



Riailtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Children's School Lives (CSL)

National longitudinal cohort study of primary schooling in Ireland

Background information

The *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) was published 19 years ago (www.curriculumonline.ie). Through reviews, evaluations and research, we know that the curriculum has provided a strong foundation for teaching and learning. We also know that classrooms have changed since 1999 with a more diverse pupil body being one of the new hallmarks and strengths of our primary schools.

The *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) Study initiated in 2002 (www.growingup.ie) and following 18,000 children, has been illuminating how children are developing in their social, economic and cultural environments and how these rapidly changing environments, especially in recent years, have in turn impacted on children's lives¹. The study has broadened our understanding of children's lives as they grow up in Ireland today. In terms of education, the Study has spotlighted some aspects of children's primary school experiences (for example, McCoy, Smyth and Banks, 2012; Smyth, 2015). Building on the GUI Study, the new national longitudinal study presents an exciting and unique opportunity to follow children **through their primary school years** and to document and learn, in detail, **about and from these experiences**. In sum, the study will provide rich pictures of the experiences of children in primary schools in Ireland, and how these experiences shape and are shaped by, schools as communities, institutions, and as a system. This learning will feed directly into the NCCA's work on curriculum and assessment at early childhood and primary as well as having the potential to inform wider educational discourse and policy development. The findings will likely also be used by primary schools to review and further develop certain policies and practices.

¹ For more information on the purpose of the *Growing Up in Ireland* Study and the key findings to date, see www.growingup.ie for a list of publications arising from the study.

Significance of the study

As noted above, the new longitudinal study offers an opportunity to build a more complete picture of children's time in primary school. This section looks briefly at some of the reasons why this picture is important.

A changing society

Irish society has seen unprecedented change in the last decade, a factor reflected in the GUI findings. Today's children are truly digital natives living in a rapidly changing world. This aspect of childhood sits alongside the reality of poverty and homelessness with 2,505 children homeless in 2016, 13% of people, including children, experiencing food poverty and 1,098 children living in direct provision (Children's Rights Alliance, 2017). Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological systems theory explains how the inherent qualities of a child and the characteristics of the external environment in which the child finds himself/herself, interact to influence how the child will grow and develop. While the GUI Study has contributed hugely to our knowledge and understanding of children's lives and experiences of 21st century Ireland, it sheds only some light on their experiences within the education system and how different experiences of family life, different cultures, different abilities and needs interact with, and shape school-life and vice-versa. The challenge for schools and individual teachers to recognise and respond to the range of children's individual learning, cultural and social differences is perhaps greater now than at any time before. The importance of the school environment; of children engaging with learning; of developing their life-skills, self-expression and communication skills all relate to the child's interaction with adults (teachers/parents) and with their peers. Social and emotional difficulties experienced by children outside of school can and do impact on their relationship in, and experience of school and their capacity to learn. For teachers, this can often involve trying to close the gap between what we know about the factors influencing children's wellbeing and their ability to learn and what we can do to help them to flourish (Kickbusch, 2012).

Children's priorities

Children themselves have told us that *how* they learn is perhaps more important than what they learn. For example, in the NCCA's first phase of review of the current curriculum, the reasons children gave for liking one subject over another focused on having an active role including engagement in collaborative learning, decision making in pairs/groups, active learning using hands-on-methods, learning through play, inquiry-based learning involving research and ICT, and authentic learning through projects and real-world studies (2005). In interviews with primary school children recorded

for a conference, *Children, their Lives, their Learning* in 2011, children told us that their dream classroom would have *more computers, tablets and iPads... to do more research on projects... and to learn more, because they like being challenged—they said they enjoyed solving problems and working out how to do problems... [but] a lot of the experiments we're doing this year you could nearly tell what the outcome is going to be.* Children have highlighted the need for better connections in their education experiences across early childhood, primary and second level to improve transitions at the beginning of the primary cycle, for example, *the only thing I don't like doing is when I can't play... I miss dressing up as well* (NCCA, 2005, pp.242-243) and towards the end of primary school, for example, *I would like if maybe for the last few months of the school year you got to try a few of the subjects that you do in secondary school so you'd know what you like and what you could do when you go and you'd have a head-start².*

