Empathy, Social Values, and Civic Behaviour Among Early Adolescents in Ireland:
Composite Report

UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre NUI Galway

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Study Overview

Study Overview

> This new century is indeed one of pressing global issues, from climate change to large-scale migration and displacement – issues that challenge us to exercise our capacity for empathy, to feel for the plight of those we have never met as we do for those with whom we share a city or a country. (Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland, 2016)[1]

Although there are many definitions available in the literature, empathy is typically understood as a person's ability to feel and understand the emotions and feelings of others. Empathy is widely seen as the foundation for broader societal attitudes and behaviours, such as social responsibility and prosocial or civic behaviour. Research has shown that empathy and related 'other-oriented' values and behaviours are associated with a wide range of positive outcomes in the areas of personal development, interpersonal relationships, and societal well-being.

As highlighted in the quote by Michael D. Higgins above, we are living in an era of great social change, where people's capacity for empathy remains critical but can be challenged by a range of forces or influences. The emergence of populist politics which have cultivated divisions between groups in society could be seen as a challenge to empathic and civic values. Concerns have been expressed that the increasing individualisation of society over recent decades is leading to declining levels of empathy, social concern, and civic engagement among younger generations. The accelerated advancement of information and communication technology has raised questions as to whether increased online activity among young people will reduce their capacity to empathise with others and change perceptions of what constitutes acceptable behaviour. Others have disputed claims that the current generation is less empathetic than their predecessors, arguing that young people's civic behaviour is different from previous generations and that technology and social media have facilitated greater social understanding between people.

Given the importance of empathy and related social values to social cohesion and democracy, it can be argued that it is of societal importance that values of empathy and care towards others be given due attention in research and policy. In particular, because the empathic or civic processes that individuals experience in childhood and youth have been found to influence their social values and civic behaviour into adulthood, it is important to explore these issues as they pertain to young people. To date, however, there has been little research conducted on this topic among youth in Ireland.

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[1] Speaking at Edinburgh University on 28 June 2016. See: https://president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/speech-at-graduation-ceremony-university-of-edinburgh-scotland.

This study aims to generate empirical evidence regarding the values and experiences of youth in Ireland towards a range of issues which reflect a sense of social responsibility towards others, including an analysis of factors that influence the development of social values and empathy. It also aims to review the degree to which national policy and curriculum supports the promotion of such values. The core research questions guiding this project are:

1. At an international level, what factors have been found to influence the development of empathy and prosocial behaviour among adolescents?

2. What are the values and behaviours of 12–16 year-olds in Ireland in relation to empathy, social values, and civic behaviour?

3. What factors in young people's social context are important in shaping empathy, social values, and civic behaviour?

4. Are empathy and social values currently a priority in national policy for children and young people? Is this an issue of focus in the second-level curriculum? Is there a need for a new or enhanced approach to teaching social values and empathy?

The methods used to address these research questions and resulting outputs are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1:
Overview of research questions, methodology and outputs from the overall study

Research Question	Methodology	Output
1. At an international level, what factors have been found to influence the development of empathy and prosocial behaviour among adolescents?	Systematic literature review	**Peer reviewed journal article:** Silke, C., Brady, B. Boylan, C., Dolan, P. (2018) Factors influencing the development of empathy and pro-social behaviour among adolescents: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review, 94, 421-436.*

Research Question	Methodology	Output
2. What are the values and behaviours of 12-16 year olds in Ireland in relation to empathy, social values and civic behaviour? 3. What factors in young people's social context are important in shaping these social values and behaviours?	Quantitative cross-sectional research with a national sample of over 700 early adolescents in 12 schools in Ireland Qualitative focus group research with 29 students in 3 schools in Ireland	Empathy, Social Values and Civic Behaviour among Early Adolescents in Ireland: *Scientific Report*
4. Are empathy and social values currently a priority in national policy for children and young people in Ireland? Is this an issue of focus within the second level curriculum? Is there a need for a new or enhanced approach to teaching social values and empathy?	Policy and curriculum review of 33 documents relevant to the Irish context Qualitative interviews with 11 key informants	Empathy, Social Values and Civic Behaviour among Early Adolescents in Ireland: *Policy & Curriculum Review & Key Informant Perspectives*
What have we learned from this programme of research? What are the implications for policy, practice and research?	Summary of overall findings and recommendations	Empathy, Social Values and Civic Behaviour among Early Adolescents in Ireland: *Composite Report* *Youth friendly summary*

This current report, Composite Report, aims to provide a brief and accessible summary of the findings of the overall research project. The reader is advised to consult the individual reports for more detailed methodology, analysis, and full reference lists. This Composite Report starts with a brief synopsis of the findings of the systematic review, before moving on to summarise the findings of the Scientific Report, Policy and Curriculum Review, and Key Informants' Perspectives. The report concludes with 10 key messages emerging from the study and a series of recommendations for policy, practice, and research.

