty broad enough spectrum socially of where children and families are at, I suppose in Ireland at the moment... we've a number of homeless children for example.'

(Principal, Co-Ed, Rural)

”

The varied profiles of schools noted by principals highlights the diversity that exists in Irish society which is mirrored in schools at local level. This has a profound impact on experiences within primary schools, in terms of priorities, time, resources, friendships and ultimately children's learning, bringing challenges as well as opportunities. Most explicit in principals narratives was the foundational impact of poverty and social exclusion on the learning trajectories of children entering primary school, and not only among those in designated disadvantaged (DEIS) schools:

“

'Last year I would have had [states number] children who became homeless and the year before, ...but we supported the parents by ...making sure the kids had a breakfast when they came in... obviously making sure all the books and all that, giving them a leap card to make sure they could come'

(Principal, Girls, Urban)

”

“

'But some of these children are coming to school and they have, may have no breakfast, may have not slept during the night, may have been disturbed during the night ...We then had to try and facilitate how do we feed the kids in the morning before they learn. You can't learn on an empty stomach really.'

(Teacher, DEIS, Boys, Urban)

”

The clustering of children of immigrant background in certain schools is of note, especially, though not exclusively, in DEIS schools. This was also reflected in the case study schools where the level of positive aspiration of immigrant parents for their children's education was consistently evident:

“

'Because I have experienced a lot back home of children at an early age not interested in school... I want him [case study child] to be more into school. Into his assignments, going to school, a holiday, ... I want him to be well educated.'

(Dad, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

”

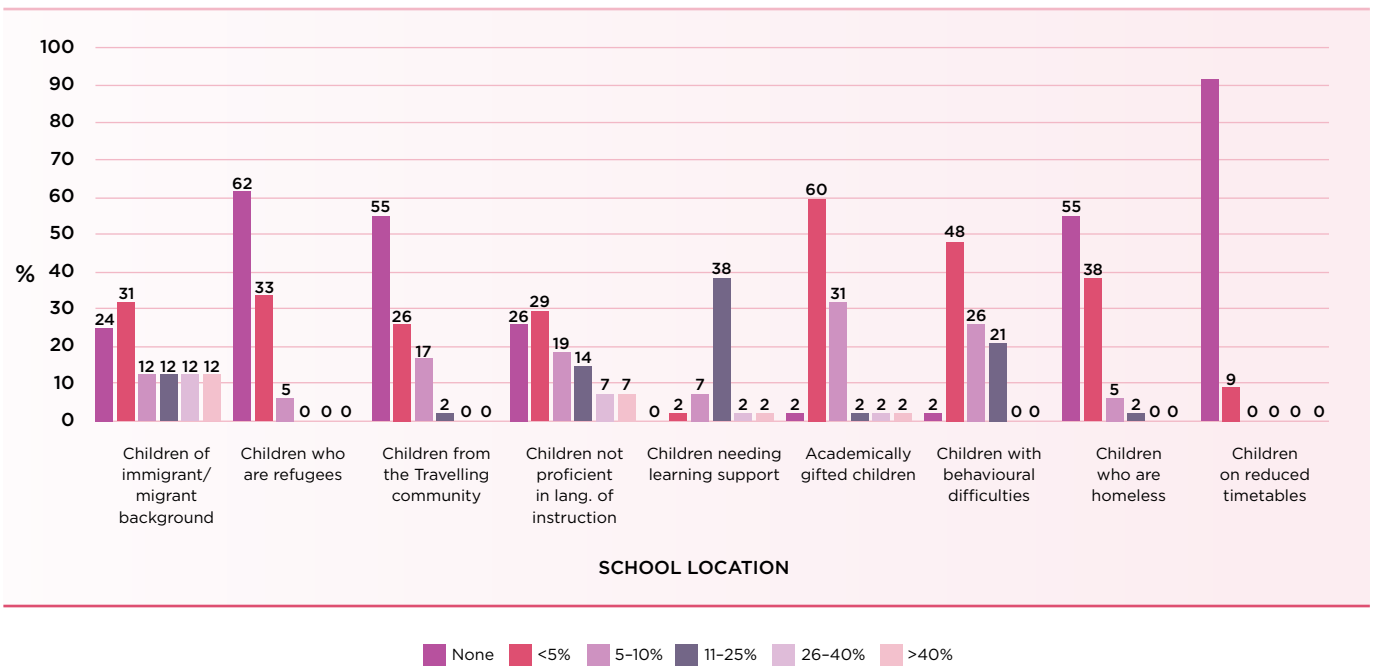
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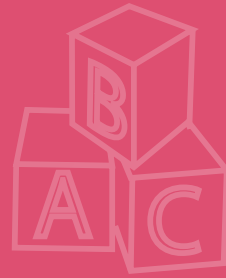
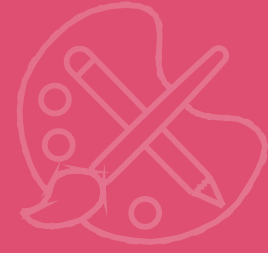
'Now we still have, I would say our EAL students, parents working, they're you know, they would be our new kind of middle class in the school...You see them in secondary, you see their children progressing, going to college, you know.'

(Principal, DEIS, Boys, Urban)

”

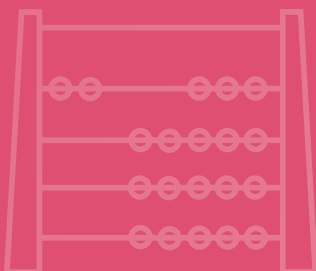
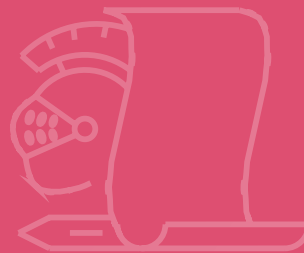
Figure 2 Estimated prevalence of minority groups (principal's report on whole school)





KEY FINDINGS:

CHILDREN IN JUNIOR INFANTS



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8 - 3



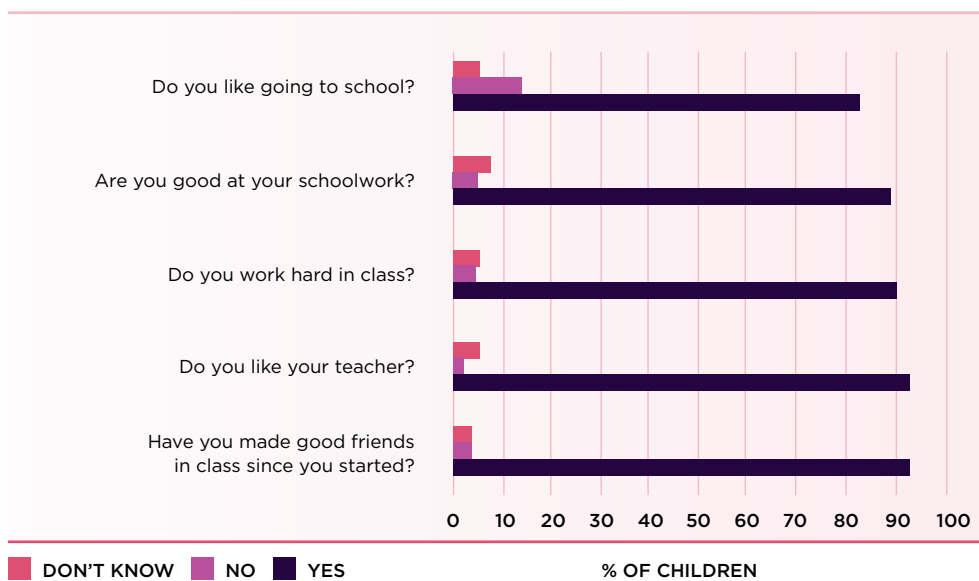
Key Findings: Children in Junior Infants

Enjoyment of school

In November 2019, approximately three months into the school year, trained fieldworkers visited each of the participating Junior Infants classes and administered a short, structured interview with those children who assented to participate and who had parental consent (parental consent was obtained for 78% of 2,276 children across the 83 schools). A total of 1,663 children participated.

