

Learning in Focus

Wellbeing and School Experiences among 9- and 13-Year-Olds:
Insights from the *Growing Up in Ireland Study*

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Executive Summary

There has been an increasing focus on the importance of taking account of child wellbeing in policy development in Ireland. However, there has been relatively little research on the factors, especially school experiences, which influence child wellbeing. This study uses rich data from the Growing Up in Ireland study to look at children's wellbeing from their own perspective. In doing so, the study uses measures of self-image across a range of domains, namely, behaviour, academic self-image, anxiety, self-reported popularity, body image and happiness. It analyses the individual, classroom and school factors which shape these aspects of self-image at nine and 13 years of age, highlighting implications for educational policy at primary and post-primary level.

Methodology The Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study is a longitudinal study of two cohorts of children: a nine-month-old cohort and a nine-year-old cohort. This report draws on data on the 8,568 nine-year-old children who, along with their parents, class teachers and principals, were surveyed in 2007/2008. The children were sampled from within primary schools so that we can compare the experiences of nine-year-olds in the same class and school. The cohort of children was followed up four years later, at the age of 13, at which stage almost all had made the transition to second-level education. At both time-points, children were asked to complete the Piers-Harris questionnaire, an internationally validated scale, which taps into six aspects of how children perceive themselves: behaviour, academic self-image, anxiety, popularity, body image and happiness. Multilevel analyses are used to disentangle the individual, class and school factors which influence self-image at the ages of nine and 13.

Main Findings for Nine-Year-Olds Child self-image is not as strongly influenced by social background as academic achievement but 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. Girls are more positive about their behaviour and are somewhat more confident as learners, but report higher anxiety levels, than boys. Children from immigrant families are less confident across all domains than those from Irish families; in other words, they 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. The most striking influence of individual background relates to having a special educational need (SEN).

Executive Summary | v

Children with a SEN, especially those with emotional-behavioural or learning difficulties, are significantly more negative about themselves than their peers.

Significant variation is found in child self-image across schools and, to some extent, across classrooms within schools but, not surprisingly, this variation is not as marked as for academic achievement. The gender mix of the school makes little difference to self-image. In contrast to significant variation in achievement, there are few differences between DEIS (disadvantaged status) and non-DEIS schools in child self-image but anxiety levels are somewhat higher in urban Band 1 schools, the most disadvantaged group of schools. Somewhat surprisingly, 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 appears to reflect the greater use of multi-grade settings and a greater emphasis on teacher monitoring of behaviour in smaller schools along with the location of larger schools in urban areas, where child self-image tends to be more positive.

A third of nine-year-olds are taught in multi-grade settings, that is, where more than one year group are taught within the same classroom. Despite its prevalence in Ireland, there has been a lack of research on the impact of multi-grade teaching on student outcomes. Girls appear to be more sensitive to being taught in a multi-grade class than are boys; they report poorer behaviour, are less confident as learners, see themselves as less popular and are more negative about their physical appearance. It appears that they are comparing themselves to their, often older, peers and making negative self-evaluations. The only significant impact for boys is that they are more negative about their physical appearance in multi-grade settings. Class size is found to play a less important role than the structure of the class (that is, whether it is single- or multi-grade), but there is some evidence that girls in larger classes (those with 30 or more students) are somewhat less self-confident as learners and have somewhat higher levels of anxiety than girls in smaller classes.

Social relationships with teachers emerge as an important influence on child self-image, with more negative self-evaluations among students who 'never like' their teacher and who are reported to have discipline problems. Negative relations with peers in the form of bullying are associated with poorer self-image across all of the dimensions. Furthermore, girls who never see their friends outside school are less happy and see themselves as less popular. Frequent involvement in sport is associated with more positive self-image across all of the different dimensions.

vi | Wellbeing and School Experiences among 9- and 13-Year-Olds

Main Findings for 13-Year-Olds The analyses explored whether self-image is stable between the ages of nine and 13, and the extent to which primary and second-level school experiences influence (changes in) self-image at 13 years of age. Some aspects of self-image are found to become more positive over the transition to second-level education; for example, young people report more positive behaviour and see themselves as more popular at 13 than they had at nine years of age. In contrast, academic self-image becomes more negative over the transition, especially for girls, as young people come to terms with the academic demands of the new school setting. Gender differences widen in terms of academic self-image, body image and freedom from anxiety between the ages of nine and 13. There is some stability in self-image between nine and 13 but many young people experience changes in how they view themselves over this four-year period. Primary school experiences, especially attitudes to their teacher, school and school subjects, have a longer term impact on self-image at the age of 13. Second-level experiences also make a difference, with poorer self-image emerging among young people who have experienced difficulties settling into the new school setting. All else being equal, second year students report poorer self-image than those in first year, with a particular gap in terms of academic self-image which appears to reflect the greater demands of schoolwork faced by young people as they move through junior cycle. Relations with second-level teachers are significantly associated with 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.

Implications for Policy and Practice The study findings indicate that schools and classrooms can make a difference to children's view of themselves across a range of domains. At the same time, even children in the same class group have different experiences of school and react to it in different ways. This diversity poses challenges for teacher practice in accommodating children with differing self-images as well as abilities. This challenge is particularly evident for teachers of multi-grade classes, and hence for smaller schools, where girls in particular appear to make negative evaluations of themselves in relation to (older) peers. The findings point to the importance of supporting teachers through initial teacher education and continuous professional development in using approaches which engage students and provide feedback in such a way as to minimise potentially negative effects on students' self-image.

Executive Summary | vii

Sports participation emerges as a crucial ingredient in fostering a positive self-image among children. This poses challenges for schools in a context where an average of one hour a week is devoted to physical education, 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. Children who have negative relations with their teacher tend to be more negative about themselves as learners at primary level and become even more negative about their abilities over the transition to second-level education. Discipline issues emerge as both a symptom and a driver of poor self-image, highlighting the way in which school and class behaviour policy can be an important lever for school climate. More punitive measures and too close a monitoring of behaviour may impact negatively on teacher-student relations and contribute to poorer self-image among children and young people. It is therefore vital that the creation of a positive climate be seen as a central component of school development planning. Investment in continuous professional development for principals and teachers is likely to facilitate change; initial teacher education should also emphasise school and classroom climate as many new teachers may not realise the impact they actually have on their students.

Primary school experiences matter in shaping how children currently view themselves as learners and in other aspects of their self-image. They matter too in influencing longer-term self-image and engagement with school. The findings indicate that any reform of the curriculum must be embedded in broader policy and practice which fosters a positive school climate and enhances student wellbeing.