Note on terms used:

Empathy *is defined as the ability to understand or share another person's feelings, emotions, or emotional state.*

Cognitive empathy *is defined as the ability to understand the perspective or feelings of others.*

Affective empathy *is defined as the ability to feel or share the emotions of others.*

Social responsibility *is defined as one's sense of 'duty' towards, or concern for, others in society.*

Prosocial behaviour *is defined as a voluntary, beneficial social behaviour or intention (e.g., helping, sharing, defending, and comforting actions or tendencies) directed towards another individual or group.*

Civic behaviour *is defined as a prosocial action which is directed towards one's community or towards others in society.*

Social and emotional learning *is defined as the acquisition of skills, attitudes, and knowledge needed to understand and manage emotions and develop positive relationships with others in ways that enable individuals to succeed in education, the workplace, and citizenship.*

02

Factors that influence the development of empathy and pro-social behaviour among adolescents: A Systematic Literature Review

Summary of Key Findings

Introduction

A narrative systematic review was conducted to identify the factors that influence the development of empathy and prosocial behaviour among adolescents. Five databases (PsycINFO, Web of Science, Embase, ProQuest, and Scopus) were searched for research papers on empathy and prosocial behaviour among typically developing adolescents aged 13–18 years. The initial search yielded 14,755 articles, which were subjected to a detailed process of checking for relevance and quality. A total of 168 papers were selected for inclusion in the study. Studies were drawn from 37 different countries, with the majority of studies coming from the United States (n = 64), the Netherlands (n = 14), Italy (n = 15), and China (n = 13).

The systematic review was published in Children and Youth Services Review – see Silke et al (2018). The broad trends identified from this review are outlined below; for a more detailed analysis, please refer to the full study findings.[2]

Findings

The systematic review identified several different factors which appear to correlate with the expression of empathy and prosocial behaviour among adolescents aged 13–18 years. As shown in the table below, these factors can be divided into two broad categories: individual (psychological) influences and social (contextual) influences, with a range of themes identified within each.

Table 2: Influences on the expression of empathy or prosocial behaviour among adolescents

Individual / Psychological Influences	Contextual / Social Influences
Gender	Parents, Siblings, and Family Dynamics
Personal Values, Knowledge, and Morality	Friends, Peers, and Popularity
Personality and Social Desirability	Schools
Self-Beliefs, Emotional Regulation, and Social Skills	Neighbourhoods, Culture, and Ethnicity
Previous Empathic or Prosocial Responding	Media Exposure
Victimisation and Aggression	Sports, Religion, and Group Membership
	Target characteristics

Findings in relation to each of these factors are now described.

[2]Silke, C., Brady, B. Boylan, C., Dolan, P. (2018) 'Factors influencing the development of empathy and pro-social behaviour among adolescents: A systematic review', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 94, 421–436.

Individual / Psychological Influences:

- Across the majority of studies, girls were found to show higher levels of empathy or prosocial behaviour than boys.

- Greater prosocial or moral values were associated with greater empathy and prosocial behaviour in adolescents.

- Personality traits such as agreeableness, honesty/humility, resilience, and social intelligence were associated with greater empathy or prosociality among adolescents.

- Adolescents' prosocial responding was significantly related to their beliefs regarding their ability to enact social change or respond effectively to others' emotions (i.e., self-efficacy).

- Adolescents with higher self-esteem, and greater ability to regulate their own emotions, were more likely to show empathic and prosocial attitudes and behaviours.

- Empathy and prosocial behaviour appeared to be positively related over time.

- Youth who showed higher levels of aggression, bullying, and antisocial or delinquent behaviour tended to show lower empathy and prosocial behaviour.

- Exposure to negative early life trauma, such as violence or war, was associated with reduced prosocial behaviour.

Contextual Influences:

Parents, Siblings, and Family Dynamics:

- Authoritative or democratic parenting styles, characterised by warmth, responsiveness, and support, are associated with higher levels of empathic and prosocial responding among adolescents.

- Parental modelling of empathic attitudes or behaviours and expectations or encouragement of prosocial responding have positive effects on adolescents' own levels of empathy and prosocial behaviour.

- Higher levels of parental income or parental education are associated with higher prosocial behaviour.

- Positive family environments (characterised by supportive and cohesive family relationships), sibling affection, and civic family orientation were also found to impact empathy and prosocial behaviour in adolescents.

- Some studies found that adolescents' empathic and prosocial responding were influenced by household size and family structure.

Sports, Religion, and Other Group Membership:

- Sports participation and team membership were found to be important correlates of prosocial responding. In particular, specific aspects of the sports team environment, such as task orientation, in-group affect, socio-moral team climate, and coach relational support, appear to promote prosocial behaviour among adolescents.

- Adolescents who reported high spirituality or religious orientation and identity showed higher levels of prosociality or empathy.

- Involvement in non-sport activities, such as music, volunteering, or other extracurricular groups (e.g., Girl Guides, after-school clubs), was also linked to greater prosocial action among adolescents.