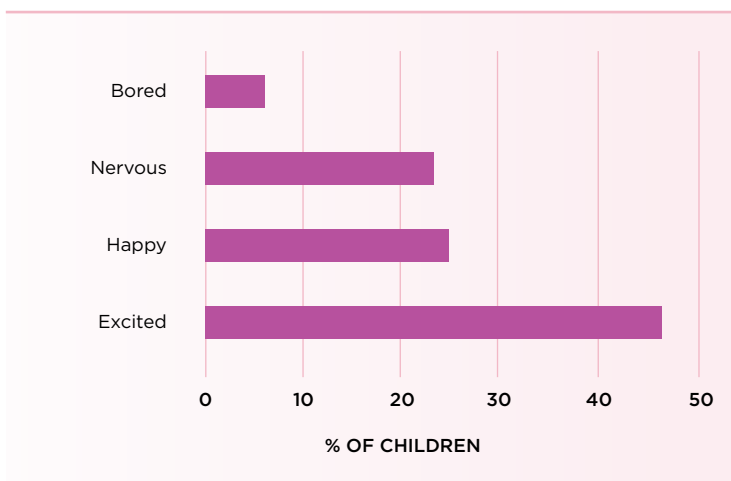
The structured interview included five items capturing children's perceptions of schools, including their perception of themselves as learners (Figure 3). Across all five items, a large proportion of the sample answered 'yes', although it is noteworthy 13% of children responded no to the question 'Do you like going to school?'.

Figure 3 Children's perceptions of school



Children were asked about their predominant feeling on their first day at school, from a pre-specified list of options (Figure 4). Almost half of children (46%) reported feeling excited and a further 25% reported feeling happy. Almost a quarter reported feeling nervous, and 6% were bored.

Figure 4 Children's feelings on their first day of school



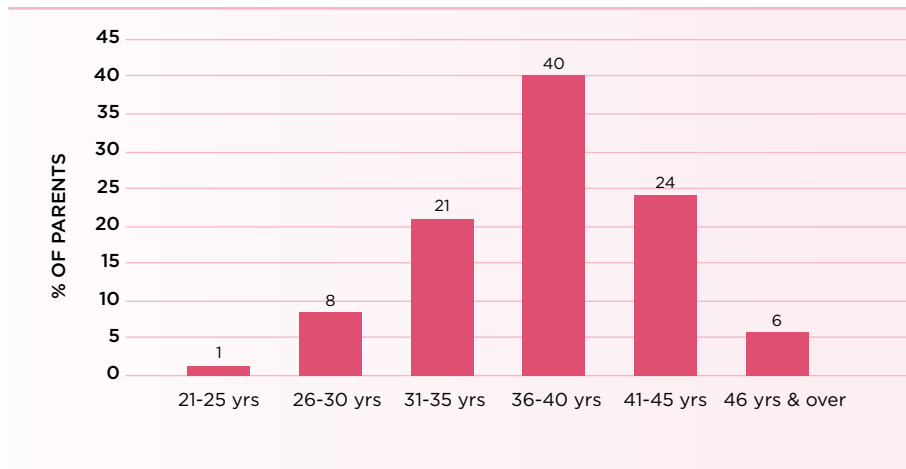
FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

This section draws on data about Cohort A children and their family contexts, based on parent reports collected through an online survey in Autumn 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

Parent age and gender

- Of the 477 parents/guardians who completed the questionnaire, 90% were female, and 40% were aged 36-40 years (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Parent age group



Parent nationality

- A large proportion of parent questionnaire respondents identified as Irish (82%) and 2% identified as British. A total of 33 other nationalities were reported, the most common being Polish (3% of parents responding to the survey).

Parent and child ethnicity

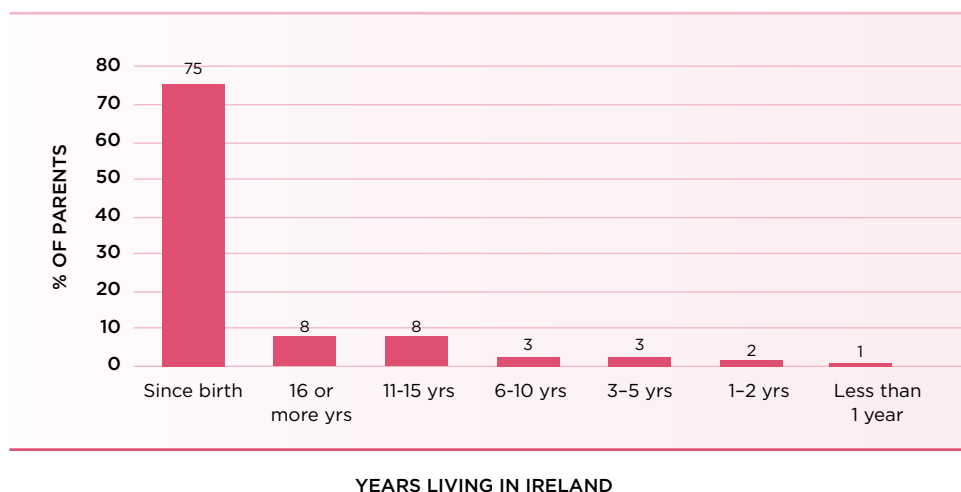
- Of the 429 parents who answered questions about ethnicity, 82% described their own ethnic background as White Irish. A further 12% were from any other White background and 4% were from an Asian or Asian Irish background.
- Parents also reported on their child's ethnic background. The composition of ethnic backgrounds broadly reflected the parent data, with 83% of children reported as White Irish and a further 9% from any other White background. Three per cent of children were from an Asian or Asian Irish background, and 3% were from a mixed ethnic background.

Years parent has lived in Ireland

- Three quarters of parents (75%) have lived in Ireland since birth (Figure 6). 8% have lived in Ireland for 16 years or more, and a further 8% for 11-15 years.
- A small proportion of parents have lived in Ireland for less than a year (1%), 1-2 years (2%) or 3-5 years (3%).

¹ An important caveat here is the potential for response bias, with certain populations being less likely to respond as a result of, for example, language barriers or lack of internet access. Highly educated parents are over represented in the sample and so findings, particularly in relation to the home learning environment, are unlikely to be representative of the wider population.

Figure 6 Years parent has lived in Ireland



Home language

- English was the main language spoken at home for 78% of households. In a further 5% of households, both English and Irish were spoken.
- In 17% of households, another language (not English or Irish) was spoken; in 10% of the sample, the other language was the main language spoken in the household.
- Twenty-one other languages were reported as being spoken at home. The most common other language was Polish, spoken in 2% of households. The next most common languages were Romanian (1%) and Arabic (1%).

Parent education and employment

- About three-fifths of parents (61%) were educated to degree level or higher (in comparison to 39% of adults aged between 20 and 49 years in the general population [Census 2016]).
- For 10% of parents, the Leaving Certificate (including Leaving Cert Applied) was the highest level of education, and a further 24% had a non-degree qualification such as a diploma or technical qualification.
- A small proportion (5%) had a level of education below Leaving Cert.
- Parents were asked about their usual situation in regards to work. Just over half of participating parents (noting that these were predominantly mothers) were employed on a full-time basis (51%), and a further 22% were working part-time. Just over a fifth were caring for the home or family (22%), and 4% were unemployed or unable to work due to sickness or disability.
- Of those parents who were employed, almost two thirds (64%) were employed in professional and managerial occupations.

Additional needs

- The proportion of children in the sample reported by parents as having a longstanding illness, condition or disability was 9%.
- Nine per cent of participating parents reported that their child received additional support in school. This was commonly a Special Needs Assistant (3%), Special Education Teacher hours (3%) and speech and language therapy (3%). Other forms of support reported by parents were school nurse (1%) and English language support (1%).

Social and emotional development

- Parents responded to the 25-item Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, a widely used scale for assessing children’s social and emotional wellbeing (Goodman, 1997). Higher scores for all scales (with the exception of the prosocial behaviour scale) reflect a greater level of difficulty.
- The mean scores (Table 5) are broadly comparable with those reported by Growing Up in Ireland, based on parental ratings of a representative sample of five-year-olds (Murray et al., 2019).
- The relatively low mean scores for the emotional problems, conduct problems and peer problems subscales, and the high mean score for prosocial behaviour, suggests that parents were rating their child’s development favourably in these areas, however this may also reflect the composition of the parent questionnaire sample (with a higher proportion of highly educated parents).

TABLE 5 STRENGTHS AND DIFFICULTIES QUESTIONNAIRE SCORES

	Scale	CSL Cohort A Mean (SD)	GUI Infant Cohort (age 5) Mean (SD)
Emotional problems	0-10	1.8 (1.9)	1.6 (1.7)
Conduct problems	0-10	1.6 (1.5)	1.5 (1.5)
Hyperactivity/ attention	0-10	3.4 (2.4)	3.4 (2.5)
Peer problems	0-10	1.1 (1.5)	1.0 (1.3)
Total difficulties	0-40	7.9 (5.3)	7.4 (4.9)
Prosocial behaviour	0-10	8.2 (1.8)	8.4 (1.7)

Home learning environment

- Parents were asked how frequently the main types of home learning activities took place with their Junior Infants child (Figure 7).
- The main activity reported was reading to their child, with 52% reporting that an adult in the household did this every day, and 29% reporting that this happened 4-6 times a week.
- Activities involving numbers and counting most commonly happened 1-3 times a week (34%).
- Over two-thirds of parents reported that there were over 30 children’s books in their home; in eight per cent of households, there were between 1-10 children’s books.

