

# Participation, happiness and achievement: the impact of poverty on the school experiences of 16-year olds

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## Introduction

Education remains one of the most contentious issues in Northern Ireland policy making. In fact, so controversial is the 11+ selection procedure that the UK government recently used the controversy about the abandonment of academic selection as one political bargaining tool in the negotiations on the reinstatement of a devolved government in Northern Ireland.

However, on a more general level, it can be argued that recent years have seen almost a U-turn in the government's education policy which signal a return to principles of community education and neighbourhood schools, as originally advocated by John Dewey (1916) and others almost one century ago. The narrow focus on numeracy, literacy and strict target setting has been abandoned and recent education initiatives favour a more comprehensive and holistic approach to what good education should be about. The extended schools initiative sets out to be a significant investment aimed at helping to tackle poverty and making schools a resource for the community. The inclusion of new subjects into the curriculum, such as Learning for Work and Life with the element of Citizenship Education, Personal Health and Social Education, and lately Relationship and Sexuality Education are also examples of the acknowledgment that schools have a role to play in equipping students with life skills that enable them to participate fully and confidently in society.

Save the Children has been prominent for many years in promoting the importance of

schools developing a participatory culture between staff and children. Save the Children's hypothesis is that this culture is as important as curriculum changes in promoting positive educational outcomes for children. Anti-bullying projects such as 'Focus on Bullying' (2002) in post primary schools and 'Something to Say' (2005) and the 'ABC Project' in primary schools have emphasised the role of stronger partnership between teachers and pupils in school to tackle issues which alienate and exclude children. Other related work in development includes projects to strengthen the effectiveness of school councils, and a pilot programme within post primary schools to bring issues of inclusion and participation to the forefront of school development planning.

Save the Children is particularly interested in exploring and testing the correlations between children's participation at school and their happiness and self-esteem, and whether this in turn might contribute to improvements in educational achievement for children. While it might be supposed that these correlations could be of relevance to all children's schooling, Save the Children has a specific focus on whether these have a differential impact on our poorest children.

The Young Life & Times survey has been interested in young people's experiences of school and their involvement in decision-making processes in school since it was first conducted in 1998 ([www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/1998/rights\\_of\\_the\\_child/index.html](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/1998/rights_of_the_child/index.html)). In 2006, some of the original questions were repeated. All 16-year olds registered on the Child Benefit Register who were born in February were

invited to take part in the survey. Of the 1,973 respondents eligible to take part, 772 (39%) completed a questionnaire.

## Happy at school?

Respondents were first asked whether they agreed or disagreed with four general statements about their school. Table 1 shows that over two thirds of respondents reported positive school experiences. Over seven in ten (71%) respondents felt happy at school and two thirds (67%) of respondents agreed that school taught them the skills and knowledge they later needed in life. The same proportion of respondents said they were satisfied that they had achieved to the best of their ability. This is a positive reflection on education provision. However, it must be a matter of concern that 12% of respondents did not feel happy at school or felt that it had not met their skills and knowledge requirements in later life, while 16% of respondents felt that most teachers did not respect them as an individual and 17% felt they themselves had under-achieved.

**Table 1: Respondents' school experiences**

|   | %     |                            |          |            |
|---|-------|----------------------------|----------|------------|
|   | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Don't know |
| On the whole, I felt very happy at school                               | 71    | 17                         | 12       | <1         |
| School taught me the skills and knowledge I will later need in life     | 67    | 20                         | 12       | 1          |
| Most teachers did NOT respect me as an individual                       | 16    | 18                         | 64       | 2          |
| I am satisfied that I have achieved at school to the best of my ability | 67    | 15                         | 17       | 1          |

## Costs associated with school

Respondents were asked how difficult their families found it to meet costs associated with school, such as for the school uniform, for day trips etc. Overall, the greatest difficulty was related to the cost of school holiday trips, with 29% of respondents saying that their families found it difficult to afford these. Nearly one quarter (24%) of respondents said that their families found it difficult to afford the costs of school uniforms.