Friends, Peers, and Popularity:

- Adolescents whose peers hold positive expectations or norms regarding prosocial responding tend to show higher levels of prosocial responding themselves. Conversely, adolescents who belong to peer groups characterised by aggressive norms show lower levels of prosocial behaviours.

- Positive, supportive connections with peers promoted higher levels of other-oriented responding.

- Adolescents' prosocial and empathic responding may be linked to their popularity or social status. Some studies found that more 'popular' adolescents or 'socially preferred' groups tend to show higher levels of prosocial responding, while peer rejection was associated with lower prosocial responding.

Schools:

- Positive, democratic school environments were linked with greater prosocial and empathic responding.

- The classroom environment, including teacher support, student involvement, and positive peer affiliation were also found to have a significant bearing on youths' empathy and prosocial behaviour.

- Greater academic achievement was positively associated with higher levels of prosocial behaviour in adolescents.

Neighbourhoods, Culture, and Ethnicity:

- Residential stability, neighbourhood cohesion and control, quality of adult–youth interaction, and community connectedness and social support were all associated with greater prosocial responding among adolescents.

- Neighbourhood size may also play an influential role, with adolescents from smaller towns showing higher levels of prosocial behaviour and empathy than adolescents from larger towns.

- Prosocial and empathic responding among adolescents appeared to vary across different cultures and ethnic identities.

Media Exposure:

- Exposure to media violence was found to be associated with a reduction in empathic and prosocial behaviour among adolescents, while exposure to prosocial media content was associated with increased positive social responding.

- The length of time spent watching television or playing video games was found to be associated with lower levels of prosocial responding.

- Childhood use of social media and online interaction with friends positively influenced adolescents' empathic and prosocial responding.

- Parental use of social media, technological knowledge, and active monitoring of the child's social media use also appeared to correlate with more positive prosocial responding and empathy among adolescents.

Target Characteristics:

- Differences were found in the type of prosocial behaviours directed towards family, friends, and strangers, with some indications that adolescents appear more likely to help others who are 'similar' to themselves.

- Adolescents' perceptions about the 'cost of responding' may also play a role in influencing their decision to engage in prosocial activity.

03

Empathy, Social Values, and Civic Behaviour Among Early Adolescents in Ireland:

Scientific Report

Summary of Key Findings

Introduction

The aim of this study was to assess empathy, social responsibility, and prosocial or civic behaviour among young people in Ireland, and to expand our understanding of how young people's empathic and civic attitudes and behaviours are shaped by their social environments. The study consisted of separate quantitative and qualitative strands, the findings of which will now be summarised.

Quantitative strand

The quantitative research involved a large, national survey of 700 young people (aged 12–16) from 12 secondary schools located throughout the Republic of Ireland. The survey assessed current levels of empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviours expressed by youth in Ireland and examined how these values and behaviours are impacted or shaped by their social environments (e.g., parents, friends, schools, local communities, extracurricular activities). Gender differences were also explored. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to examine the direct and indirect effects of the variables assessed on civic behaviour.

The key findings of the quantitative strand of the study are summarised below, while in Table 3, an overview of the domains assessed and factors found to have positive and negative influences on youth empathy, civic behaviour and social responsibility is provided.

Key Findings

- Youth reported high levels of empathy and social responsibility values (e.g., social concern) but showed low engagement in prosocial or civic behaviour.

- Youth's parents, peers, schools, and communities had a significant impact on their empathic attitudes, social values, and civic behaviours.

- In particular, this research identified six specific aspects of the social context (*parent social responsibility, parent civic engagement, prosocial friend norms, classroom climate, classroom social analysis, and community connectedness*) which appear to be consistently associated with youth's (cognitive and affective) empathy, social responsibility values, or civic behaviours.

- Youth's empathic attitudes, social values, and civic behaviours were affected differently by these different social contexts. For example, parents' or friends' encouragement of empathy was important for shaping youth's empathic or social values, but parents' prosocial behaviours were important for shaping youth's prosocial behaviours.

- Youth with higher perspective-taking skills and social responsibility values showed greater levels of prosocial behaviour.

- Boys showed lower empathy and social concern than girls.

- Youth participation in youth clubs, drama, music, sport, and religious activities was linked with greater civic or empathic responding.

- Greater involvement with video gaming was associated with lower empathic and civic responding

Table 3: Overview of domains assessed and factors found to have positive and negative influences

Domain assessed:	Influenced positively by:	Influenced negatively by:
Empathy	Parent social responsibility Open classroom climate Prosocial friend norms Community connectedness Participation in youth clubs	Parent civic engagement Playing violent video games
Social responsibility	Parent social responsibility Social analysis in the classroom Prosocial friend norms Community connectedness Participation in youth clubs Participation in drama	Playing violent video games
Civic behaviour	Cognitive empathy Social responsibility Parent civic engagement Participation in sports Participation in youth clubs Participation in music Participation in drama Participation in religious activities	Playing violent video games

Qualitative strand

The qualitative research conducted as part of this study involved an in-depth exploration of youth's views and opinions about the development and expression of empathy and prosocial or civic behaviour. During this research, 29 young people (aged 13–17) from three secondary schools in Ireland took part in one of three separate focus group discussions. These discussions explored youth perspectives about how young people acquire and develop empathy or other social values, and probed their views about what facilitates and impedes engagement in prosocial or civic behaviour. This qualitative study also elicited youth's recommendations for how empathy or prosocial behaviour can be better promoted.