Case studies involved interviewing the families of 14 children, two from each case study class, to include parents and grandparents. Here we gained insights into the patterns signalled at national level: the contexts of the children’s family lives during this key transition moment, parent’s hopes and expectations for their children starting schools, as well as their worries. Interviews highlighted many of the challenges of contemporary family life, including the time-bind of managing working life with care routines, now altered with the transition to school:

“

'He gets up in the morning and we go to Granny's because I start work at 8 o'clock. So, Granny gives him his breakfast. Then she brings him to school, and he is obviously at school here. Then after school, I collect him because I am on my lunch break and bring him back to Granny's...I suppose she has always looked after him because I have always had to work full-time. They definitely have a great bond.'

(Mother 1, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

”

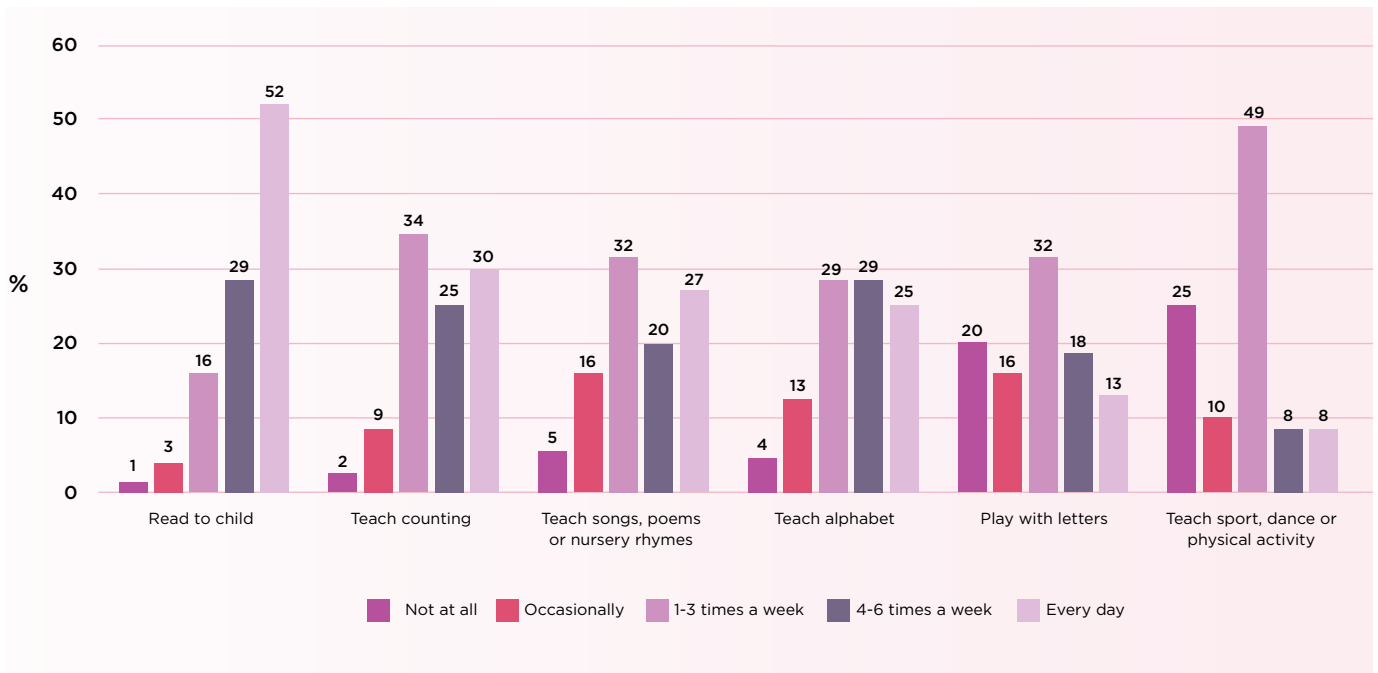
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'Yes, I feel like parents are more out working now and grandparents would be there more with the children and as well, with the home situation, people wouldn't have their own homes as much as years ago now. So, the families are more involved and in the one home, I think, for longer...we are there for them as much as we can be. You are more involved, definitely.'

(Grandmother, DEIS, Girls, Urban)

”

Figure 7 Frequency of learning activities in the home (parent-report)



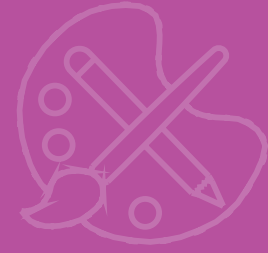
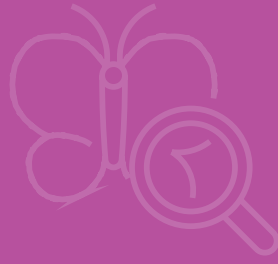
Parents spoke of the need for after-school facilities to help them cope with work schedules and achieve a work-life balance, but also finding the time to be there for their children as they embarked on this significant transition to primary school. In this context, pick-up time from school was considered to be an important time to communicate and check-in with children:

“

'I think that is really important. Kids just definitely need time, especially smaller kids, they just need time to be listened to. They are a bit slower. They are not going against the clock like adults are. We are always racing against the clock. They are not, and I think they just need a bit more time, and to be listened to. A bit of attention.'

(Mother 2, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

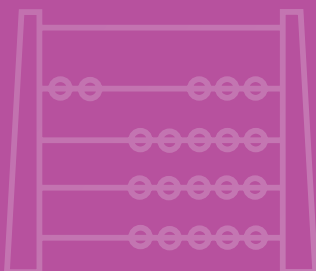
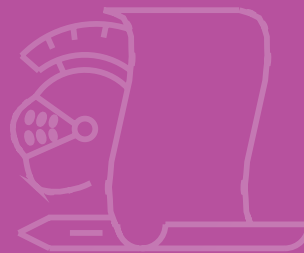
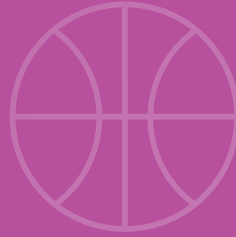
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KEY FINDINGS:



JUNIOR INFANTS CLASSES



4 x 4
8 - 3



Key Findings: Junior Infants Classes

Class size and composition

- Teachers reported on a total of 103 Junior Infants classes.
- Class sizes ranged from 8 – 32 children. The average class size was 21 children.
- Nine classes were single-gender classes (5 all boys and 4 all girls).
- Three quarters of classes were single grade classes; 20% were consecutive grade (Junior and Senior Infants), and 5% were multigrade classes.

The school day (incl. break times)

- Class start times ranged from 8:20am to 9:30am. The most common class start time was 9:20am (35% of classes). The next most common start time was 8:50am (30% of classes).
- Class end times ranged from 1pm to 2:50pm. The most common class end time was 2pm (35%), followed by 1:30pm (27%).
- The majority of classes had two breaks during the day (93%), with 6% having three breaks and 1% having four breaks.
- Break 1 was most commonly a mid-morning 10 minute (78%) or 15 minute (19%) break, and took place outdoors for the majority of classes (88%).
- Break 2 tended to be a longer break of 30 minutes (72%), usually taking place outside (87%) between 12 and 1pm.

Case study data highlighted the importance of children’s preparation for the school day, including the routines within the classroom and the transition going home. For teachers of Junior Infants, the structure of what happens before, during and after school is an important aspect as it helps children to settle in and have more positive experiences. The emphasis for them, especially at the beginning of the Junior Infant year, is providing an overall positive experience for children, helping them to overcome anxiety and making sure they enjoy being in their schools and classrooms:



‘I really think the structure and organisation, especially in an infant classroom, is really important for them. I think a lot of time at the start of the year, things they are unsure of is because they don’t know how the day is going to look. [...] So that the first thing we always did was, teach them about the visual timetable. So that we know when all of these things are happening in the day. For the majority of them, that is enough.’

(Teacher, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

‘I try to make (starting school) a really kind of playful and fun place, especially the first few weeks...I’d be more making sure that they’re enjoying themselves and they’re happy when they’re leaving and they’re happy coming in.’