Relational aspect of education

We know that children's relationships with their peers play a significant role in their level of engagement with school during the primary years (ESRI, 2012, p.36). In an open call for 'priorities for primary education' in 2012, respondents described the primary classroom as a key social setting for children to practise and refine their social skills, to learn to interact with others, forge and sustain friendships, and work collaboratively in pairs and small groups (NCCA, 2012, p.15). A strong focus on supporting children to develop positive relationships in primary school recognises the importance of helping them to grow and challenges, to some extent, the image of the hurried child (Elkind, 2001) or the constantly busy child which seems to have become part of our thinking about children and their world today. Commentators have described this shift from content to communication in terms of moving from a world of stocks—with knowledge that is stacked up somewhere depreciating rapidly in value—to a world in which the enriching power of communication and collaborative flows is increasing (Schleicher 2012, p.35). The teacher-child relationship is at the heart of primary education. Children learn and develop in an environment where a positive, nurturing relationship exists with their teacher. These relationships are central to high-quality teaching and learning in the primary years which, in turn, are crucial to children's success as highlighted by Bryk and Schneider (2002) and Hattie (2012).

The curriculum

One of the defining features of the primary curriculum is its focus on the development of the whole child: *The curriculum is characterised by its breadth and balance. It reflects the many dimensions of*

² Podcast with Children (NCCA, 2011) <http://vimeo.com/82283247>

human experience, activity and expression, and is directed towards the development of the full potential of every child (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p.10). The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011) brought, for the first time since the curriculum was published in 1999, a mandated change in how time should be used within the curriculum. The strategy required the allocation of additional time to language and maths for all children, and by default, a reduction of time spent on other aspects of children's learning. The strategy also resulted in the mandatory use and reporting of standardised testing at three points in a child's educational journey through primary school. Four years later in 2015, the publication of the new language curriculum for junior infants to second class marked the first significant change to the content and design of the curriculum since 1999. Notwithstanding this, the intervening years brought many sets of guidelines focused on supporting schools' work within rapidly changing classrooms as noted earlier—working in increasingly culturally-diverse classrooms, supporting children with special educational needs, children for whom English is an additional language and exceptionally able children, and using new play-based pedagogies in infant classrooms. This landscape marked an unprecedented pace and scale of change in schools around the country.

The 2017/2018 school year saw 563,459 children enrolled in 3,246 primary schools (DES, 2018). As already noted, little is known about their day-to-day experience of primary school life. How involved or empowered do children feel in their primary classrooms? What helps them to settle into junior infants or into another class if they emigrate to Ireland? What is their experience of the different areas and subjects that constitute the primary curriculum? What enables them to do well at school? How do their attitudes towards, and their experience of school, differ as they progress through the eight years? How do schools differ in how they support particular groups of children?

In January 2017, the NCCA initiated a consultation on a new structure for the primary curriculum and how time might be used differently within it (www.ncca.ie/timeandstructure). This represents the first occasion since the launch of the primary curriculum in 1999, when teachers, principals, parents and the wider public have had an opportunity to reflect on the curriculum and to respond to the question, *what type of curriculum should we have in order to support all children in their learning into the future?* The findings from this consultation will help shape how the primary curriculum from junior infants to sixth class might be redeveloped over the coming years. The new longitudinal study on children's experiences in primary school can and will make a further significant contribution to the work and help to ensure that a redeveloped curriculum supports *all* children in having a positive and beneficial experience of primary education. The following sections look briefly at the potential benefits of such a study and identify broad themes for the research.

The study

To ensure that findings from the study can feed directly into the NCCA's curriculum and assessment work within the coming years and to reduce the timeframe required to generate a picture of children's experience of the full primary school cycle, the Council invited tenders for a cross-sequential longitudinal research study. This design facilitates the selection of two cohorts of differing ages at the beginning of the research. One cohort will begin in the preschool year prior to school entry and finish in second class, and a second cohort will begin in second class in primary school and finish in first year in post-primary school. The first cohort will be followed for five years and the second for six years resulting in two overlapping data sets. A mixed methods research design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data has the potential to yield rich and interesting insights into children's experience of primary school. In addition and given the nature of longitudinal studies, the research has the potential to tell us about schools themselves and about schools compared with each other—for example, insights into children's, teachers', management's and parents' perspectives on how schools are run, how they're led, how they see themselves in the context of the community they're based in, what works in what they do and what doesn't in terms of establishing effective learning environments for children, and how they interact and work with children's parents.