Key Findings

- Youth expressed the belief that empathy promotes greater psychological and interpersonal functioning, but believed that society values individualism over empathy.

- Youth conceptualised empathy as both an innate 'personality' trait and a skill that can be strengthened or weakened by one's environment.

- Parents, other family members, strangers, and friends were all recognised as having the potential to positively or negatively influence the development and expression of empathy or prosocial behaviour among young people.

- Adolescents believed that religion, sport, and social media also impact on empathy in various ways, both positively and negatively.

- Youth believed that young people are likely to show empathy towards their friends, but may lack empathy for 'others' who are different from them.

- The degree of empathy shown by young people in a particular situation was thought to depend on the perceived level of need, as well as the age and gender of the respondent.

- Adolescents identified a weak empathic relationship between teachers and students in school and felt that this has negative consequences for well-being and education.

- Young people said that fear of being judged, fear of making a situation worse, and lack of knowledge, skills, or access to resources were barriers impeding their willingness or ability to engage in active empathic or prosocial responding.

- Youth identified schools as important targets for reform and empathy promotion, and provided recommendations for how schools, parents, young people, and society more generally can all help create a greater culture of empathy.

Selected quotes from young people participating in the research

'We don't know where to start. We're like, okay, I really want to help, but how? What can I do that will make a difference?' (**Emma, age 16**)

'What stops people our age showing empathy is being judged, being judged for being different, for caring, for being 'weak'. We don't want to do anything out of the norm for fear of not being accepted.' (**Heidi, age 17**)

'I don't think boys can show their feelings around their friends – their friends will be like, "Oh look, you're being soft" … like, if you're a boy you're supposed to be hard and tough, so that's the act that you put on.' (**Sarah, age 14**)

'Well, for starters, just say you were going through something … girls will support you and they won't laugh at you, and they won't scoff at you and just say go stand up for yourself … They won't belittle you.' (**Michael, age 14**)

'Say someone comes from a mean family, their parents are always like, "You're the best, you don't need anyone else…", they're not going to be very empathetic.' (**Kevin, age 15**)

'If you're surrounded by a group of people who judge everyone as they pass, then you're going to learn to be like that. Whereas if you're surrounded by people that take into consideration what people are going through or whatever, like, you're more likely to be like that.' (**Anna, age 14**)

'There's a lot of YouTubers that do homeless videos and stuff, and that can, like, influence you' (**Milo, age 14**)

'There are millions of tweets a day, probably hundreds of millions of tweets a day, whatever, and like so many different things. We can't even stop and focus on one thing. You'd be like, Oh my God, we should like help solve this, because then ten more things come in and we're like, Okay, we don't have enough time.' (**Emma, age 16**)

'Like if the school situation was changed maybe and they focused more on teaching students not only about academics but also about how to approach life, feelings, empathy, all that, because we spend so much time here and we literally leave school and are thrown out into the real world.' (**Olivia, age 15**)

04

Policy and Curriculum Review and Key Informant Perspectives:

Summary of Key Findings

Introduction

This strand of the research study explored the degree to which the promotion of empathy and social values is currently a priority in national policy and curriculum for children and young people. It aimed to establish if there is a need for a new or enhanced approach to the teaching of social values and empathy. To address these questions, a policy and curriculum review was undertaken, followed by a series of interviews with key informants.

Policy and Curriculum Review

This review was undertaken to examine how policy across government departments supports the development and promotion of empathy and related prosocial values in children and young people, a form of education referred to as *Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)*. The review analysed 33 current policy documents with a significant SEL component, ranging from high-level policy to the school curriculum and including formal, non-formal, and informal learning settings.

Key Findings

The report identified the following opportunities:

• Social and Emotional Learning is embedded in policy at all levels from high-level frameworks and action plans to the school curriculum.

• Opportunities for Social and Emotional Learning exist at all formal educational levels from early years settings to the end of second level.

• National policy acknowledges the relevance of Social and Emotional Learning across settings, e.g., school, youth work, community groups, and home settings.

However, the following challenges were also identified:

• There is a conflict between the high-level policy aims of educating students for the workforce and educating young people for positive citizenship.

• Social and Emotional Learning tends to focus on 'self-oriented' personal skills (e.g., resilience, emotional regulation) rather than 'other-oriented' skills and values (e.g., empathy, social responsibility, care).

• The policy emphasis is on formal education over non-formal and informal education, e.g., youth work or parenting.

• Social and Emotional Learning is not mandatory in teacher education degrees.

