# How are children's academic self-concepts, their parents' expectations, and their relationships with teachers linked to later educational attainment?[1, 2]

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### INTRODUCTION

Children from economically vulnerable families are persistently less likely to progress to third-level education. As such, there is a pressing need to understand why socio-economic status (SES) gaps in educational attainment persist and how they can be addressed by policy.

This study addresses this by examining how children's academic self-concepts (how children perceive themselves as learners), parent expectations, and teacher-student relationship quality are linked with later educational attainment. Academic self-concept has been found to be central in understanding gaps in educational outcomes, with low SES students more vulnerable to poorer academic self-concepts, which in turn contributes to differences in achievement. In general, academic self-concepts usually start very positive and become increasingly negative across school years. A particular drop in self-concept occurs when children move from primary to secondary school.

Parent expectations have a well-documented association with children's academic achievement and self-concepts, and higher SES families usually hold higher expectations for their children's education, even when taking account of children's actual academic performance. Finally, research has shown that positive teacher-child interactions also support children's academic self-concepts and achievement and may be particularly important for children from less well-resourced families.

First, we assess changes in academic self-concepts and parent expectations as children move from primary to secondary school. Second, we look at the impact of both parent expectations and teacher-student relationship quality on educational

attainment. Third, we measure educational attainment at third level, specifically whether students continue their education after secondary school and at what level (e.g. vocational training, diploma programmes, or university degrees).

## 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 outcomes of young people who experienced different levels of economic vulnerability (a measure combining income poverty, economic stress and material deprivation) during their childhood. We use data from three waves of GUI data collected from the young person at ages 9, 13 and 20, and from their primary caregiver and school at 9 and 13. The first wave was collected in 2007 and the final in 2018.

Statistical models analyse the relationship between third level progression and earlier experiences, namely children's beliefs about themselves as learners, the expectations parents hold for them and the quality of their interactions with their teachers.

## RESULTS

Children from economically vulnerable families finish primary school with lower academic self-concepts and these drop more steeply in secondary school compared with their peers. Parental educational expectations typically rise during this transition, but not for low-SES parents. Both of these patterns predict attainment 7 years later. In fact, parents' expectations during this period are especially influential for low-SES children.

Positive teacher-student relationships in early secondary school are critical. Even when low-SES parents do hold high expectations, these students also need positive teacher relationships to reach the same attainment levels (a third-level degree) as their high-SES peers. For their high SES peers, teacher-child interaction quality plays a compensatory role in the context of low parental expectations. These children benefit from having at least one good adult relationship, whether with a teacher or a parent.

## IMPLICATIONS

Working to make school a place all students want to be is a vital part of the DEIS programme focused on schools serving communities experiencing significant socio-economic barriers. This research reaffirms the importance of building engaging contexts in order to nurture engaged students. Economically vulnerable students need positive teacher relationships to reach the same attainment levels (a third level degree) as their peers. Bolstering academic self-concepts before starting secondary school could particularly help economically vulnerable children maintain positive academic self-concepts while adjusting to the many changes experienced in secondary school. The recent shift in educational policy to whole-child approaches and emphasis on socio-emotional development is a welcome development.

Parent expectations matter greatly for children's educational development, particularly for economically vulnerable children. The evidence from this and other studies highlights the critical role played by home school community liaison officers in supporting meaningful partnerships between parents and schools, and the value of a wider range of initiatives, such as the Education Passport, that aim to connect parents with primary and secondary school communities.

Overall, this research shows that boosting children's academic self-concepts in primary school, supporting high expectations among their parents, and promoting positive school climates are essential in supporting the educational careers of all young people, regardless of background.