

Pathways through the Junior Cycle

the experiences of second year students



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Ask teachers which year group in junior cycle is the most difficult and challenging to teach and most will answer, second years! With the innocence of first year behind them, second years begin to challenge the system. Teachers notice a deterioration in their behaviour, and some of them seem to lose interest in their studies. We blame it on adolescence or on the lack of an exam focus, or on one of a number of other reasons. But we seldom find out what it's like to *be* a second year. Well, that's just what ESRI researchers did recently when, as one part of a major study commissioned by the NCCA, they asked over 900 students in 12 Irish schools to tell them just that – what school life looks like through the eyes of second year students.

The findings of this part of the study give us a unique insight into what second years think about school, about the subjects they like and dislike, what helps them to learn, how they get on with and relate to their teachers, and how they feel about themselves. We don't look to this part of the research study for definitive answers, but what it does do is raise some very interesting and quite thorny issues! So read on – and find out what some of our students think...

...about school

First, the good news! The majority of second years say they like school, get on well with teachers, work hard, and participate fully in school life. Girls, especially those from professional backgrounds and those with higher academic ability, are in the majority here. But others have a different story to tell. They don't get on so well with their teachers; they misbehave and 'get given out to' more often; they see themselves as drifting and even as beginning the process of disengaging from school life altogether. Too often these are boys, and those with lower academic ability levels. In fact, these two groupings, with their different experiences and expectations of school, appear again and again in the findings of the ESRI study. Not so surprising, you might think...but what about this one? Students generally become less positive about school as time progresses—in fact, the proportion of students who find schoolwork interesting falls from 80% at the start of first year to a low of 55% by the end of second year.

...about the subjects they take

Students report that they like subjects where the learning is organised in an active, project-like way, subjects like Art, the Technology subjects, Home Economics, PE, Music. But not all students can take these subjects, either because the school doesn't offer the subjects,

some students are not allowed to take them or there is a clash with some other subject on the timetable. Languages are the least liked subjects, are seen by students as least interesting and feature prominently among the subjects students say they find most difficult and wish they hadn't taken. The study also found that students who have restricted subject choice and who regret taking some subjects have significantly more negative feelings about school and their teachers than other groups of students.

...about teachers

So, what makes a good teacher? Few surprises here really. According to our second years the good teacher is:

- someone who explains things well
- someone who enjoys teaching
- someone they can talk to
- someone who has a good sense of humour

Other qualities the students value are 'encourages questions', 'gives praise', 'doesn't give out all the time' 'keeps order', and 'relates the subject to life'.

...about learning

Students were asked about the kinds of lessons in which they learn most. They said it was in classes where the teacher explains things very well, where they (the students) like the subject, and are good at it. Practical activities like discussions, working in a group, or where the teacher makes the subject more interesting by using different teaching styles rather than just working through the textbook, were all seen as helping them to learn. Here's what one student had to say on the matter:

And you'd learn a lot as well...we did a whole activity on, like, learning these French verbs or something and everyone knows them now...everyone learnt them and we didn't even try to, it was just a game really.

...about streaming

Although the research findings about the subject of streaming are in general quite negative, they raise one of those particularly thorny questions: what does streaming actually do for the students who end up in the lower streams? Students who are placed in a lower stream, sometimes as early as first year in post-primary school, frequently remain there throughout junior cycle. They tend not to be academically challenged and are more likely to take their examination subjects at Ordinary or Foundation levels, which, of course, is highly

predictive of the levels that will take their subjects for Leaving Certificate, assuming they stay on that long in school.

But the most negative aspect of this is that the students themselves are keenly aware of this pattern. And this extends to their attitudes to homework. Students who rate themselves 'above average' spend most time on homework per night (95 minutes), while students who rate themselves 'below average' spend least (60 minutes). But in some streamed schools the challenges set for students are inconsistent, in that teachers appear to vary the amount of homework they give depending on the ability level of the class group. The demoralising effect of this can be seen in the low self-image of some students in the lower streams who claim that they get no homework because they would not do it anyway!

...about study and exams

The attitudes of second year students to study and tests can appear almost contradictory at times, and peer pressure seems to exert a strong influence on those attitudes. While they generally think it is a good idea to study, most students say they do not study. They also pretend they haven't studied even though they have! This seems to be because they are afraid they will be teased for studying and don't want

others to know in case they do badly. It seems all right to appear 'naturally clever', but it's not cool to study!

How to get the best out of second years

The study shows that the type of interaction students have with teachers and the school is one of the strongest influences on how they get on in second year. Students who have experienced positive interaction with teachers have a more positive self-image, both academic and social. The opposite is the case for students who have experienced negative interaction with their teachers. They are also more likely to become disengaged from learning and from school life. They have lower academic aspirations, miss more school and are more likely to leave school before or after the Junior Certificate.

However, where the climate of the school and the atmosphere of the classroom is positive, students are more likely to enjoy school and to like teachers. They are likely to be more engaged in their study, have higher academic aspirations and are less likely to misbehave. What more could we ask for!

This article is reproduced from the NCCAs newsletter 'info@ncca'. It is based on the book *Pathways through Junior Cycle: the experiences of second year students*, by Emer Smyth, Allison Dunne, Selina McCoy and Merike Darmody, ESRI.

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