Key informant interviews

In order to further understand how policy translates into practice and how empathy and prosocial values are promoted in applied settings, interviews were conducted to explore the views of professionals from a range of backgrounds, including teaching, programme development and delivery, academia, educational psychology, school leadership, and youth work, on approaches to promoting empathy and social values in young people.

Key Findings

Social and Emotional Learning outside of schools:

- Parents were seen to play a crucial role in the development, fostering, and promotion of empathy in children and young people.

- Youth work and youth spaces were recognised as a significant setting for the promotion of empathy and social values outside of school and the home settings.

- Youth work policy was seen to have veered away from universal youth work, which was seen to be relevant for promoting values in young people.

Social and Emotional Learning in schools:

- Schools were seen to be delivering Social and Emotional Learning and promoting socio-emotional skills in a variety of ways, though they may not explicitly acknowledge their work in this area.

- Policy and the school curriculum were seen to play a significant role in promoting values with school settings, e.g., by providing a rationale to practitioners and guiding practice. However, issues with implementation of the curriculum were noted.

- In the Irish school system, primary school was seen as a more conducive space for values promotion than secondary school.

- In schools, subject-based approaches were seen as relevant for teaching social values. However, SPHE and CSPE were deemed to have a low status in the curriculum, and committed or interested teachers are not always assigned to these subjects.

- Lesson-based programmes in schools may be effective in promoting values. However, they may not be implemented or delivered effectively, e.g., they may be delivered as 'content', and teachers may be reluctant to use active methodologies.

- Whole-school approaches were favoured above all others as an effective and sustainable approach to promoting empathy and social values, with a particular emphasis on the cultivation of a positive school climate.

- Programme implementation can be difficult to monitor in schools.

- Time pressures on teachers and an academic or exam focus, particularly in senior cycle, are a significant challenge to the promotion of empathy in school settings. Related to this, parents were seen to tend to prioritise exam results over SEL.

- Social and Emotional Learning in schools tends to devolve to a small number of interested teachers on the staff; whole staff buy-in can be difficult to achieve.

- Providing a rationale for Social and Emotional Learning to parents, teachers, and school managers was seen as important in order to align SEL to their respective interests, needs, and objectives.

- There was a recognised need for further capacity-building in teachers through Initial Teacher Education or Continuous Professional Development (CPD), e.g., a mandatory component on Social and Emotional Learning in Initial Teacher Education.

Other findings:

- The prevailing socio-economic climate was seen to often prize values at odds with empathy and prosocial values (e.g., individualism, competitiveness), undervaluing or militating against them.

- Experiential learning, role modelling, and relationship-building were all cited as effective in promoting empathy and prosocial values across settings.

- Managers, i.e., school leaders and youth work programme managers, were recognised as playing a significant role in cultivating a positive climate for the promotion of values among both staff and young people.

05

Ten Key Messages and
Recommendations from the Study

This research study is among the first to explore the expression of empathy and civic responding among youth in an Irish context, generating greater understanding of the processes related to youth's empathic and civic responding and providing insights into the relationship between empathy and civic behaviour. In addition, this research has synthesised the findings from international research on the factors that influence youth empathy and prosocial behaviour. Across all strands of the research, parents, peers, schools, and local communities have emerged as important facilitators of youth social values, while the findings also draw attention to the role that youth's individual agency, skills, interests, and knowledge, as well as societal norms and practices, can play in shaping youth's empathic and civic responding. This research project has also examined how empathy and related 'other-oriented' skills, values, and behaviours, such as social responsibility and civic engagement, are promoted in children and young people in Ireland.

This research underlines the critical importance of promoting values in children and young people for the future of society and offers valuable information for policymakers and practitioners across a range of settings. In this section, we integrate the findings of the overall study and identify ten key messages and associated recommendations emerging from the research.

1. Empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviour among young people are an important focus for society and policy

The processes of socialisation experienced by the current generation of youth are both similar to and very different from those experienced by previous generations. While values continue to be shaped by interpersonal relationships with parents, peers, and teachers, young people in Ireland are now also exposed to a much wider array of influences through technology, multiculturalism, globalisation, and consumerism, while religious influence is less strong for many young people. Because the empathic or civic processes that individuals experience in childhood and youth have been found to influence their responsibility values, empathic understanding, and civic engagement into adulthood, it is important to explore and reflect on these issues as they pertain to young people. There was broad agreement from young people and key informants taking part in this study that empathy and social values are an important focus for society and policy.

Recommendation: Empathy, social values, and civic behaviour among youth should become a key priority in policy, research, and practice.

2. Young people in Ireland 'feel' empathy and social responsibility but may not always show it to others in society

The quantitative study showed that young people in Ireland reported high levels of empathy and social responsibility values but had low engagement in prosocial or civic behaviour. These results were somewhat supported by the qualitative research findings, with a number of youth contending that while it is easy to feel empathy for others in society, it is more difficult to actively help or engage in prosocial responding at this level. This finding may be explained in part by the relatively young age of the respondents, whereby opportunities for civic engagement may be more limited than for older adolescents.

