

CUMULATIVE DISADVANTAGE IN POST-SCHOOL PLANS AND PATHWAYS AMONG THOSE IDENTIFIED WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN IRISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Cumulative disadvantage in post-school plans and pathways among those identified with special educational needs in Irish primary schools¹

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INTRODUCTION

How do children with special educational needs (SEN) fare as they progress through and beyond second-level education? Research from other countries suggests that young people with SEN are more likely to leave school early and less likely to progress to higher education.

Internationally, experts have highlighted that childhood disability or SEN status has been largely overlooked in social stratification research, which studies how social mobility is affected by social structures like the education system. While education is often seen as a driver of social mobility, critical theorists argue that it reproduces existing inequalities.

DATA AND METHODS

We used longitudinal data on 8,500 children in Ireland from the '98 cohort of Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) to examine post-school plans and outcomes of children with SEN. Four waves of GUI data were collected from the young person at ages 9, 13, 17 and 20, and from their primary caregiver and school at 9 and 13. The first wave was collected in 2007 and the fourth in 2018.

We first investigated early school leaving and plans to attend higher education or further education at 17. We then examined two outcomes at age 20: (i) attendance at a University or Institute of Technology (IT); (ii) the highest of six levels of education completed or currently engaged: University Level 8, IT level 8, Higher

¹ This Bulletin summaries the findings from two papers:

- Carroll, E., Ye, K., McCoy, S., 2022. Educationally maintained inequality? The role of risk factors and resilience at 9, 13 and 17 in disabled young people's post-school pathways at 20, *Irish Educational Studies*, online 5 July 2022.
- Carroll, E., McCoy, S., Mihut, G., 2022. Exploring cumulative disadvantage in early school leaving and planned post-school pathways among those identified with special educational needs in Irish primary schools, *British Educational Research Journal*, online 17 June 2022.

Education Level 6/7 (HE), Further Education and Training (FET), Did not Finish a course, No Post-School Education.

SEN status was based on teacher and/or parent identification at age 9. We controlled for personal characteristics like gender, academic achievement, school engagement and school attendance, as well as family and school characteristics like economic vulnerability, primary caregiver educational attainment and school DEIS status.

RESULTS

At age 17, fewer students identified with SEN in childhood were still in school (79.1%) than students not identified with SEN (84.8%). Among those still in school, students with SEN were less likely to plan to attend higher education (66.3%) than students without SEN (83.9%) and more likely to plan to attend FET (14.9% versus 7.5%). Students identified with SEN at age 9 were twice as likely to leave school early (5.1% versus 2.3%).

