

THE LONG ROAD TO SECONDARY SCHOOL: BACKGROUND, HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSITION DIFFICULTIES

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INTRODUCTION

A young person's move from primary to secondary school can be difficult. For most, settling into a new school setting or experiencing a new way of learning can cause temporary difficulties. However, for others, school transition difficulty has lasting effects, resulting in poorer educational outcomes. While there is a good deal of research on the transition process, there has been little attention paid to whether and why transition difficulties are greater among young people from more socio-economically disadvantaged families. Our research addresses this gap, looking at social inequalities in the transition from primary to secondary school. It draws on data from Scotland but highlights issues relevant to policymakers and school practitioners in Ireland.

Internationally, debate centres on whether what matters is who parents are (the income they have and their insider knowledge of the education system) or what they do (in particular, whether they provide an environment at home that promotes child learning). Some researchers and policy makers have argued that the home learning environment can close the gap in educational achievement between children from low-income families and other children. Our article considers three aspects of inequality (parents' education, family income and family social class) to unpack the mechanisms behind school transition difficulty.

¹ This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Smyth, E., and Privalko, I., "The long road to secondary school: background, home learning environment, and transition difficulties in Scotland", *Research Papers in Education*, Available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2022.2065520>. This work was supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council [ES/P009301/1].

DATA AND METHODS

We used data from the Growing Up in Scotland longitudinal study, which surveyed families when the children were aged 10 months, 3, 4, 5, 10, and 12 years of age. Our main outcome was measured when the children were 12 and starting in a new school. Parents answered several questions about their child settling into the new school and these were combined into a total measure of transition difficulty.

We were interested in whether transition difficulty was greater among children from certain social backgrounds so we took account of their mothers' education, the family's income, and their social class.

To measure the home learning environment, we used questions asked at age 3 about the number of days per week children spend reading, making art, making music, preparing for school, or playing with puzzles. We combined these measures together into one variable. We also considered the number of times children visited museums and galleries, and the local library, which are learning activities not directly tied to home learning environment, but still found to be relevant previously. Finally, we considered the number of books that children had at home when growing up. Because having a more positive experience of primary school may help young people later on, we took account of the extent to which they liked school and school subjects and the kinds of cognitive skills they developed at primary level.

RESULTS

Both the child's household income and their mother's education had strong effects on difficulties making the transition to secondary school. Young people whose mothers had (at most) lower secondary education or who came from the lowest income quintile (fifth) were much more likely to have difficulties adjusting to secondary school. The home learning environment young people experienced as toddlers (such as being read to and taken to the library) helped to protect against transition difficulties. However, this was not sufficient to account for the size of the differences we recorded by family income and education. Those who were more positive about primary school and did better in cognitive tests settled into secondary school better, but again primary school experiences were insufficient to explain social inequalities in transition experiences.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Although we used data from Scotland, our findings have important lessons for the Irish context. They show that young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds (in terms of parental income and education) have greater difficulties settling into secondary school and are thus more likely to have poorer levels of achievement. While a positive home learning environment helps to ease the transition process, it cannot close this gap, and cannot explain the differences we

find between affluent and non-affluent children. More generally, the findings suggest that who parents are is more important than what they do with their children. Our results suggest the need to look at the impact of low income among families in designing policy interventions to address educational disadvantage. Policies that limit the chance of experiencing income poverty and enhance a parent's chances of leaving school with an upper secondary or higher education would be important in bringing about a smooth educational trajectory for children. In general, protecting against poverty and deprivation is likely to have much larger effects on school transitions than efforts to promote parental engagement in home learning.

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