

Second-Level Student Experiences in a Time of Change

Background

The Irish education system has seen considerable change, as curricular reforms embed alongside efforts to create a more innovative school system. Schools are at the forefront of Ireland's efforts to integrate migrant families, build an inclusive society, and tackle persistent social inequalities. They are also arenas for debate over social questions like the place of faith and secularism in public institutions and the best path to ensuring that young people flourish. Schools are responding to these debates under the legacy of the pandemic and its lasting effects, while navigating the complexities of the digital world and its risks and potential for student learning and wellbeing.

As the dust settles on the implementation of the new Junior Cycle curriculum, and as plans for Senior Cycle redevelopment start to take shape, recent research at the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (Carroll et al., 2024) provides a timely opportunity to assess how students across different school contexts are faring. Commissioned by the Joint Managerial Body (JMB) for Voluntary Secondary Schools, the study took place in spring 2023 in 21 schools chosen to reflect diversity in the sector. Second- and Fifth-Year students participated through surveys and semi-structured focus groups. School leaders, guidance counsellors, special educational needs coordinators, teachers, board of management members, parents, and key stakeholders also participated.

The data spans a diversity of themes, including teaching and learning experiences, school ethos, and the role and impact of school gender and social mix. While voluntary schools have traditionally drawn more from middle-class families, there has been a convergence in the social profile of sectors over time, alongside growing diversity in the voluntary sector.



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As the Irish education system undergoes reform, a recent study at the Economic and Social Research Institute provides a timely opportunity to assess how students across different school contexts are faring. This article focuses on two themes from the findings: how school social mix shapes student experience, and how students are experiencing the revamped Junior Cycle programme.

The study provides rich evidence and reflections from a multitude of perspectives. Here I focus on two themes: how school social mix shapes student experience, and how students are faring in the revamped Junior Cycle programme.

At the launch of “Embracing diversity in all its forms”: The voluntary secondary sector in Irish education’, Europe Hotel, Killarney, May 2024.



(L-R) John Curtis, former General Secretary of JMB, Deirdre Matthews, General Secretary of JMB, John Barry, President of JMB, and Professor Selina McCoy, ESRI.

Findings

Schools were seen to play a vital role in supporting students to flourish, regardless of background and need. The study particularly highlights the profound importance of the DEIS programme. Students attending these schools benefited in terms of curricular provision, a strong emphasis on literacy skills, opportunities to participate in sports (particularly for girls), their role in decision-making, and the positive nature of their interaction with teachers.

However, concerns were raised over the responsiveness of the DEIS school identification system – also identified by the OECD (2024) – and the struggles that some non-DEIS schools faced in meeting high levels of student and family need. More broadly, school infrastructural deficits and teacher supply problems are impacting, notably on schools’ capacity to offer diverse curricular and extracurricular activities, which are critical in supporting engagement for the most vulnerable. Given that the system relies on volunteerism to provide extracurricular programmes, there are valid concerns over the sustainability of

this model. Wider challenges in the recruitment and retention of teachers, the lack of diversity in the teaching profession, and risks from work overload and burnout across the school community are also ever-present.

The evidence highlights the intersectionality of disadvantage and the complexities in understanding how different students fare. For example, school absence is closely related to gender, special educational needs (SEN) status, and socioeconomic background, with higher absenteeism rates among girls, students with SEN, and those from disadvantaged families. While students generally held positive attitudes towards school, distinctive differences are associated with family background and SEN status. However, schools play an important role in shaping these student experiences. Positive teacher interactions enhanced school experiences, shaped by positive academic self-image, high teacher expectations, and the presence of a student-led ethos at school. These findings highlight the influence of school climate and student dynamics over individual or school characteristics.

There were calls for the types of learning experienced at Junior Cycle to be followed through to Senior Cycle.

The student voice was powerful in relation to the Junior Cycle programme, in its second year since it was fully rolled out. While reflections were broadly positive, the evidence points to some changes that are needed – an important finding as the redevelopment of the Leaving Certificate progresses. Overall, students enjoyed the programme and the learning opportunities provided, and highlighted the value in moving towards more experiential, student-centred learning, a key objective of the programme. The introduction of tailored programmes for students with additional learning needs is a particular strength, and planned follow-on programmes at Senior Cycle will be hugely valuable in supporting learning and achievement for all students. The removal of foundation-level papers has received criticism, and impacts can be seen on the accessibility of the main curriculum and student confidence levels.

In confining change to Junior Cycle level only, the research highlights mismatch and a lack of preparedness as students move into Fifth Year. There were calls for the types of learning experienced at Junior Cycle to be followed through to Senior Cycle. Classroom-based assessments attracted much attention; this study shows that the CBAs are not being experienced positively by some students and teachers. They are seen as an important assessment and are, as a result, a source of stress. However, the perceived low weighting afforded to CBAs, in comparison to the workload attached, is creating difficulties. The evidence suggests a need to mark the CBAs as part of the final result.

Conclusion

As educational systems increasingly focus on international standardised assessment measures, like PISA, this study highlights the importance of holistic student development in Irish schools. It brings to life the breadth of impact that

schools have in their students' lives. They are not just places where young people learn testable subject matter; they are a dense web of educational experiences and social relations where children are shaped into adults.



A new report, "Embracing diversity in all its forms - The Voluntary Secondary Sector in Irish Education", was launched in the Europe Hotel, Killarney in May 2024.

Report Authors pictured here (L-R): Professor Selina McCoy, Dr Eamonn Carroll, and Ms Keyu Ye.

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