

CAREER DECISION-MAKING AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN IRELAND

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Career decision-making among young people in Ireland¹

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INTRODUCTION

Inequality in the pathways young people pursue after leaving school has been well established in Ireland and elsewhere. However, less is known about the kinds of information young people draw on in making their decisions. This research looks at who young people talk to about their future pathways and what kinds of activities they engage in, such as attending college open days. It focuses on whether these sources of information and guidance activities vary by family social background and the social mix of the school they attend.

DATA AND METHODS

The research draws on Growing Up in Ireland data collected when the young people were 17/18 years of age. Young people were asked about the extent to which they relied on different people for advice about what to do after leaving school; these included informal sources (parents, other family and friends) and school-based sources (such the guidance counsellor and subject teachers). They were also asked how important each of these people were in their decision-making. In addition, the young people reported the kinds of guidance activities they engaged in, including attending career talks at school, attending college open days and going to a private guidance counsellor.

RESULTS

Young people whose parents or older siblings have experience of higher education are likely to have greater insider knowledge of the education system and be better able to support the young person's choices. The research found that the majority of all young people mentioned their mothers and fathers as a source of information and advice but this was more common among more highly educated families and

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those working in professional jobs. This group of young people were also more likely to pay to talk to a private guidance counsellor. In contrast, those from families with lower levels of education were more reliant on school staff such as class tutors and year heads.

The social mix of the school also made a difference. The analyses distinguish between schools serving a more socio-economically disadvantaged population (DEIS schools), fee-paying schools which have a middle-class profile and other, more socially mixed schools. Principals in fee-paying schools were much more likely to describe guidance provision in their schools as excellent or good and students there were more likely to have had a one-to-one session with the guidance counsellor. These patterns reflect the taken-for-granted nature of going on to higher education in more middle-class settings. As a result, students in fee-paying schools were more likely to use individual sessions with the guidance counsellor as a source of information and have access to career talks in the school; they were also more likely to consult with their parents. In contrast, students in more disadvantaged settings were more reliant on class tutors or subject teachers for advice. However, their reliance on teachers did not boost their intention to go on to higher education, suggesting that such advice was not sufficient to make up for the lack of insider knowledge of the education system among their family members.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The research points to differences by family background and school social mix in the kinds of information and resources young people draw on in making the decision about what to do after leaving school. Young people from more advantaged backgrounds have greater access to insider knowledge about the education system among family members and are more likely to avail of private guidance support. Furthermore, those attending fee-paying schools have greater access to in-school career talks and individual guidance sessions, which may better cater to their individual career preferences. In contrast, young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds and those attending schools with a greater concentration of disadvantage are more reliant on non-guidance school staff, who may be supportive but may not have specialist career knowledge. The research findings suggest the need to target additional guidance resources towards schools serving more disadvantaged populations to help counterbalance the resources (within and outside school) available to their more advantaged peers. Addressing the disparity in access to guidance resources is a crucial element in bringing about greater equality in higher education participation across social groups.

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