In the qualitative study, youth discussed the perceived negative impact that societal norms have

on young people's empathic or prosocial responding. They suggested that young people may be discouraged from developing or showing empathy to others due to the growing societal focus on individualism, a viewpoint that was also expressed in the Key Informant study. Specifically, youth contended that empathy and prosociality are regarded as a weakness or an inconvenience in a society that values individual gain over social compassion. Some young people also said that fear may also inhibit young people's prosocial or civic responding – both fear of making a situation worse, and of experiencing personal negative consequences (e.g., being taken advantage of) as a result of their prosocial engagement. Youth also suggested that it can be difficult for young people to take prosocial or civic action when they lack the knowledge, skills, or resources necessary to help. However, there was a broad consensus that youth are more motivated to help when they have a close or positive relationship with the person or people in focus or when there is a strong perceived need to help or intervene.

Recommendations:

- The research provides evidence to suggest that services or interventions that can facilitate greater civic or prosocial responding among youth in Ireland are warranted.

- Interventions which specifically target youth's motivations, fears, and skills and explore the influential role that wider societal norms play in impacting youth's empathic or civic responding may be particularly beneficial. In addition, there is a need to consider ways that we can encourage youth to show greater empathy, compassion, and prosocial behaviour towards all individuals in society, not just friends, family members, or people in one's close inner circle.

- It would be beneficial to replicate this research with older adolescents to explore potential age-related differences in empathy and civic values and behaviours.

3. Girls were found to score higher than boys on measures of empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviour

Findings from the quantitative research indicated that teenage boys in Ireland show lower levels of empathy and social responsibility values than their female peers, which also reflects trends in the international research literature. Results revealed that boys are less likely than girls to have friends who model prosocial activities, and are also less likely to be encouraged to adopt social responsibility values by their parents. Findings from the qualitative research appeared to support this proposition, with the majority of young people voicing the belief that adolescent boys show less empathy than girls and that this appeared to be linked to differences in societal norms regarding empathy or prosocial behaviours for boys and girls.

Recommendations: Linked to the earlier recommendation, there is a need for interventions regarding societal norms to also consider gender stereotypes and tackle perceived gender norms.

4. Parents and peers can have a positive or negative effect on young people's empathy, social values, and prosocial or civic behaviours

Both the systematic literature review and the empirical research undertaken as part of this study found evidence that parents and peers play an important role in the socialisation of empathy and prosocial or civic behaviour among young people. For example, the quantitative strand of this study found that where young people perceived that their parents encouraged them to show concern to others and treat people equally (e.g., agreeing that 'My parents/guardians encourage me to be helpful to others, especially the less fortunate', and 'My parents/guardians encourage me to treat everyone equally'), they showed higher levels of social responsibility and affective and cognitive empathy, which led indirectly to an increase in youth civic behaviour. Key informants interviewed as part of the study also expressed the view that parents are important educators for empathy and social values. The crucial role of parents in the children's socio-emotional development is acknowledged in policy, albeit in a limited way.

With regard to peers, the quantitative research found that young people who rated their peers as having higher prosocial norms (e.g., if their friends would 'say nice things or compliment people just to be nice'; 'Help people without expecting something back') scored higher in empathy and social responsibility. The importance of these interpersonal processes in shaping youth's empathic attitudes and civic behaviours was also raised by young people in qualitative focus groups.

The findings therefore support the conclusions of previous research that these social contexts are important agents through which greater youth empathic or civic responding can be encouraged or discouraged. However, it should be noted that these issues are complex and that close attention should be paid to the research evidence as reported in the scientific report. An example of this is that where young people rated their parents as active in their communities (e.g., 'My parents/guardians do volunteer work in the community'; 'My parents/guardians are active in the community'), it was found to have a positive influence on youth's civic behaviour but a negative influence on youth's empathy. The possible reasons for this finding are complex and were discussed in detail in the scientific report.

Recommendations:

- Parents should be made aware of the role they play in promoting empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviour through public awareness campaigns and programmes.

- Policy and programmes ought to consider how we can encourage more positive or prosocial peer norms and recognise the role that peer norms play in shaping youths' empathy values.

- From a research perspective, there is a need to learn more about what influences peer norms – exploring the influence of parents, or society more generally, in shaping the type of beliefs or behaviours that are valued in adolescent friendship groups.

5. Young people's experiences at school influences their empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviour

Previous research, as summarised in our systematic literature review, has shown that young people's experiences at school can shape their social values and behaviours. In the empirical part of this study, two particular dimensions of the school experience emerged as exerting a significant influence on youth values and behaviours in the Irish context. Firstly, young people who reported that they engaged more in social analysis or civic education at school (e.g., 'In our classes, we learn about problems in our society and what causes them'; 'In our classes, we talk about current events') showed higher levels of social responsibility. Furthermore, young people who reported having an open classroom climate, where they are encouraged to share their opinions in class (e.g., 'In our classes, students are encouraged to express opinions'; 'In our classes, students can disagree with the teacher, if they are respectful') scored higher on measures of cognitive empathy. These findings indicate that it is advantageous to engage young people in open and critical discussions of social issues in the context of mutually respectful teacher–student relationships.

