

# School transition difficulties in Scotland and Ireland<sup>1, 2</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Moving from primary to secondary school involves many adjustments, with new peers, teachers, subjects and approaches to learning. Young people can therefore sometimes struggle with this transition. Research on the transition process has tended to assume that such difficulties are common across different educational systems internationally. By contrast, our research investigates institutional differences in school transition difficulties by comparing Scotland and Ireland. The two systems differ in ways that might be expected to influence the transition process, including a shorter duration of primary education in Scotland and greater school choice in Ireland.

## DATA AND METHODS

We used two sources of longitudinal data, the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) and Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) studies, covering the period of primary education and the transition to secondary education. Both used the same measure of transition difficulties and contained several comparable background factors, including family characteristics, school engagement, social dynamics at school, after-school activity, and engagement with schoolwork.

Our analyses compared the nature of transition difficulty in the two systems and then examined whether these are related to differences in social inequalities, skill

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<sup>1</sup> This Bulletin summarizes the findings from: Smyth, E., Privalko, I. "School transition difficulty in Scotland and Ireland", *Educational Review*.

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development and school engagement at primary level, and peer interaction and school engagement in the new school.

## **RESULTS**

We found differences and similarities in transition difficulties between the two systems. In both Ireland and Scotland, those who acquire better vocabulary skills at primary level adjust more quickly to the demands of secondary school. Those who dislike primary school in Scotland have greater adjustment difficulties, but in Ireland attitudes to Maths at primary level emerge as a particularly important predictor of later transition experiences. In both countries making the transition to secondary school with primary school friends eases the transition, while those who are bullied have much greater adjustment difficulties. Experience of subjects in the new secondary school also makes a difference, with finding Maths difficult again associated with greater transition difficulties in both countries.

In both systems, there are clear social inequalities, with higher rates of school transition difficulty among young people coming from households with lower levels of income and lower maternal education. This gap is only partially accounted for by differences in their school experiences at primary and secondary level and individual ability. Boys experience more transition difficulties than girls in Scotland while the reverse is the case in Ireland. Difficulties for boys in Scotland are partly explained by their lower levels of primary school engagement and higher rates of being bullied. Transition difficulties for girls in Ireland are largely related to their more negative attitudes to Maths at primary level.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Our findings provide new insights into how social inequalities emerge over the school career. Young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds (in terms of parental income and education) have greater difficulties settling into secondary school. This pattern, which will contribute to poorer levels of achievement later on, cannot be explained by their ability, their engagement with school, their earlier development, or their social lives at school. The finding highlights the need to look at broader factors that shape educational disadvantage. Our results suggest that the impact of low income among families needs to be factored into the design of policy interventions to address educational disadvantage. Policies that limit the chance of experiencing income poverty and enhance parental resources would smooth the educational trajectory for children and reinforce policy interventions within schools.

The study points to the potential for further comparative research on school transitions to better understand how it plays out in different contexts. There are common aspects of the transition process which apply across systems, especially the social adjustment to a new peer group. However, our findings show the importance of looking at the transition process as embedded in a broader set of

educational systems and societal factors. Further research could usefully explore transition experiences across other educational systems.