(Teacher, DEIS, Girls, Urban)

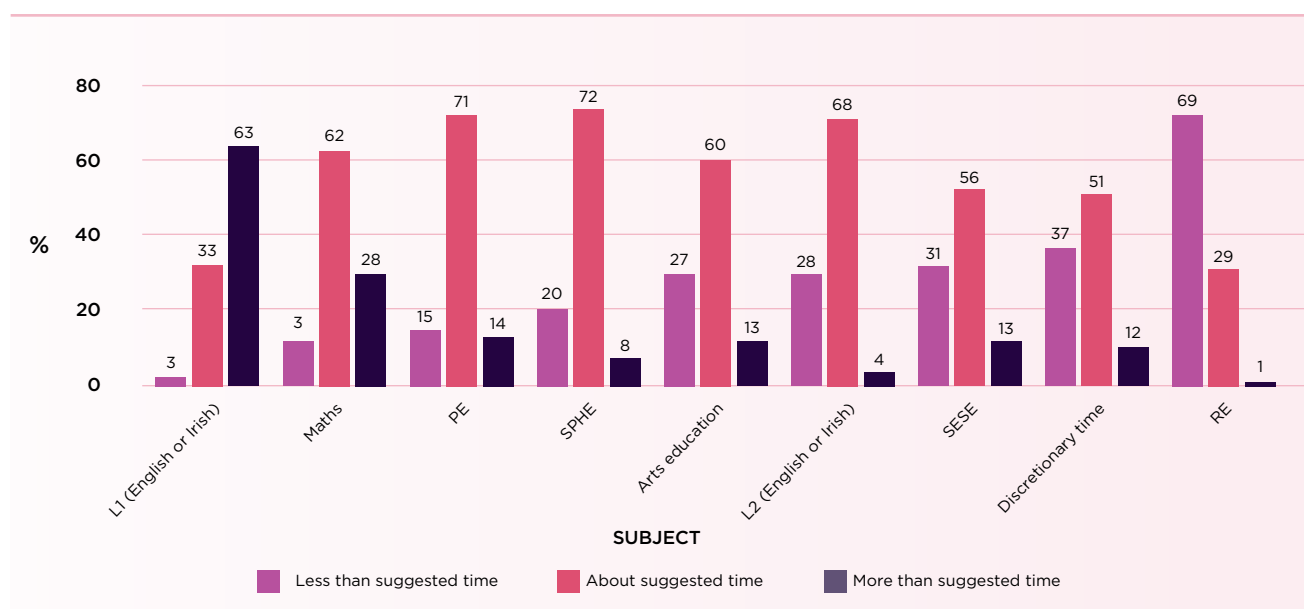


Curriculum

Lesson duration

- Duration of individual (L1 lessons English or Irish depending on the medium of instruction) ranged from 15 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes; they were most commonly 40 minutes (19%), one hour (18%), 30 minutes (17%) or 50 minutes (14%).
- Maths lessons ranged from 20 minutes to 1 hour. The most common response was 30 minutes (34%) followed by 40 minutes (29%).
- Teachers were asked whether the time spent on different subjects was more, less or equivalent to the time suggested within the Primary School Curriculum (Figure 8). Over two thirds of the sample reported spending less than the suggested time on RE. For most subjects, a large proportion of the sample (ranging from 50 - 72%) were spending about the suggested time, while 63% of teachers reported spending more time teaching L1 (English or Irish depending on medium of instruction).

Figure 8 Junior Infants teachers' time spent on subjects



Case study data emphasised some of the challenges faced by teachers of Junior Infants in working through and adapting the curriculum, with curriculum 'overload' specifically mentioned as a concern. Such comments must be considered in the wider context of social and educational change, and the intensification of teaching roles as teachers juggled multiple demands and contexts:



'I think you need...as a teacher to stand back, you're probably not meant to but like [you set] priorities, like what do these children need, just so much to cover, so much. I do find I spend way more time than what the curriculum tells you to spend.'

(Teacher, DEIS, Girls, Urban)

'It is not hard; it is impossible to spend the right amount of time on what you are supposed to, from what the Department allocates you. So, I do a lot of thematic teaching and try [to] overlap subjects, if that makes sense to do that.'

(Teacher, Boys, Urban)



There were particular challenges noted in DEIS schools, including time spent making sure the children were 'ready' to engage with the curriculum. Teachers referred to this as being 'ready to learn'. This 'preparatory' time often focused not only on core self-care tasks but also on equipping children with the necessary words and phrases needed for more conceptual elements of the curriculum:



'I think you are better off covering a smaller amount of things well, rather than trying to do the whole curriculum rushed because our kids don't have a lot of the language needed to access the curriculum...In maths, our kids find the abstract concepts of maths very difficult because they don't have the language for it. Then, they can try and do the different types of maths that are in the curriculum.'

(Teacher, DEIS, Boys, Urban)

'Our challenge is finding time in the class...Concentration skills, ability to listen, the ability to take knowledge in aurally, orally, we're so tuned into how our children learn, that when you get them to learn anything, you kind of feel that you have a bit of success...We feel like we spend an overly heavy amount of time on nurturing the child, to get them ready to learn. And then, the day is over, and you're like, oh my god, did we teach them anything?'

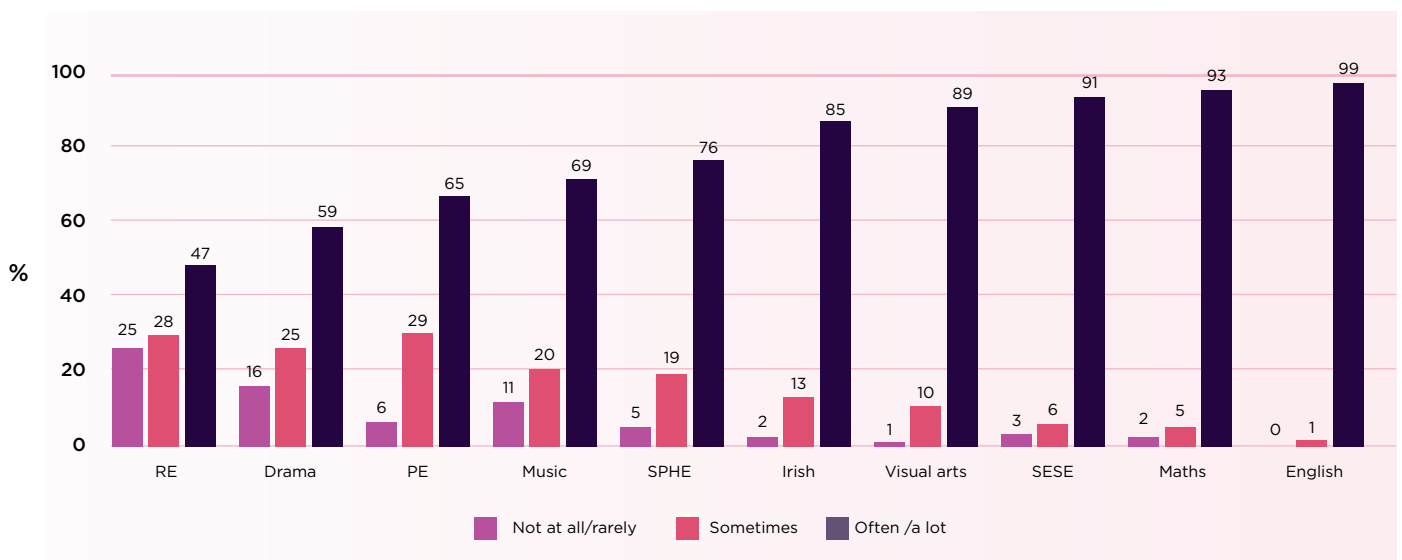
(Principal, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)



Subject enjoyment

- Teachers were asked to rate their enjoyment of teaching a range of subjects (Figure 9). Subjects with the highest level of enjoyment across the sample were English (99% enjoy often/a lot), maths (93%) and SESE (91%).
- The least enjoyed subjects were RE (47% enjoy often/a lot), drama (59%) and PE (65%).

