

# SOCIAL CLASS AND GENDER INEQUALITIES IN READING ABILITY AMONG NINE-YEAR-OLDS IN IRELAND

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# Social class and gender inequalities in reading ability among nine-year-olds in Ireland<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Given growing concerns about disengagement and lower achievement among boys from disadvantaged backgrounds, our research looks at the extent to which social class and gender differences in reading ability are evident by age nine. It explores whether these differences can be explained by how much children were read to by their parents, whether they attended centre-based care and the age they started primary school. The research also examines how differences at age nine relate to children's earlier vocabulary development. Any inequalities by social class background or between girls and boys at this stage will have longer-term consequences for later engagement with learning and subsequent life chances.

## DATA AND METHODS

The research draws on data from Growing Up in Ireland Cohort '08 which followed children from the age of nine months to nine years. Reading ability at nine is measured using the Drumcondra reading vocabulary test, which is based on the national curriculum. We use (oral) vocabulary tests taken when the child was three to look at progress in vocabulary development over the six-year period. Our main focus is on potential differences in reading by gender and by social class background. Social class is based on the occupational group of parents (whichever is higher) and includes a separate category to capture those living in jobless households.

## RESULTS

Girls are found to have slightly higher reading scores than boys, a pattern that is mainly explained by their more advanced vocabulary development by the age of

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<sup>1</sup> This Bulletin summarizes the findings from: McGinnity, F. McMullin, P., Murray, A., Russell, H. and Smyth, E. Understanding differences in children's reading ability by social origin and gender: The role of parental reading and pre- and primary school exposure in Ireland, *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2022.100729>

three. A much larger difference is found by social class background, with children from professional families achieving the highest scores and those from jobless households having the lowest scores. Children from jobless or working-class families also make less progress in vocabulary development between the ages of three and nine than other children.

Can these social class inequalities be explained? Young children from more advantaged families are read to more often by the parents and have access to more children's books at home. These factors do enhance children's reading abilities but do not explain the differences we find by social class background. Similarly, more advantaged families are more likely to avail of centre-based care for their three-year-old and children who have received such care make more progress in their vocabulary development. However, pre-school education and care does not explain the differences found. Children from working-class and jobless households tend to start primary school earlier than those from more advantaged families. In addition, girls tend to start school slightly earlier than boys. Length of exposure to school actually helps mitigate social class inequalities somewhat, as those who are in fourth class at age nine have lower reading scores than their peers in fifth class. Boys are found to benefit slightly more than girls from starting school earlier.

#### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Our research shows marked differences by social class background in children's reading abilities at age nine. These inequalities are likely to lead to longer-term differences in educational and other outcomes. The home learning environment – parents reading to children and having a book-rich home – matters, so measures to support parents' learning engagement may make some difference. However, our data suggest that parents' activities with children at home are unlikely to compensate fully for other socio-economic disadvantages. Being in centre-based care at three is also linked to vocabulary development but again does not account for the inequalities found. The results therefore show that the social class into which a child is born has a direct relationship with their reading abilities, and this inequality is not accounted for by the home learning environment, participation in centre-based care at three or age on school start. Policies to address educational inequality should therefore be embedded in broader anti-poverty policies in order to enhance child outcomes. Soon-to-be available data on these children at age 13 will provide useful insights into whether these inequalities have increased in the wake of the pandemic.

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