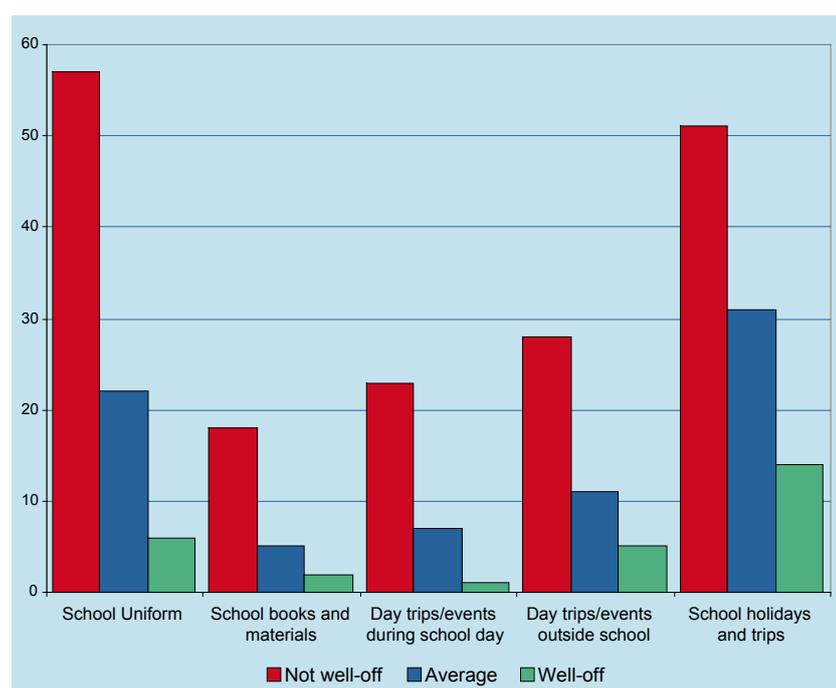
In order to determine how poverty or wealth impacted on the educational experience of the young people responding, they were asked to state how well off their families were financially. Fifteen percent said their families were very well-off or well-off, 54% felt that the financial situation of their families was average, and 29% said their families were either not well-off or not well-off at all. Whilst these figures are subjective perceptions of the respondents, they correspond with official statistics on child poverty in Northern Ireland, which range from 24% to 38% depending on the measures used.

The proportion of YLT respondents who said their families found it difficult to meet the

costs of school uniforms rose to 63% among respondents who said their families were financially not well-off. This was ten times higher than the proportion among well-off respondents (6%). Not well-off respondents were nearly four times more likely than well-off respondents to say that their families found it difficult to afford school trips (53% and 14%).

There were also significant differences between children who came from affluent and less affluent families with regard to day trips and events during and after school hours. 16-year olds from not well-off families were sixteen times more likely than those from well-off families to say that their families found it difficult to afford day trips during school hours and 6 times more likely to say that their families had difficulties in affording day trips or events outside school hours (Figure 1). Clearly these figures indicate that financial hardship of families does constrain poorer children's education and may be a cause of possible stigma of children from poorer backgrounds.

**Figure 1: Respondents (%), by self-reported financial affluence, saying their families found it difficult to afford school costs**



## Affluence, school choice and school experience

It is interesting to see how respondents from affluent family backgrounds assessed their school experience compared to those from families who were not well-off. Previous research (Gallagher & Smith, 2001) showed that pupils from less affluent families are more likely to attend secondary schools whereas pupils from well-off families are more likely to go to grammar schools. The 2006 YLT survey confirms that there is indeed a significant relationship between the type of school attended and the self-reported affluence of 16-year olds' families, as Table 2 shows.

**Table 2: What type of school did you last attend (by self-reported financial affluence)?**

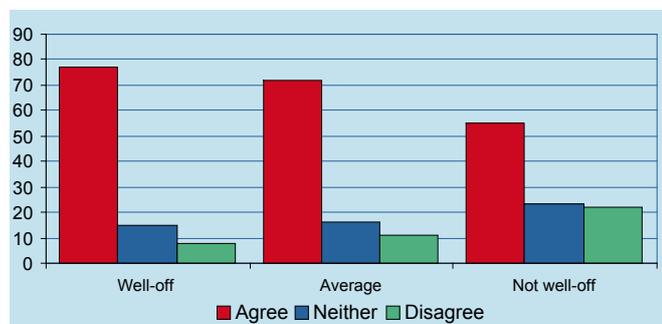
|                    | %            |         |          |
|--------------------|--------------|---------|----------|
|                    | Not well-off | Average | Well-off |
| Planned Integrated | 6            | 6       | 7        |
| Grammar            | 34           | 45      | 55       |
| Secondary          | 61           | 49      | 38       |

Just over one third of respondents (34%) from not well-off families attended grammar schools compared to over half (55%) of well-off families. However, the proportion of students attending the mixed-ability planned integrated schools was similar among respondents whose families were well-off, not well-off or average well-off.

