

# WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT LARGE SCALE IMMIGRATION AND IRISH SCHOOLS?

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The period since the 1990s has seen immigration into Ireland of a scale and speed unprecedented in comparative context. After decades of net emigration from Ireland, the strong economic growth of the last decade and resulting rapid immigration of non-Irish nationals from a wide range of countries has transformed Ireland into a country of net immigration. In recent years the inflow of migrants has become more diverse, with many nationalities represented, and return Irish migration declining from 50 per cent of the inflow in 1996 to less than 25 per cent in 2006. In little over a decade Irish society has become more diverse in terms of nationality, language, ethnicity and religious affiliation as the population share of non-national immigrants increased from 3 per cent in 1993 to 6 per cent in 2002 to 10 per cent in 2006. As a result, immigrant children are now reflected in the composition of the student body at both primary and second level. While a number of small scale studies have been conducted on the experiences of immigrant students in Irish schools, national level data on how immigrant students are distributed across Irish schools, and on their levels of knowledge of English, have not been available. A new study by the ESRI *Adapting to Diversity\** addresses this gap. Emer Smyth, Merike Darmody, Frances McGinnity and Delma Byrne conducted a nationwide survey of principals of primary and second-level schools. In addition, they carried out qualitative interviews in 12 case study schools. The study estimates that immigrant students made up approximately 10 per cent of the primary school-going population and 6 per cent of the second-level population in 2007.

The study points to demographic trends and residential segregation, school characteristics, parental choice of schools and school admission policies as factors that contribute to the placement of immigrant children in schools. Internationally studies of this type have been driven by a concern about segregation among the immigrant population. We have found no evidence of school segregation in relation to immigrant students relative to international

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comparisons, as most immigrant students are in schools with a low proportion of immigrant students. Our findings indicate that the distribution of immigrant students across schools in Ireland is more evenly distributed than in other international contexts. There are however, a number of differences between the primary and second-level sectors. First, while around 90 per cent of second-level schools record immigrant students in their student body, this is the case for just 56 per cent of primary schools. Thus, the level of ‘clustering’ is much more pronounced in primary schools than in second-level schools. Second, we find that most second-level immigrant students are in schools with a low proportion (between 2-9 per cent) of other immigrant students. Only 2 per cent attend schools with an immigrant student intake of 40 per cent or more. That is, most immigrant students do not attend second-level schools with a high immigrant student intake. However, we see a different pattern for primary schools; almost half of immigrant students attending primary schools are in schools with an immigrant student body of over 20 per cent and one in five are in schools with an immigrant student intake of over 40 per cent. These findings are consistent with how the two sectors operate and interact in the Irish education system. Primary schools tend to draw students from their local area, while second-level schools have a much larger catchment area. Typically, a number of primary schools feed into any given second-level school, so even if one feeder primary school had no immigrant students, the second-level school in the area would record immigrant students if there were immigrant students in other primary schools in the area.

Differences between the primary and second-level sectors are likely to be due to residential patterns of immigrants, as the availability of places in schools, coupled with residential patterns, means that immigrant students are more highly represented in urban schools and those already catering for more disadvantaged populations. However, the research does note that where schools are oversubscribed, enrolment criteria, such as ‘first come, first served’ and priority given to siblings of children already in the school, are likely to favour settled communities and thus immigrant students will be under-represented in these schools.

Immigration has meant that the student body is much more diverse than before, particularly within second-level schools. The majority of immigrant students in Ireland are from non-English speaking countries (over three-quarters in primary schools and over 70 per cent in second level). As a result, over half of both primary and second-level principals reported language difficulties among a significant proportion of their immigrant students. School principals and teachers indicate that language difficulties have marked consequences for the academic progress and social integration of immigrant students. The study highlights a number of areas which would further enhance provision for immigrant students in Irish schools. First, language support provision would benefit from a greater emphasis on combining withdrawal and within-class support, flexibility (e.g. tapering) in resource allocation, training and support for specialist and mainstream teachers, and access to suitable teaching resources and materials. Second, language support within the school needs to be situated within the wider context, in terms of language support for the adult population and access to translation/interpretation services for schools. Third, social integration is likely to benefit from the promotion of

intercultural awareness within and outside schools, consistent practice regarding bullying, and the use of student mentors to counter such behaviour.

The period since this study was conducted has seen a rapidly changing economic and policy climate. A number of recent measures, including changes in the criteria for allocating language support teachers, may negatively affect the educational experiences of immigrants. Recessionary conditions may prompt net emigration but, such was the scale of inward migration, it is clear that Irish society will remain culturally diverse for the foreseeable future. In the context of scarce resources, it is important to note that our findings clearly indicate that supporting more differentiated teaching methods and promoting a positive school climate would benefit immigrant and Irish students alike.