

## **New ESRI research looks at child wellbeing and school experiences**

A new report, published today (15<sup>th</sup> July) by the ESRI and the NCCA, looks at children's well-being from their own point of view – their happiness, how they are getting on with schoolwork, whether they feel anxious, how popular they are, how they feel about their appearance and behaviour. *Wellbeing and School Experiences among 9 and 13 Year Olds*, by Emer Smyth (ESRI), draws on the large-scale *Growing Up in Ireland* survey to look at how individual, classroom and school factors shape these aspects of self-image at 9 and 13 years of age. This study was commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), so that the voices of children and young people who experience curriculum first-hand can contribute to its development.

### **The key questions addressed and the related findings are:**

#### *How does wellbeing vary across groups of 9 year olds?*

- Girls are more positive about their behaviour and are somewhat more confident as learners, but report higher anxiety levels, than boys.
- Middle-class children are more confident about their behaviour, feel somewhat happier and are less anxious than their peers from working-class or non-employed households.
- Children from immigrant families see themselves as less popular, are less happy and more anxious, report poorer behaviour, and are more self-critical of their academic abilities and their body image than those from Irish families.
- The most striking difference relates to having a special educational need (SEN). Children with a SEN, especially those with emotional-behavioural or learning difficulties, are significantly more negative about themselves than their peers.

#### *Do schools make a difference to child wellbeing?*

- A third of 9 year olds are taught in multi-grade settings (with more than one year group in the same class). Girls in multi-grade classes report poorer behaviour, are less confident as learners, see themselves as less popular and are more negative about their physical appearance than those in single-grade settings. This seems to result from comparing themselves to their, often older, peers and making negative self-evaluations.
- Child self-image is found to be less positive in smaller schools compared with larger schools (those with more than 100-200 students) across all domains, except anxiety. This is related to the greater use of multi-grade settings and a greater emphasis on teacher monitoring of behaviour in smaller schools. The fact that larger schools are in urban areas, where child self-image tends to be more positive, also plays a part.
- Social relationships with teachers emerge as a crucial influence, with more negative self-image among students who 'never like' their teacher and who have discipline problems.
- Negative relations with peers in the form of bullying are associated with poorer self-image across the board. In addition, girls who never see their friends outside school are less happy and see themselves as less popular.
- Frequent involvement in sport helps to boost children's self-image.

### *How does self-image change over the transition to second-level education?*

- Young people report more positive behaviour and see themselves as more popular at 13 than they had at 9 years of age. On the other hand, academic self-image (the ability to cope with schoolwork) becomes more negative over the transition to second-level education, especially for girls, as young people are faced with greater academic demands in the new school setting.
- Positive primary school experiences, especially children's attitudes to their teacher, school and school subjects, enhance young people's self-image at the age of 13.
- The study finds poorer self-image among young people who have experienced difficulties settling into second-level education. Second year students report poorer self-image than those in first year.
- Relations with second-level teachers make a significant difference to young people's self-image; those who have more positive relations in the form of frequent praise and positive feedback have enhanced self-images while those who have frequently been reprimanded by their teachers have poorer evaluations of themselves.

### *What are the Implications for policy?*

- Schools and classrooms can make a difference to children's view of themselves. At the same time, even children in the same class group have different experiences of school and react to it in different ways. The findings point to the importance of supporting teachers through initial teacher education and continuous professional development in using approaches which engage students with different abilities and self-images.
- Sports participation fosters a positive self-image among children. This poses challenges in a context where an average of one hour a week is devoted to physical education at primary level, schools vary in their access to sports facilities and in their provision of extra-curricular sport, and children differ in their access to team-based sports outside the school setting.
- The nature of the school and classroom climate, especially the quality of relationships with teachers, emerges as a crucial influence on children's self-image. It is therefore vital that the creation of a positive climate be seen as a central component of school development planning as well as initial and continuous professional development for teachers.

Report author, Emer Smyth, said: 'The quality of relations with teachers plays an important protective role in children's wellbeing within primary school and over the transition to second-level education. A positive and supportive relationship with teachers not only helps students cope with schoolwork but influences how they view themselves more generally.'

Sarah Fitzpatrick, Deputy CEO of the NCCA, said: 'This study takes us beyond academic achievement to a more profound understanding of the role of education and the responsibilities of teachers in nurturing children's wellbeing. Findings affirm the direction of curriculum developments at primary, i.e., greater emphasis on life-skills and on children's social and emotional development. There are implications for how we understand differentiation in the primary classroom and ultimately, how teachers are supported to meet the very individual needs of each child/young person in their care.'

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