It is important that findings from each year of the study are published as soon as possible in order to inform the NCCA's ongoing work on the curriculum and to contribute to wider work in the education system. There is potential for an area of particular interest and relevance to the NCCA's work, for example, transitions or home-school partnerships, to emerge in a specific year in the study that can then be built upon and further explored later in the study. This could, in turn, give rise to thematic reports.

The section below presents broad themes and possible lines of inquiry within these, for the study. Drawing on similar-type longitudinal studies and other research on children's experience of primary school, the researchers may identify other important themes for investigation. In exploring the experiences of children across our rich diversity of school contexts, it will be important to involve children from different language backgrounds, cultures, socio-economic contexts, family types, and abilities, as well as reflecting the range of school types in Ireland. This will, in turn, enable comparisons between and across groups of children and their experiences of primary school. In the case of some lines of inquiry, it will be important that, in addition to children's perspectives, other voices are captured in the study, for example, those of teachers, principals, parents, special needs assistants, and ancillary staff such as school secretaries and caretakers.

Theme 1: Relationships and school culture

- relationships with teachers and peers
- key relationships and what makes these key for children
- perceptions and experiences of different teaching approaches and the link to children's motivation and engagement in school life
- identity and self-image as learners
- attitudes to primary school and to parental involvement in school
- access to, and participation in, extra-curricular activities in the school

Theme 2: Transitions, 'readiness' and supports (with particular focus on issues of inclusion)

- transition from preschool to primary school
- transition from primary school to post-primary school
- other transitions such as lesson to lesson, shorter infant day to the full school day, teacher to teacher, junior school to senior school, co-educational school to single-sex school, mainstream to special school/class and vice versa?

Theme 3: Diversity and inclusion, and participation

- primary schools as inclusive educational settings – children's identity and belonging
- how schools help *all* children to feel included in, and be active participants in school life
- children's choice and decision-making in classrooms
- children's participation in, and contribution to shaping school life

(This theme would give particular attention to children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, children with special educational needs, children of immigrants, and children from the Traveller Community.)

Theme 4: Experiences and outcomes across the curriculum

- children's engagement with the curriculum³ and their reflections on this
- children's agency in their learning
- children's attitudes to curriculum areas/subjects and what shapes these attitudes
- how schools support children's educational needs

³ The principles of the primary curriculum provide an important basis for this question. For example, to what extent do children experience collaborative learning; access to and use of ICT to support learning; opportunities for learning in the outdoor environment; learning through play; guided discovery experiences; lessons that are focused on oral language; activities that support higher-order thinking and problem-solving; feedback from teachers on a 1-1 basis on their learning; opportunities to engage in self-evaluation and target setting; opportunities to give their thoughts and opinions about school and learning in the classroom.

- broad outcomes (including formal and informal outcomes) of primary school for children
- progression in children's learning and development throughout a year, and across years
- children's experience of teacher feedback and how this impacts their engagement and learning
- impact of time allocations on children's experience of, and attitude to, curriculum areas/subjects, and their educational achievements

Theme 5: Children's wellbeing

- children's sense of wellbeing through their primary school years
- children's motivation and engagement in school and the relationships with their wellbeing
- how schools nurture and enhance children's wellbeing
- relationship between children's wellbeing and their experience of school and their educational outcomes

Theme 6: Schools as educational organisations

- children's experiences and interests as a dimension of the determinants of why schools organise themselves as they do
- school environment (physical, cultural and attitudinal) and children's experiences; how the school environment responds to children
- school size and its impact on children's experience of primary school
- how schools organise time and the impact on children's experiences
- leadership style in primary schools and the impact on children's experiences
- how schools interact and work with children's parents and the community
- what works and what doesn't in establishing effective learning environments for children.

See www.ncca.ie for further information.