Figure 9 Junior Infants teachers subject enjoyment



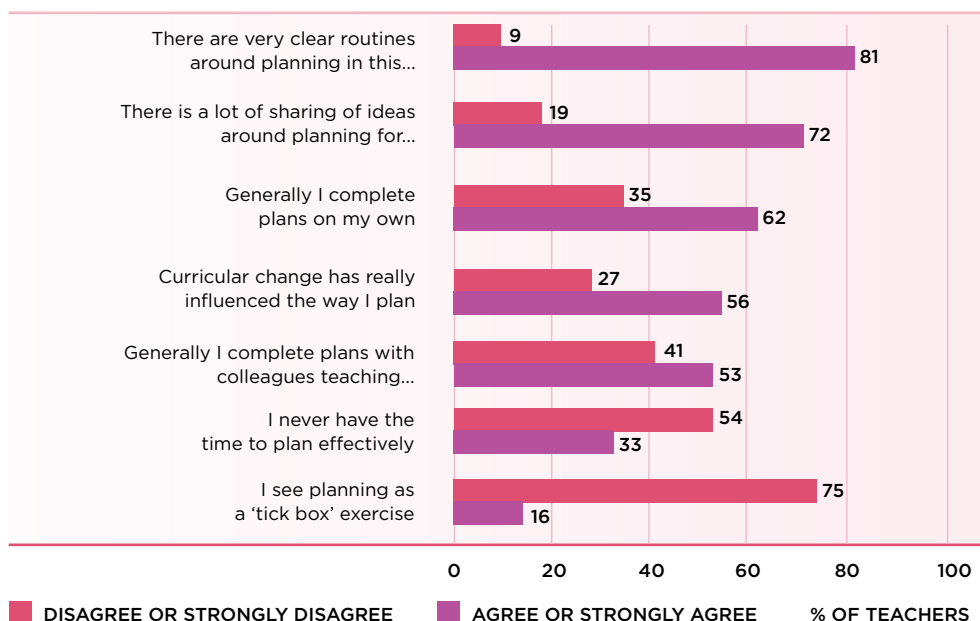
Pedagogy

Teachers were asked a series of questions in relation to their pedagogy in Junior Infants including their level of planning, differentiation through ability grouping, the learning climate they sought to promote and their views on using Aistear: the Early childhood Curriculum Framework.

Planning

- When asked about how often they were to submit plans in their school, 49% of teachers submitted fortnightly plans, and 39% submitted monthly plans. Two per cent submitted plans on a weekly basis, while 6% submitted plans annually. Five per cent reported that plans were not submitted in their school.
- About 10% of the sample reported spending an average of around one hour per week planning. About a quarter of the sample reported spending an average of three hours planning, while a further 26% were spending more than 3 hours a week planning.
- Teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements about planning (Figure 10). The majority of teachers agreed that their school had clear routines (81%) and sharing of ideas around planning (72%), although there were mixed views around completing plans with colleagues teaching the same class level (41% in disagreement and 53% in agreement).
- A third of the sample (33%) felt they lacked time to plan effectively.
- The majority of teachers (75%) disagreed with the statement that planning is a 'tick-box' exercise.

Figure 10 Teacher perceptions of planning



- Teachers reported spending more time planning for certain subjects, most commonly L1 (English or Irish depending on the medium of instruction; 95%) and maths (73%), connecting perhaps with comments made in our case study schools on the preparatory time that was needed to equip children with the language and skills needed for learning to learn. Just under half of teachers (42%) spent more time planning for SESE and 33% spent more time planning for arts.



'So, I find that there is an awful lot of prep, an awful lot of looking for ideas as well for different ways of doing things, and all that.'

(Teacher, Co-Ed, Rural Town)



Interviews highlighted how teachers' planning was often responsive to the particular needs and context of the children in each school. The need to be responsive and attentive to context was especially prevalent in the narratives of teachers in DEIS schools where both teachers and principals acknowledged the particular challenges the children faced:



'And sometimes you've got to take a year or two to get the children here and understand the circumstances, where they're coming from, their background and the whole thing. [...] Their bucket is full to the brim and the important thing for the teacher to do is to understand and be positive. Not, 'Where's your homework, why are you late?'. And...from there on yes, let them know it's important to have your homework done, it's important to be in on time. But at the same time, "it's great to see you here", you know.'

(Teacher, DEIS, Boys, Urban)

'Curriculum time, maths and English are our literacy and numeracy core. But they are done and other subjects may get sacrificed because of that.'

(Principal, DEIS, Boys, Urban)

'I think what would help, if they could all come in, know how to stack a chair, put on their coat, put away their lunchbox. You'd be surprised the amount that come in not knowing that. I'm not asking any child to be able to come in and read, do sounds. That's all done in school and it should be done there.'

(Teacher, Girls, Urban)



Ability grouping

- Around half of teachers of Junior Infants (51%) reported grouping children by ability. This was most frequently for English reading (81% of those who ability grouped the children) and maths (50% of those who ability grouped the children).
- The predominant format of ability groups was subject-specific, with 80% of teachers reporting that children moved between ability groups depending on the subject.
- A fifth of teachers reported that children in their class stayed in the same ability group for most of the day (20%).
- The most common form of ability grouping used was within-class ability grouping (67% of teachers). Other forms used were cross-grade (e.g. Junior Infants and Senior Infants) ability groups (13%), and mixed groups with either one low ability group (9%) or one high ability group (6%).
- Teachers were asked about the strategies they used to group children by ability. Almost all teachers (98%) reported using their professional judgement, and 92% reported using observations of behaviour. Many teachers used results of teacher-designed tests (68%).

Interviews with teachers in the case study classes gave further insights into these patterns. Prevalent was their focus on ascertaining the children's abilities while not drawing overt attention to differences. In general, ability grouping was used for specific subjects such as English and maths but not throughout the whole day. Teachers were concerned to implement such differentiation subtly but nonetheless stressed the different levels of challenge they provided on the basis of such grouping:



'I think in Junior Infants it's just trying to make them feel they're the same as everyone else, all the way up really you want them to be like they're the same obviously you don't want to be specifically saying, 'You're doing this because you're not able to do'...yeah so it's just kind of trying to make it as subtle as possible...it's differentiation of how you ask a question like lower, higher or lower questioning.'

(Teacher, DEIS, Girls, Urban)

'I think with English, we might differentiate it by outcome. So we might all be reading the same book, but some of them will be looking at different words in the book or different sounds in the book, and the same with our writing.'

(Junior Infants & Senior Infants cross-grade; Teacher, Co-Ed, Rural)



Approaches to teaching and learning

The 1999 Primary School Curriculum (Introduction) references the importance of play as a pedagogy, and data indicates that teachers are drawing on the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Aistear) to inform approaches to teaching and learning. Additional comments from teachers indicate that teachers reference Aistear particularly in relation to play.

Teachers were asked about their general approaches to teaching in Junior Infants, including perceptions of Aistear. Teacher survey responses indicated general enthusiasm about play and playful approaches including references to Aistear:

- Just over three quarters of teachers (76%) reported that they were drawing on the Aistear framework in their classroom 'very much'.
- Teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement with a series of statements about Aistear. Responses suggest that Aistear is strongly associated in teacher's minds with play-based teaching and learning.
- The majority of teachers reported being aware of the benefits of play-based learning for young children (99%), and of the benefits of Aistear (91%).

Despite this level of enthusiasm, teachers in the Junior Infant classes also indicated that there is some level of uncertainty over the approaches to teaching and learning advocated by Aistear and a lack of specialised training in such approaches:

“

'I haven't had any training in Aistear...so what's kind of happening in the mornings is structured play, but it is something I will have to look at doing because everybody else is doing it, kind of thing. So, I suppose as staff we will have to look at that along the way.'

(Teacher, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

”

This is also reflected in the survey data, where roughly a third of teachers agreed that they did not have adequate resources (37%), training (35%) or time (33%) to use the approaches advocated in Aistear.

Interviews with teachers of Junior Infants in the CSL case study schools confirmed that play-based learning is extremely popular among children although there was a significant difference in the way this was used across schools. For some teachers, Aistear was informing integrated play or play-based activities to reinforce the curriculum content; for others it is perceived as playtime that helps children in their transition to 'formal' learning. Teacher narratives also suggest that Aistear is perceived as an appropriate age-based framework that helps the children connect what they are learning in school with their lives and communities.

“

'Aistear is at the heart of it, which is our integrated play...I think the most important in this age group is just getting basic understanding of number and understanding of letter.'

(Teacher, Co-Ed, Rural)

'We are quite fortunate that we have 'Aistear'. That means that you can, kind of, use your playtime to help them to learn different things that aren't just sit down and do. [...] But, it's really fun for them to do! They don't realise that they're learning!'