The important role that schools can and should play in developing and promoting empathy and related values was a strong theme across key informant interviews. For the key informants, schools were seen to have a responsibility to promote values, focus groups with young people and key informant interviews as they act in loco parentis. Young people identified a need for schools to be more empathetic environments and for more open discussion of social issues in the classroom. Those interviewed placed the greatest emphasis on a whole-school approach, and in particular on the cultivation of an environment that embeds and promotes particular values in the school in a variety of ways.

Recommendations:

- Schools should ensure that young people are provided with opportunities to engage in social analysis and to discuss social issues openly in class.
- The findings indicate that a whole-school approach to the promotion of empathy and social values is warranted. However, in order to do so, further research and guidance on the specific nature and components of a whole-school approach are required.

6. Community connectedness, youth work, and extracurricular activities (including arts, music, and drama) positively influence emphatic and civic responding

In the quantitative research, higher levels of empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviour were observed among young people who reported that the community they lived in was characterised by a high degree of connectedness (e.g., 'Most people trust each other'; 'In general, people in my community work together to solve problems'). The quantitative research also found that young people reporting greater involvement in youth clubs were more likely to show higher levels of empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviour. The key role that out-of-school contexts, in particular youth work, can play in promoting empathy and social values was also emphasised in key informant interviews. Participation in arts, drama, and music was linked to greater youth civic behaviour or social responsibility values. Findings from the quantitative research also indicated

that youth who more frequently attend religious activities engage in more civic behaviour. This connection was echoed by a small number of students in the qualitative research, who also suggested that religious teachings may help promote greater empathic responding. Together these findings support the international research findings that youth participation, quality adult–youth interaction, neighbourhood cohesion, community connectedness, and religiosity promote greater prosocial responding among adolescents.

Recommendations:

- Given the positive influence of community, youth work, and extracurricular activities on empathy and social responsibility, there should be greater emphasis in policy on community development, youth work, and other aspects of non-formal and informal education.
- In this regard, there is a strong case to be made for universal youth work provision. Studies have highlighted the importance of youth work provision and local youth spaces in facilitating ordinary interaction and prosocial values which can promote understanding across cultural boundaries.

7. Mixed findings emerged in relation to social media and video games

In the quantitative research, playing violent video games was associated with lower empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviour. This finding is consistent with the broad consensus of research reviewed in the systematic review that exposure to media violence appears to be associated with a reduction in empathic and prosocial behaviour among adolescents.

In our quantitative research with youth in Ireland, no significant link, positive or negative, was found between youth's level of social media use and their current levels of empathy, social responsibility values, or civic behaviour. In the qualitative research, some youth felt that social media encourages narcissism and individualism and can desensitise young people from caring about societal issues, while others believed that social media can connect young people to the wider world, making them aware of social issues and social injustice. These findings, which indicate that youth's empathic and civic responding is associated more with the type of content youth are exposed to on social media, than with their level of social media usage, reflect the findings of international research.

Recommendations:

- There is a need for further research exploring the positive and negative impact of different types of media use on youth's empathy, prosocial responding, or civic engagement.

- Given the central role that social media plays in the lives of youth, more interventions or programmes are required that help to maximise the positive potential of social media and video gaming.

8. The Irish policy context promotes Social and Emotional Learning, but recognition of and commitment to its role for social good are required

The conclusion from both the Policy and Curriculum Review and the Key Informant Study was that the policy context in Ireland does support the delivery of Social and Emotional Learning and the promotion of 'other-oriented' skills, values, and behaviours such as empathy, care, tolerance, social responsibility, prosocial responding, and civic engagement. However, despite the increasing support for Social and Emotional Learning evident in Irish policy and practice, academic achievement remains the key priority in the formal education sector. Both adults and young people taking part in this research highlighted a concern that the expression of prosocial attitudes and behaviours is frustrated or discouraged by prevailing social norms that encourage opposing values such as individualism, competition, and aggression. Such concerns tap into a broader debate about the aims of Social and Emotional Learning in the liberal and neo-liberal conceptions of the role of education. In this context, Social and Emotional Learning, which is often referred to as '21st century skills', can at times appear as part of an effort to create an efficient workforce for the future of global capitalism, rather than to promote empathy and other-oriented skills and values for the greater social good. The question of whether 'other-oriented' skills and values are targeted to the same degree as self-oriented skills was also identified as a concern.

Recommendation: Policy should emphasise the importance of Social and Emotional Learning for social good and place greater emphasis on 'other-oriented' skills and values.

9. Policy on Social and Emotional Learning would benefit from a more comprehensive framework

This research has pointed to the range of contextual factors that influence the development of empathy and prosocial responding in young people, including family, school, peers, community, media, sports membership, and culture. However, the current policy framework places the greatest emphasis on developing socio-emotional skills through the formal education system, with considerably less attention paid to the role of informal and non-formal settings, such as home and community, in the development and promotion of empathy and related skills and values. In other words, policy does not take a sufficiently ecological approach to the promotion of prosocial skills and values in children and young people.