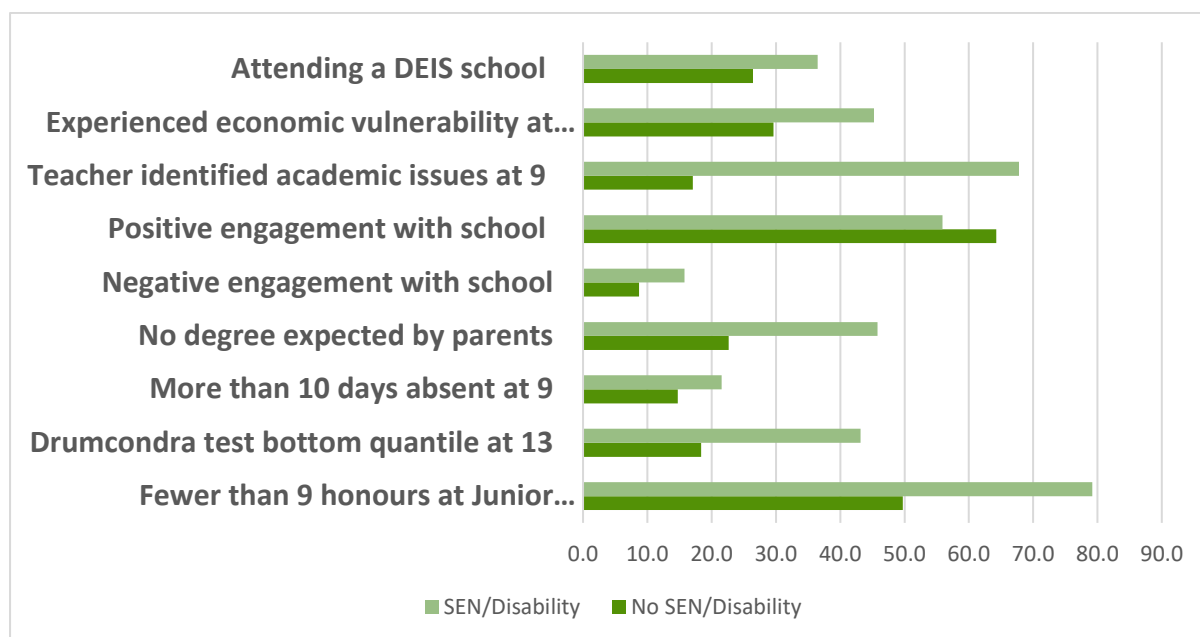
Young people with SEN were more likely to have experienced vulnerabilities that negatively impact educational outcomes. SEN students were more likely to have had conflict in interactions with their mother, had negative interactions with teachers, come from economically vulnerable households and attended schools with socioeconomically disadvantaged populations. Positive interactions with teachers acted as a protective factor. After controlling for all these factors, SEN status was no longer a significant predictor of post-school plans.

At age 20, 61% of young people were currently in or had completed an HE degree, with wide differences by type of SEN and disability: 66% of those without SEN, 62% with physical or sensory disabilities, 49% with specific learning difficulties, 46% of those in the 'other disability' category, 40% with social-emotional SEN and 28% with intellectual disabilities.

Much lower levels of HE participation were evident where a family had experienced economic vulnerability or where parents had no 3rd level degree. While 42% of those who attended a DEIS school were in HE, this compared to 68% among those attending non-DEIS schools. Much higher levels of HE participation were found among those whose parents expected them to achieve this level of education (68% versus 42% where expectations were lower). Participation rates were significantly lower among individuals who, at age 9, had been identified as having a difficulty with a key academic subject or had missed more than 10 days of school in the previous year. Not liking school at age 13 was also predictive of lower HE entry, as was achieving fewer than 9 Junior Certificate honours (47% versus 86% for those with 9 or more).

Students with SEN were disproportionately likely to belong to a broad range of these at-risk groups (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Risk factors & SEN status



These key personal and family characteristics explained the gap for most young people with SEN. However, among those with socio-emotional difficulties entry to higher education is less likely even after accounting for them.

Finally, compared to those without SEN or a disability, young people with SEN or disability were, all else being equal, less likely to be in a University Level 8 degree and more likely to attend an IT, to attend FET, not to finish their programme or not to attend any post-school education.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These results highlight the importance of attendance, engagement and achievement of young people with SEN during the primary and early secondary years, as well as of parental expectations and students’ own plans in late secondary school. The evidence reveals multiple challenges associated with socio-economic disadvantage, at family, school and community levels, with implications for inclusive education and for policy addressing educational disadvantage.

Working to make school a place all students want to be is a vital part of the DEIS framework. This research reaffirms the importance of building engaging contexts in order to nurture engaged students. The scale of differences in the profile of, and outcomes for, DEIS students raises questions over whether the current DEIS model is adequately resourced to meet the severe challenges facing many young people in DEIS schools.

Post-school pathways have powerful impacts on life trajectories. HE graduates experience better outcomes across earnings, job satisfaction and general life satisfaction, and the more prestigious the institution, the more pronounced the premium. While this remains the case, differential access to higher-status courses by SEN status and socioeconomic background will lead to the education system effectively maintaining inequality.

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