(Teacher, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

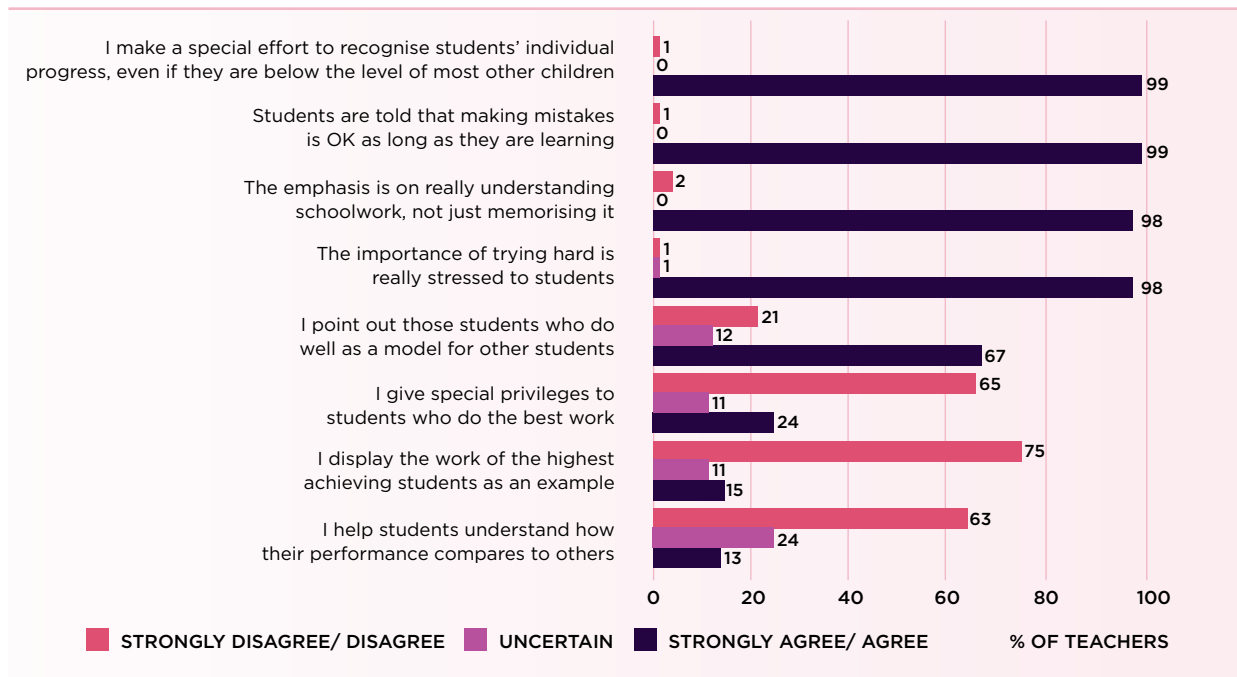
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Learning climate

Teacher focus on a holistic, child centred approach to their pedagogy was especially evident in their responses to questions about the learning climate in their Junior Infant classrooms (Figure 11).

- Nearly all teachers consistently reported agreeing that they used teaching approaches to support children's mastery over their own learning. This demonstrates a broad agreement with principles of deep learning, personalised learning, cognitive learning strategies, and motivation.
- Teachers were more varied in their use of approaches to visibly showcase individual child performance as an incentive for children to learn. Nearly a quarter of teachers gave special privileges to children who did the best work, and pointed out those children as role models to others. Far fewer teachers (approximately one seventh) intentionally displayed the work of high achieving children or discussed with children how their work compared to that of others.

Figure 11 Teacher report of learning climate in their class



Case study fieldwork highlighted the priorities placed by teachers of Junior Infants in creating a happy, safe and stress free environment for their learning. Social development, learning to share, listen to others and adapt to co-operative ways of learning were also prioritised. The challenge is finding the time, resources and continuous support needed to sustain this kind of learning environment. Teachers referred to their efforts to find ways for children to contribute to the quality of their school lives and respond to specific needs. This includes providing consistent opportunities for children to learn how to check-in with themselves, with others and to speak up in class.



'I suppose getting them involved really early on in why we have these rules and that basically we want everybody to be safe and happy, and that is our priority. Then, "how can we help that to happen?" Once they all start to understand the bigger picture and why it happens, and that it helps us to learn and we can be ... happier and more... safe.'

(Teacher, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

'The next step is kind of making them aware of each other's opinions, rather than just their own. They could share and voice what they thought really well, but they weren't really interacting with what everyone else thought, like 'Oh I agree with you' or, it was very much so 'I think this'; so the next step is kind of listening to the others in the room. Just that's a step.'

(Teacher, Co-Ed, Rural)

The learning climate in the Junior Infants classrooms was clearly impacted by the evident delight among teachers working with this age group:

'Junior and Senior Infants are so much fun and it just predominantly gets less fun as you go up [laughing] but I just hope they enjoy Junior and Senior as much as they can and they get a good, really good foundation for the rest of the year groups and that they just enjoy it.'

(Teacher, Co-Ed, Rural)



Parents and grandparents interviewed frequently referred to the enthusiasm and dedication of teachers of Junior Infants and their sensitivity toward the children's needs. They agreed a positive classroom climate enabled the children to transition successfully into their new routine, and created a welcoming environment where they could flourish academically and socially:



'Like even the homework, (study child 1), the comments on her homework page. It just makes you feel proud but I don't remember having anything like that in school. ... They just seem to be very much involved and they're very good at, you know, showing you.'

(Mother, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

'I only said to (Case study child) recently, 'It is so much different for you now going to school, teachers are nice, you can approach the teachers, you can speak to the teachers if you are worried about anything'. It is definitely much nicer for children now. I feel they are very involved with the parents and grandparents. They just seem very helpful with the children.'

(Grandmother, DEIS, Girls, Urban)

Interviews with teachers confirmed the importance of a supportive working environment for teachers through teamwork and shared planning in supporting their own pedagogical practices:

'Cooperative and teamwork would be huge in this school.'

(Teacher, Girls, Urban)

'There are just so many opportunities for people to kind of pool together and work together and make life easier for everyone and share resources and share plans.'

(Teacher, Boys, Urban)

Assessment

- 48% of teachers reported using/intending to use some form of standardised assessment with their class.

The interviews with teachers and principals in the CSL case study schools emphasise that assessment in Junior Infant classes was used for formative purposes, assessing how children are progressing and to identify areas of support going forward. It was clear that assessment was also conceived of in broad terms covering key aspects such as children's happiness in school, socialisation, and readiness to engage with the curriculum:

'So, every term there would be kind of set assessments that the whole stream will do!...Within that though, you are casually doing so much yourself within the class. A lot of it is just note-keeping, a lot of it is kind of like the records of their actual copy books. You would have an assessment folder for each child as well, and within that there would be some things that are academic...But then within that as well there's the school's, the child's happiness in school and readiness for learning.'

(Teacher, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)



This broader and inclusive approach to assessment allows teachers to encourage self-learning and self-determination in the classroom and to maintain open communication with parents about their children's progress. Such communication is perceived as key for schools to assist with coordinated plans of action with families in relation to children's learning:



'So, you are constantly helping, monitoring, correcting, whatever. But they are also getting to the point where they are able to see their own mistakes, so they say, you know, I made a mistake and they want it to be right. So, you help them with that.'

(Teacher, Co-Ed, Rural)

'Like I would be always looking out that no parent would be getting a surprise about their child. That they would be kept in the loop.'

(Principal, Co-Ed, Rural Town)

KEY FINDINGS:

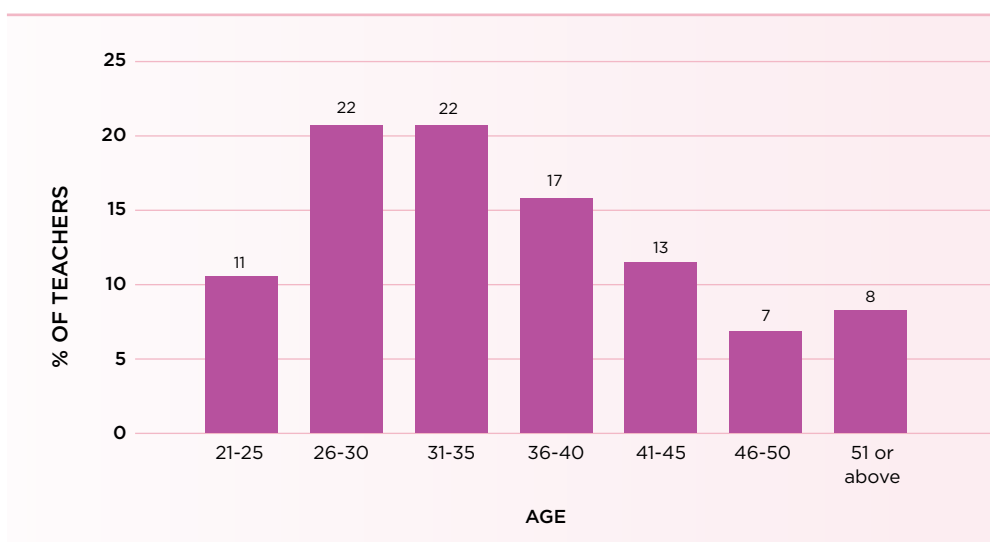
JUNIOR INFANTS CLASS TEACHERS

Key Findings: Junior Infants Class Teachers

Gender and age

- The majority of participating Junior Infants teachers' age group were female (95%).
- The largest age groups were 26-30 years and 31-35 years (Figure 12).

Figure 12 Junior Infants teachers' age group



Home county

- Teachers were from 22 counties, with Dublin having the highest representation (11%), followed by Kerry and Mayo (both 8%), and then Clare, Cork, Wexford, Limerick (all 7%).

