

Issue 4 | 6 March 2025

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## Lived Experiences of Students in Irish Primary Girls' Schools: Benefits of single-sex schooling for girls

Ireland's first in-depth study into the lived experiences of children in Irish primary schools (single sex and co-educational) has been released. Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, this landmark longitudinal study was conducted by University College Dublin's School of Education and followed the experiences of over 4,000 children from 2019 to 2024.

One of the main aims of the study was to explore what factors influence children's experiences of learning in the context of norms and expectations of wider society. The study covered many aspects of children's lives, including the influence on students' primary school experience. Few studies have prioritised the voices of children as strongly as this study when considering how gender and school profiles impact children's engagement with learning.

Based on observations of students in school environments, as well as interviews, focus groups and questionnaires with students, teachers, principals and parents, the influence of gender stereotypes on children's engagement with learning was generally evident. All children identified girls as more engaged with learning than boys and attributed the stereotypical associations of "good" boys as physically strong, intelligent and good at sport and Maths, whilst describing "good" girls as those who are nice, kind, caring and polite. Children's engagement with extracurricular activities aligned with their ideas about gender as well as the skills and competencies they developed.

Yet as much as the children's responses reflected these gendered stereotypical descriptors, their responses also disrupted stereotypical thinking. This was especially true among younger children, and even more so among girls. Generalised stereotypical views of girls and boys decreased amongst girls as they aged. Older girls were aware of tensions that can occur when pushing the boundaries of what is considered "acceptable" behaviour for girls and women. Students attending girls' schools showed different approaches to learning and had more developed and positive attitudes about the important values and culture provided in all girls' schools.

Girls attending girls' schools expressed a strong preference for an all-girls' environment. They were hesitant and wary of co-educational options because of the risk of gender stereotypes. While some teachers in the study suggested that girls' schools could reinforce gender binaries, other interviews showed that girls attending girls' schools showed awareness of, and engagement with, gender diversity. In fact, girls are more likely to engage with gendered identities that challenge or intersect with gender stereotypes, and this was particularly reinforced in girls' schools.

Attitudes around learning, ability and aspirations for future education are important aspects of girls' experiences in girls' schools. While there was no significant difference in the type of academic subjects pursued by girls at co-educational and girls' schools, teachers strongly felt that there was more recognition for girls' talent in extracurricular activities at girls' schools, including options like sports. Teachers typically had a higher

expectation for girls to attend higher education compared to boys. Likewise, all girls, regardless of school type, are more likely to aspire to attend college/university than their male counterparts.

What is significant about those attending girls' schools is their perceptions of their capabilities and how they feel this is viewed by their teachers. Girls attending girls' schools were significantly more likely than girls from co-educational schools to agree that boys and girls can achieve as well as each other at the same task. They also had a more positive perception of their teachers' opinions of their ability, and felt their teachers would agree that they were "smart".

The report showed that there were clearly higher expectations surrounding behaviour for all girls. This was especially evident at girls' schools, among both teachers and students. Girls have a more positive approach to the presence of rules, and this was also more pronounced in girls' schools, especially for younger students. Girls attending girls' schools were also the most likely out of all cohorts in the study to agree that it is important that all people are treated fairly. In fact, it was in girls' schools that students were most likely to feel listened to in school. It was in these environments that students felt like they had a voice, could make decisions, and feel like their ideas were being used to make positive changes in their schools.

The benefits of girls' schools for primary school children in Ireland extends to a crucial aspect of the students' journeys: relationships with their peers and the impact of this on experiences of bullying. With rising rates of anxiety, especially among girls, bullying is a significant focus for educators, principals and families. Concerningly, the number of times girls reported being a witness to bullying increased over time compared to boys. But this was not the case for those in girls' schools. Girls attending girls' schools reported the lowest levels of bullying out of all the project participants.

The researchers attribute this to the stronger social connectivity girls have with their peers at girls' schools compared to girls in co-educational environments. Girls attending girls' schools are less likely to single out others as being "popular" or "socially prestigious", and there were typically smaller and tighter networks of friends, with girls' schools having the highest levels of closeness among students. While girls had a lower number of friends compared to their counterparts at co-educational schools, this was replaced with an exceptionally strong social cohesion and quality of relationships that was not evident in other project cohorts. This reinforces the benefits of girls' schools beyond academic outcomes alone, and incorporates the holistic wellbeing of students, which is an essential aspect of supporting girls to achieve their full potential.

This study reinforced some positive findings for girls' schools and the benefits these environments offer to students and highlights the benefits of single-sex schools for girls in connection with learning, wellbeing, engagement, equality and inclusion.

This study has real implications for the ongoing development of policy, professional practice and curriculum in primary schools internationally.

## References

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