

# SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE TRANSITION TO SECOND-LEVEL EDUCATION

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## INTRODUCTION

The transition to second-level education involves encountering new subjects, having several teachers rather than one, new peer groups and, in the Irish case, often moving from a small school to a much larger one. There is a large body of international and Irish research which examines the extent to which young people experience difficulties over this transition period. It seeks to identify factors that make it easier to integrate into the new school setting. Social relationships have been identified as important in the transition process, but studies have rarely looked at the simultaneous impact of relationships with parents, friends and teachers on young people's experiences. This paper draws on rich data from the Growing Up in Ireland study to trace the pathways of young people from 9 to 13 years of age. It explores two aspects of the transition process: (1) difficulties in the transition to second-level education, as reported by parents; and (2) changes in self-confidence as learners, as reported by young people themselves. The research investigates whether these outcomes are influenced by the quality of relationships with parents, peers and teachers.

## TRANSITION DIFFICULTIES

Mothers were asked about difficulties their child had in settling into second-level education, including missing old friends and making new ones and adjusting to schoolwork. Few such difficulties were reported, though it is worth noting that previous research shows that young people tend to be more negative about the transition process than their parents. However, a significant minority of mothers pointed to difficulties around friendships. Boys and those with greater familial resources (parental education and social class) and higher primary school

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achievement tended to settle in more easily. Migrant families reported greater difficulties. Young people with special educational needs emerged as having the greatest difficulties adjusting.

Social relationships were found to play an important role in helping young people settle into the new school setting. Talking with parents regularly about their day-to-day lives emerged as much more important than parents being formally involved in the school (through meetings or events) or helping with homework. Having larger friendship networks and reporting greater trust in their friends smoothed the transition. Young people who had experienced positive interaction (praise or positive feedback) with their second-level teachers were less likely to experience adjustment difficulties.

#### **SELF-CONFIDENCE ABOUT LEARNING**

Young people themselves were asked how confident they felt about schoolwork. Over the transition to second-level education, certain groups became much less self-confident as learners; these included girls, those from lower education or non-employed households and those with special educational needs. Doing well at reading and mathematics in primary school helped maintain self-confidence over the transition. Again, social relationships were found to play an important role. Young people were more self-confident where they talked regularly with their parents and where their parents attended school concerts or other events. Having larger friendship networks and trusting those friends also enhanced academic self-confidence. Relationships with teachers were a very significant influence on young people's confidence as learners. Praise or positive feedback was associated with enhanced self-confidence while frequent reprimands were related to feeling more negative about their ability to cope with schoolwork. Second year students were less self-confident than those in first year, most likely reflecting the increased academic demands as they moved through junior cycle.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY**

The academic skills developed at primary level provide an important foundation for the transition to second-level education, reinforcing the need for support around literacy and numeracy within primary schools. The findings highlight the need for more inclusive approaches to supporting young people's transition, given that migrant groups and young people with special educational needs experience greater difficulties, even taking account of prior achievement levels. The findings add to the growing body of research on the importance of teacher-student relationships in creating a school climate which enhances young people's outcomes. The research points to the importance in policy terms of creating a positive school climate which supports student adjustment and broader wellbeing.

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