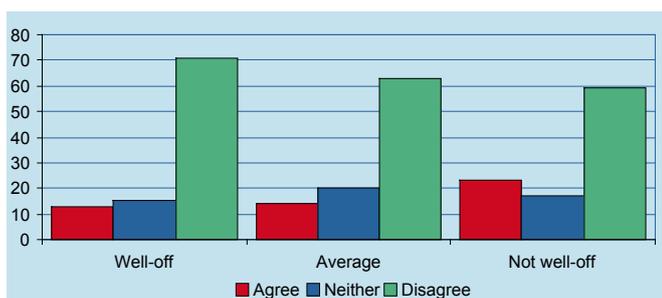
Figures 2-4 show that respondents from less well-off families reported significantly worse school experiences than those from well-off families. They were overall less happy at school, they were more likely to feel not respected as an individual by most teachers in their school and they were less likely to agree than well-off respondents that

school taught them the skills and knowledge they later needed in life (56% and 66% respectively).

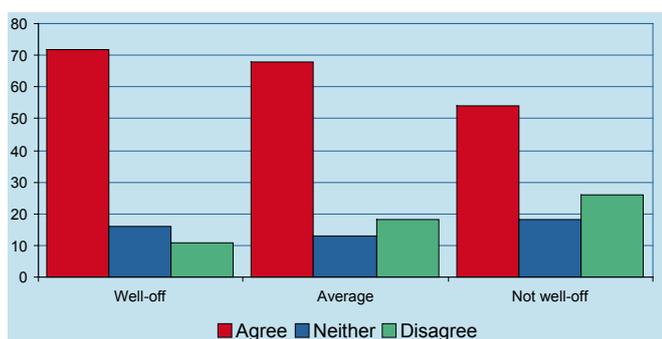
**Figure 2: On the whole, I felt very happy at school (%)**



**Figure 3: Most teachers did NOT respect me as an individual (%)**



**Figure 4: I am satisfied that I achieved at school to the best of my ability (%)**



Interestingly, the differences in the school experiences between respondents who attended different types of school – i.e. grammar, secondary or planned integrated – were statistically insignificant. This would

suggest that it is really respondents' affluence which determines how they experience school and not the type of school they attended. This hypothesis was tested by analysing responses of 16-year olds attending the same type of school. For example, among grammar school students, just 59% of those from families that were not well-off said they felt overall happy at school compared to 79% of those from well-off families. In secondary schools these figures were 53% and 75% respectively. Furthermore, in secondary schools 24% of respondents who came from not well-off families felt that they were not respected by most teachers as individuals, compared to 12% of students who came from well-off families who said the same. Additionally, 58% of respondents from not well-off families attending secondary schools agreed that they had achieved to the best of their ability, compared to 73% of respondents from well-off families. Again, these findings correspond with results of recent research undertaken elsewhere, namely that 11-year olds in schools with a high proportion receiving free school meals are twice as likely to fail to reach level 4 at Key Stage 2 as 11-year olds in other schools (Kenway et al, 2006).

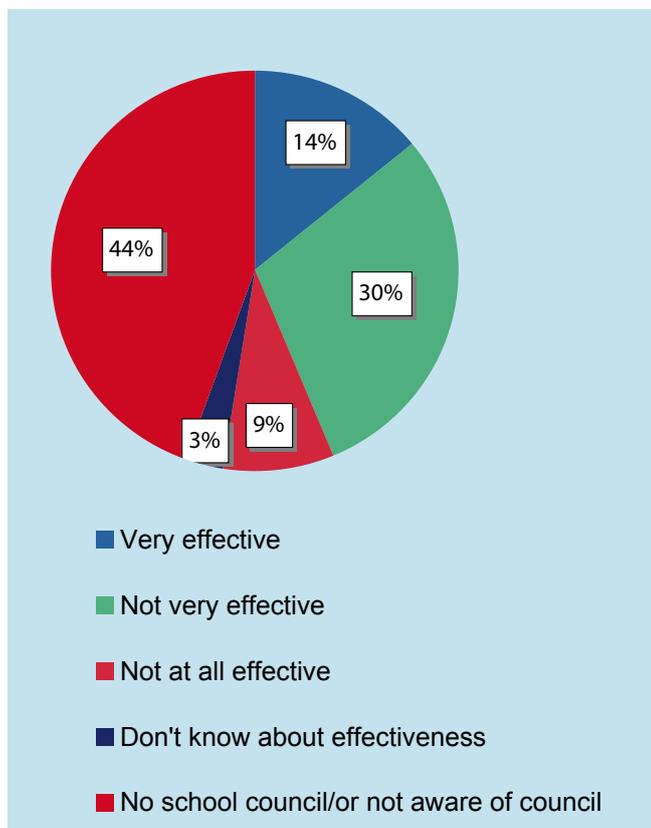
### *Say and participation in school*

The majority of respondents (58%) thought that students in their school were allowed to express their views a little. Twelve percent thought they were allowed to do this a lot; however over one quarter (26%) thought that they were not allowed to do this at all. When asked in what kind of things students had some say in their schools, most reported that this was in relation to their school policies (e.g. anti-bullying or suspensions) (42%), school facilities (e.g. toilets or lockers) (41%), and their school uniform (22%). Nine percent of respondents said they had some say on

