

ACADEMIC AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN IRELAND?

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Academic and socio-emotional outcomes of students with special educational needs in Ireland¹

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INTRODUCTION

Research on the development of students with special educational or additional needs (SEN) often narrowly focuses on their academic development, overlooking the growing understanding of the role of inclusion in supporting fulfilling lives. By using rich, nationally representative data, a broader measure of SEN, and including both academic and socio-emotional outcomes, this paper provides a more holistic approach to understanding the lived experiences of young people with SEN.

DATA AND METHODS

Using longitudinal data on 8,500 9-year-old children in Ireland from the Growing Up in Ireland study, we examine how young people with different types of SEN at age 9 compare in terms of their academic development and wellbeing at 17 years. The young people were first surveyed in 2007/2008, and followed up at the age of 13 in 2011/2012 and 17 in 2015/16. Given how well each child was performing at age 9, and taking into account many of their home, family and school characteristics, we can see if young people with different types of SEN fare better or worse at age 17 than those without SEN. We focus on the experiences of students with general learning or intellectual SEN, specific learning SEN, emotional or behavioural SEN, and physical SEN.

At 17 years we measure their academic development using the average Junior Certificate score across all subjects. For socio-emotional development, we examine the extent to which young people are satisfied with their lives and their coping

¹ This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Mihut, G., S. McCoy and B. Maître, "A capability approach to understanding academic and socio-emotional outcomes of students with special educational needs in Ireland", *Oxford Review of Education*, Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2021.1973982> This research was supported by the ESRI's Research Programme on the experiences of people with disabilities, which is funded by the National Disability Authority.

strategies, including problem solving and seeking support (as positive methods of coping) and avoidance (as a negative method of coping).

RESULTS

With the exception of young people with physical SEN, all other SEN groups made less academic progress than non-SEN students between 9 and 17 years. Both home and school environmental factors at 9 years, particularly economic strain, maternal depression and conflict between the mother and young person, had long-term associations with the academic outcomes of young people with SEN. Home and school environmental factors had less consistent associations with the socio-emotional outcomes of young people with SEN. Differences between the groups in terms of life satisfaction largely disappeared when we took account of characteristics like gender and self-concept, as well as maternal depression and conflict between the mother and young person. While young people with emotional SEN were less likely than non-SEN students to employ problem solving, those with general learning SEN were more likely than non-SEN students to seek support.

The results highlight protective factors that may reduce the gaps in academic and socio-emotional outcomes between students with and without SEN. Higher parental educational expectations were particularly linked to higher academic achievement. Receiving additional supports at school at age 9 lowered the association between SEN type and Junior Certificate average scores. Finally, cumulative economic and family risk factors were linked to both academic and socio-emotional development for young people with SEN, suggesting that additional home supports are needed for parents of children and young people with SEN.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the findings point to the importance of home *and* school supports for children and young people with additional needs, supports which address educational needs and also socio-emotional and financial needs of families of children with SEN. Given the gap in academic progress for students attending DEIS schools, as well as lower levels of life satisfaction, the research provides further support for channelling additional resources to those schools serving students with additional and complex needs.

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