Mother tongue

- Almost all teachers reported that English was their first language (98%), with the remaining 2% speaking Irish as their first language.

Ethnicity

- All participants who opted to report their ethnic background (n=101) identified as White Irish.

Religion and religiosity

- Of those who opted to answer questions on religion (n=101), 91% identified as Roman Catholic. Three per cent identified as Church of Ireland, and a further 4% reported being spiritual rather than religious.
- A small percentage reported attending religious services at least once a week (13%) or every two to three weeks (19%). Many participants attended religious services only on religious holidays (30%) or once per year (11%), while 12% attended never or practically never.

School teachers in the family

- Over half of teachers reported having other teachers in their family (59%). This was most commonly an aunt (n=27), sister (n=16) or mother (n=12).

As with principals, the profile of case study teachers mirrored the homogeneity of the social, cultural and ethnic profile evident at national level. Interviews with teachers in the CSL case study schools consistently highlighted influences in their own family histories in their decisions to enter teaching - either through past family members who were themselves teachers, or their own positive experience of schooling which influenced their decision to choose teaching as a career:



'Yeah, so I just loved children, loved kind of, I loved school myself, especially primary school. I was kind of a 'swot' myself in secondary, I had to have everything done and stuff. I loved following the rules and it made sense.'

(Teacher, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)

'So...I wanted to do teaching from a young age...Everyone's saying, oh, what are you going to do after Leaving Cert? And always it was teaching, teaching, teaching. I think I had such fond memories of school and I always liked school, so that probably helped why I wanted to be a teacher.'

(Teacher, Girls, Urban)



Level of education

- For 44% of the sample, a Bachelor's degree was the highest level of education.
- Just under a third had achieved a post-graduate diploma (29%), and a further 20% had obtained a Master's degree.
- Almost a third of the sample (32%) had no qualification in special education; 55% had taken one or more modules in special education. A small proportion had a certificate (8%) or diploma (5%) in special education, and 1% had a Master's in the area.
- A large proportion of the sample had no qualification in educational leadership (70%); 22% had taken one or more modules. Several participants had formal qualifications in educational leadership, at certificate (2%), diploma (2%) and Master's level (4%).

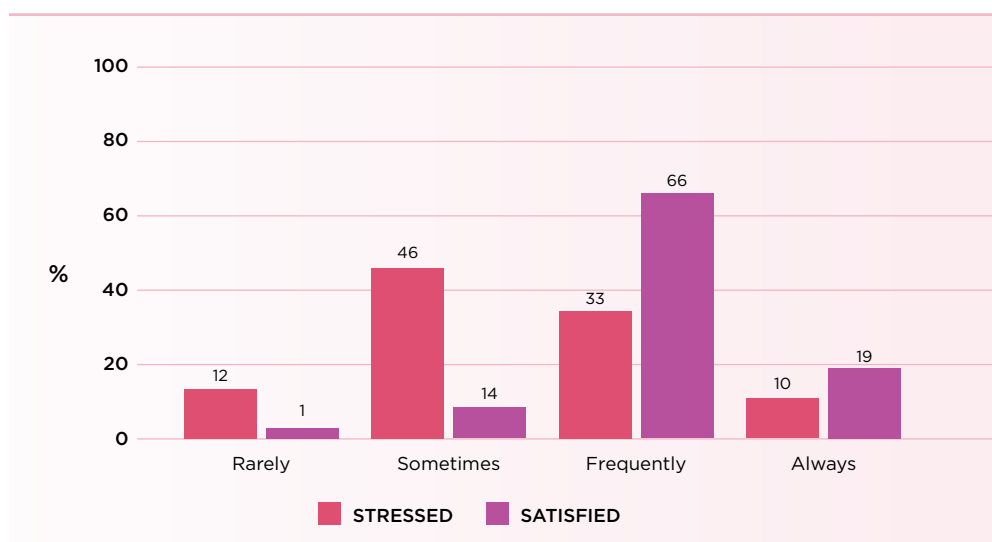
Employment status and experience

- A large proportion of the sample (86%) were on a permanent contract, and all worked on a full-time basis.
- Despite the complexity of the work in the early years of primary school, the average number of years' experience in infant classes was relatively small at 6 years (range 0-29 years). Only 12% of the sample had more than 10 years' experience teaching infant classes.
- Years teaching in total ranged from 1 to 37 years, with an average length of 12 years.
- Years teaching in their current school ranged from 1 to 35 years, with an average length of 8 years.

Job stress and satisfaction

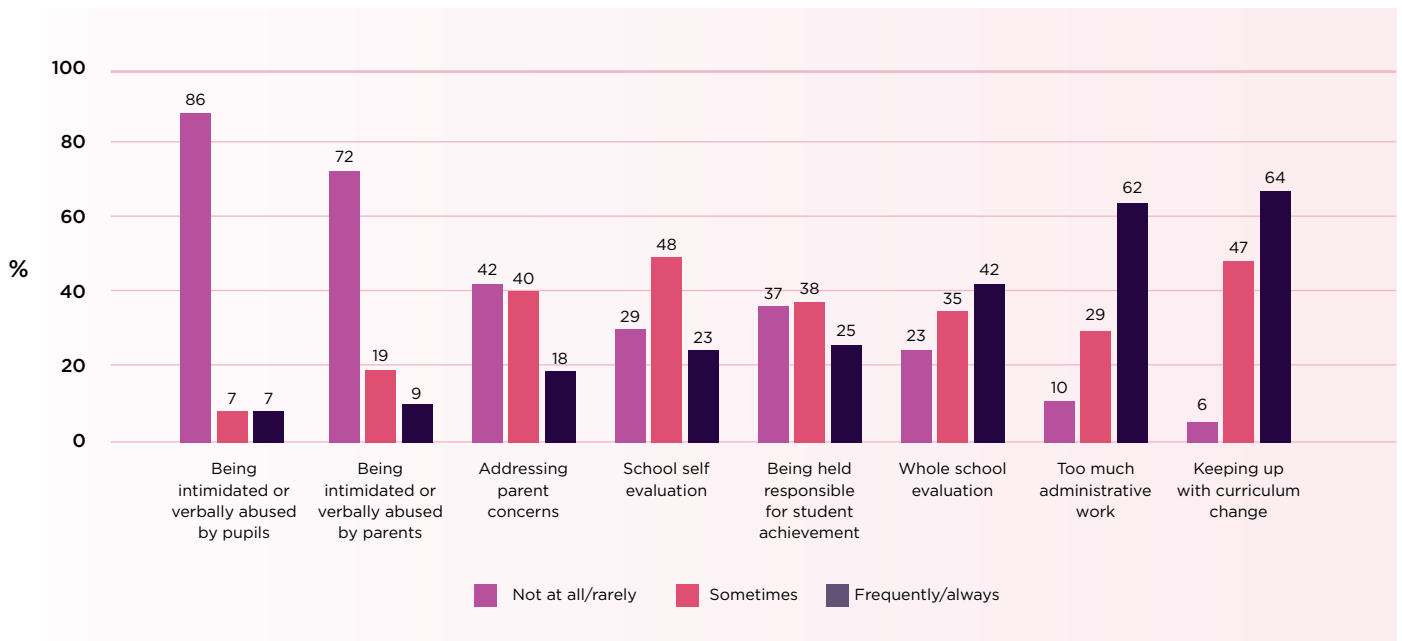
- Teachers were asked how often they felt stressed and satisfied by their job (Figure 13). These data were collected in the teacher questionnaire administered in Autumn 2019, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Almost half of teachers (46%) reported that they sometimes felt stressed by their job, with a further 33% feeling stressed frequently. Only 12% were rarely stressed by their job, while 10% reported that they always felt stressed.
- Levels of job satisfaction appeared high, with 66% reporting that they frequently felt satisfied by their job, and a further 19% were always satisfied. A small proportion were rarely (1%) or sometimes satisfied (14%).

Figure 13 Junior Infants teachers' job stress and satisfaction



- The main source of stress reported by teachers was keeping up with curriculum change (64% frequently/always; Figure 14). Curriculum change encompasses changes not just from a change in the national curriculum, but also changes to the approach to literacy or numeracy within the school, the introduction of a new textbook or programme, actions arising from School Self-Evaluation, whole school approaches to initiatives (e.g. Active Flag), and changes in paperwork associated with the curriculum. Having too much administrative work was the second main source of stress (62% frequently/always).