the curriculum and six percent said they had some say on how the budget was allocated. Other areas in which students had some say were in relation to school meals and food on offer, with regard to school events and in relation to charitable activities that their school organised.

Over half of respondents (57%) said that their school had a school council. One third said (33%) said their school did not and one in ten respondents (10%) did not know whether their school had a council or not. However, only one quarter of respondents from schools with school councils (26%) said that their council was very effective (14% of all respondents). The other respondents felt that it was not very effective (53%, 30% of all) or not effective at all (16%, 9% of all).

**Figure 5: Perceived effectiveness of school councils**



Base: percentages in pie chart refer to all respondents

## Who is participating?

Previous research shows that, too often, participation in school is limited only to a small proportion of students. So who are the YLT respondents who participate and who is excluded?

The survey shows that students from well-off families do not differ from those from not well-off families with regard to their perceptions of how much say students had in their school. Well-off and not well-off respondents did not vary either in their view of how effective their school council was in raising issues affecting school life. Rather, it was the school type which determined to what extent students had any say. Respondents from planned integrated schools were significantly more likely to say than respondents from grammar schools and secondary schools that their school had a school council (72%, 59% and 52%). Respondents who attended grammar schools were much less likely to think that their school council was very effective in raising issues affecting school life (19% compared to 30% of secondary school students and 31% of respondents from planned integrated schools). Table 3 shows that respondents from planned integrated schools were indeed significantly more likely to report that students had some say in most areas.

Notably, two thirds (67%) of respondents from planned integrated schools felt that students had some say in relation to school policies, compared to just under half of secondary school students (49%) and just over one third (36%) of grammar school students. Respondents from planned integrated schools were also twice as likely as respondents from grammar schools to feel that students in their schools had any say about the curriculum (14% and 7%). They were also about twice as likely as secondary school students and

almost three times as likely as grammar school students to have any say in relation to their school uniform (49%, 26% and 18%).

**Table 3: Respondents (%) saying that students in their school had some say in relation to particular issues**

|   | Grammar | Secondary | Planned Integrated | All |
|---|---------|-----------|--------------------|-----|
| School uniform                                      | 18      | 26        | 49                 | 24  |
| How the school budget was allocated                 | 6       | 8         | 5                  | 7   |
| The curriculum                                      | 7       | 10        | 14                 | 9   |
| Facilities (e.g. toilets or lockers)                | 42      | 42        | 54                 | 43  |
| School policies (e.g. anti-bullying or suspensions) | 36      | 49        | 67                 | 44  |
| Other (Please say what)                             | 30      | 22        | 33                 | 27  |

Main recommendations arising from the survey focus on the issues of finance and participation. The survey has indicated that children have a clear perception of the economic status of their families and that there is a wide range of costs associated with their schooling that can put pressure on

## Conclusions

Despite the success of schools in meeting many of the social and education needs of the majority of children, it must remain a concern that a sizeable minority appeared underserved and disappointed in their school experience at the time the 2006 YLT survey was conducted. The fact that the highest proportion of this minority is drawn from children who perceive their families as not well-off must at least suggest the possibility that the financial cost of schooling is an additional stress or stigmatising factor for some children. Although school type rather than affluence appears from the survey to be the main factor in determining the quality of children's participation in school decision-taking (at least through school councils), the evidence overall suggests strongly that participatory mechanisms in most schools need to be strengthened.

some families and, through them, on children themselves. One solution is to explore options around 'money free' schools, where the ever more frequent requirement on children to bring money into school to meet costs (books, trips, events, charities) is removed or at the least severely reduced. Another approach could be for government to provide a seasonal grant to poorer families at the start of the school year when the greatest of these costs are apparent.

While it appears from the survey that a great many schools have school councils in place, their effectiveness is not highly valued by children themselves. Agencies such as the Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) and Save the Children themselves, alongside statutory education authorities, should place a strong emphasis on supporting schools to review and strengthen the effectiveness of school councils and other participatory and 'democratic' mechanisms.

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