Recommendations:

- There is a need for an overarching policy framework on Social and Emotional Learning that is socio-ecological in nature, reflecting the fact that a child's socio-emotional development takes places in a relational context. Such a framework would help to ensure a more cohesive and coordinated policy approach to the promotion of prosocial skills, covering a diverse range of settings (home, school, and community settings), approaches, and age cohorts.

- To inform a coordinated policy approach, research should be undertaken to produce an extensive 'mapping exercise' of Social and Emotional Learning delivery in schools, youth work, and community settings. Equally relevant, given the importance of promoting values

across settings, is further research on how parents promote values. Such research would enable policymakers to reflect on how policy impacts on practice and where the gaps in provision lie.

10. Specific challenges to promoting empathy and related values in the school system require targeted solutions

The Key Informant Study found that secondary schools face particular challenges in delivering Social and Emotional Learning, in particular the time constraints faced by teachers as a result of pressures to deliver an overloaded, exam-focused curriculum, leaving little time for Social and Emotional Learning or a school culture conducive to this form of education. It was also found that Social and Emotional Learning in schools tends to devolve to small number of interested teachers, that its subjects have low status in the curriculum, and that teachers can be reluctant to use the active methodologies associated with Social and Emotional Learning.

Recommendations:

- Social and Emotional Learning, including a focus on methods of promoting other-oriented values, should be a mandatory component of teacher education degrees. Teacher CPD focused on Social and Emotional Learning, including whole-school approaches and associated methodologies, should be made accessible to in-service teachers.

- Research is required into viable approaches to promoting empathy, social responsibility, and civic engagement in the Irish secondary school context.

Conclusion:

The promotion and development of empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviour among young people is of major importance for society. It is imperative that parents, youth, schools, and communities are made aware of the important role they play in shaping the type of empathic and civic orientations and social values that are adopted and modelled by young people today. Researchers, policymakers, and the general public should work together to develop effective strategies and ensure that all youth in our society are exposed to positive social environments that nurture empathy and inspire greater civic and prosocial behaviour. To this end, the recommendations arising from the study are summarised below.

Summary of recommendations:

- Empathy, social values, and civic behaviour among youth should become a key priority in policy, research, and practice.

Policy:

- There is a need for an overarching policy framework on Social and Emotional Learning that is socio-ecological in nature, reflecting the fact that a child's socio-emotional development takes place in a range of settings, including the home, peer networks, community, and school.

- Policy should emphasise the importance of Social and Emotional Learning for social good, and place greater emphasis on 'other-oriented' skills and values.

- Given the positive influence of community, youth work, and extracurricular activities on empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviour, there should be greater emphasis on, and support for, non-formal and informal education in policy.

- In this regard, there is a strong case to be made for universal youth work provision. Studies have highlighted the importance of youth work provision and local youth spaces in facilitating ordinary interaction and prosocial values which can promote understanding across cultural boundaries.

- Social and Emotional Learning, including a focus on methods of promoting other-oriented values, should be a mandatory component of teacher education degrees. Teacher CPD focused on Social and Emotional Learning, including whole-school approaches and associated methodologies, should be made accessible to in-service teachers.

Interventions:

- Results provide evidence to suggest that services or interventions that can facilitate greater civic or prosocial responding among youth in Ireland are warranted.

- Parents should be made aware of the role they play in promoting empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviour through public awareness campaigns and programmes.

- The findings indicate that interventions which specifically target youth's motivations, fears, and skills and explore the influential role that wider societal norms and gender stereotypes play in impacting youth's empathic or civic responding may be particularly beneficial. Furthermore, there is a need to consider ways that we can encourage youth to show greater empathy, compassion, and prosocial behaviour towards all individuals in society, not just friends, family members, or people in one's close inner circle.

- Group programmes and processes should be developed to facilitate young people to reflect on peer norms and encourage prosocial peer norms.

- Given the central role that social media plays in the lives of youth, more interventions or programmes are required that help maximise the positive potential of social media and video gaming.

Schools:

- Schools should ensure that young people are provided with opportunities to engage in social analysis and to discuss social issues openly in class. Empathy education should occur in the classroom as a key part of the curriculum.

- The findings indicate that a whole-school approach to the promotion of empathy and social values is warranted.

Research:

- It would be beneficial to replicate this research with older adolescents to explore potential age-related differences in empathy and civic values and behaviours.

- There is a need for further research exploring the positive and negative impact of different types of media use on youth's empathy, prosocial responding, or civic engagement.

- To inform a coordinated policy approach, research should be undertaken to produce an extensive 'mapping exercise' of SEL delivery in schools, youth work, and community settings.

- Research is required into viable approaches, including whole-school approaches, to promoting empathy, social responsibility, and civic engagement in the Irish secondary school context.

UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre

School of Political Science & Sociology

NUI Galway
Tel: 091 495398