Figure 14 Sources of stress (teacher report)



Interview data with teachers of Junior Infants in the CSL case study schools confirmed the joys the teachers experienced in working with this younger cohort but also the challenges that arose. They loved what they saw as the humour and the expressiveness of the younger children and the challenge of understanding how young children see the world. Challenges and stressors they referred to revolved around ensuring the children had the skills to engage with the curriculum (noted also earlier), as well as managing parental expectations, even at this young age. Their comments also highlight the importance of school readiness and communication with parents in relation to the transition to Junior Infants, noted previously.



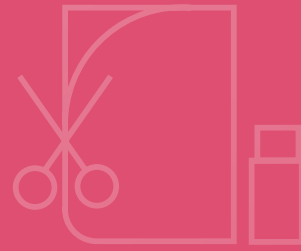
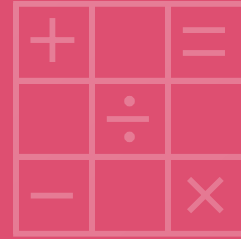
'I love being a teacher. I love working with children. I think it's just a lot easier than working with adults, especially smaller children because you can allow so much more patience for them because they're so small, and they're so new...they're happy, they're sad, they're angry, I think that's kind of mainly what you see in school. Your days are always different, and regardless of what else is going on there's always something positive to be taken from a day in school, somewhere [laughs].'

(Teacher, Co-Ed, Rural)

'...you can only expect so much from a teacher before they break. I think there are a lot of teachers, at the moment, that are maybe under-appreciated. They are under a lot of stress and under a lot of pressure and that comes from, in our school, would be behaviour and things like that. But in other schools, it comes from parents and it comes from expectations.'

(Teacher, DEIS, Boys, Urban)





KEY FINDINGS:

PRINCIPALS

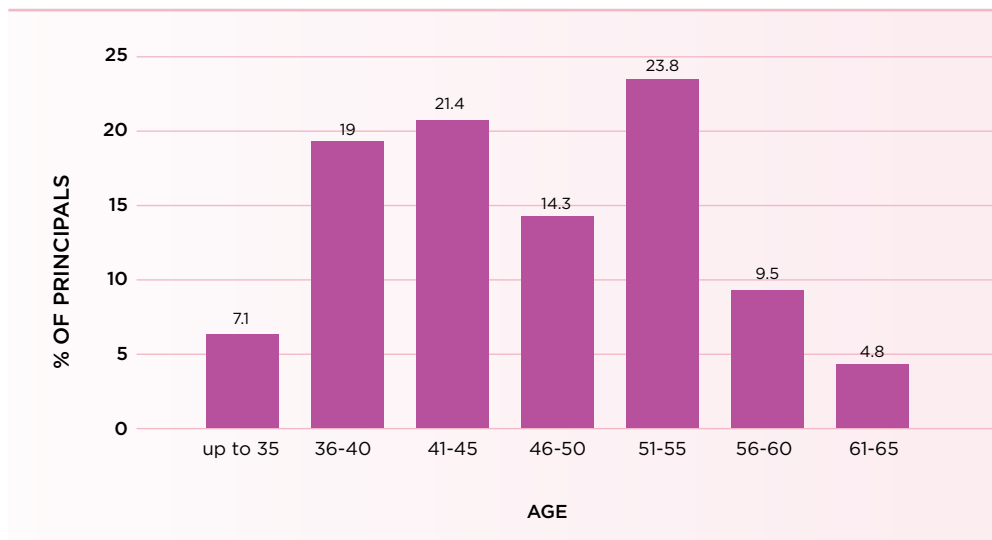


Key Findings: Principals

Gender and age

- Of the 60 principals who completed the survey, 42 answered the questions about gender and age.
- Of these, 26% were male and 74% were female.
- About a quarter (24%) were aged between 51-55 years (Figure 15).

Figure 15 Principals' age group



Home county

- Principals grew up in 20 counties across Ireland.
- Dublin (10%) and Kerry (10%) had the highest representation.

Mother tongue

- All principals reported that their first language was English.

Ethnicity

- Almost all principals (98%) identified as White Irish.

Religion and religiosity

- 83.5% of principals reported identifying with the Roman Catholic religion. Church of Ireland was the second most common response (7.5%).

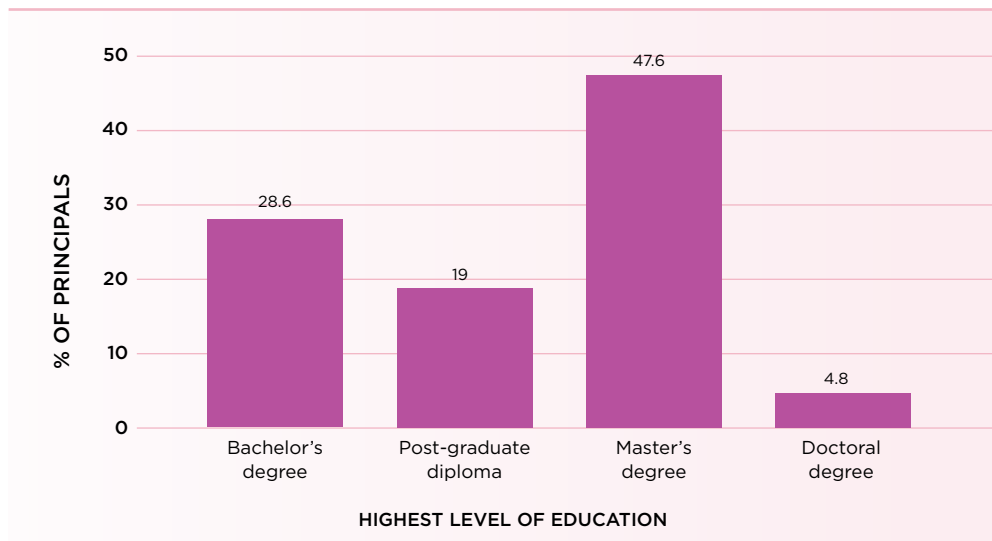
School teachers in the family

- Around two-thirds of the sample (69%) reported that they had teachers in the immediate family.

Level of education

- Almost half of respondents had a Master's degree (48%) and a further 5% had a Doctoral degree (Figure 16).
- For 29%, a Bachelor's degree was the highest qualification.

Figure 16 Principal highest level of education



Principal type

- The majority of participants were administrative principals (71%), with the remaining 29% reporting that they were teaching principals.

Principals in our case study schools mirrored the social and cultural backgrounds of those in the national study. This high level of homogeneity in the profile of school leaders is also reflected in their consistently positive experiences of education growing up and their commitment to following through with this in their own leadership. Interviews highlighted the steep learning curve in taking on a leadership role, and of the overarching commitment of the principals to a particular vision for their schools. Like all primary schools, each case study school is characterised by its own distinct culture and trajectory. For some principals their focus was about continuity and stability, for others it was commitment to change and /or furthering a particular model of education.



'I have a very clear memory, when I was in fourth class and I had a teacher...and I remember her teaching a geography lesson and I remember thinking to myself "I'd love to do that"...I always feel that my mother certainly guided me into teaching...I have found my career like... and I think it's a great privilege to be a principal, particularly in a primary school, where you have some hand in shaping young lives, and some influence in young lives.'

(Principal, Girls, Urban)

'I'm very lucky that my mam and dad put a focus on education. But I know that a lot of kids in the same school as I was in, they wouldn't have had the same educational outcome, I suppose, as I ended up with. And that's not fair, it's not fair at all.'

(Principal, DEIS, Co-Ed, Urban)



All principals spoke of the intensification of their roles, the administrative/management grind, alongside the stress and worry of sourcing sufficient support for children (and families) with diverse needs:

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'But there are times that things, if you let them, could get very stressful, and it could become all-consuming because you could be at this job 24/7.'

(Principal, Mixed, Urban)

'So, we would say that the school has a huge role in burden sharing with parents who come with children with differing abilities, and to vindicate their rights to the extent that we can, and to keep knocking on the door until we get there. So, there is a little bit of guerrilla warfare going on. And some of my letters might be bordering on impolite, to the powers that be.'

(Principal, Boys, Urban)

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Also frequently noted was their priority for team work, collaboration and sustaining the morale and motivation among their staff, while coping themselves with the relative isolation of their role:

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'Yeah. I guess like with a principal it can be an isolated role, you know, and then not a lot of people would understand what your job entails at all...I think it's really important to feel part of a team, you know? It can be quite isolating as a teacher; you always only see your own practice, so it's really good to have collaboration and a sense that people can ask for help.'

(Principal, DEIS, Girls, Urban)

'And one of the things I would look at myself, which has informed me...some drive in you to keep you going...I often say to them, look out for your psychological payday, because you get paid twice a month, but the psychological payday is what keeps you going, and those moments.'

(Principal, Boys, Urban)

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It takes a team....

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Figures presented in this report are based on initial analysis and may be subject to change.

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