

# New Insights on Irish and European Education from ESRI Research

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Education research carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) addresses policy issues that are critical to achieving greater equality of educational outcomes and improving the experience of students, teachers, and others in the education system. This article selects several such studies and other research in the EU and summarises their findings and conclusions.

## Introduction

ESRI education research addresses policy issues critical to achieving greater equality of educational outcomes and improving the experience of students, teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders across the education system. The student voice is placed at the centre of the research, providing important insights into student experiences across the school system, their reflections on choices made, and their post-school opportunities and pathways.



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This year has seen a diversity of studies cross-cutting education levels, sectors, and themes, providing insights on new and enduring challenges in education. We have selected some studies which we feel address critical challenges for education policy in Ireland. We also consider some of the rich evidence presented by the European Commission expert group on quality investment in education and training, of which Professor Selina McCoy was an invited member.

## Evidence on the Irish education system

Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) data have continued to provide important insights into educational experiences and gaps between social groups in Ireland, and three areas of research can be highlighted this year. The first focused on early educational development, examining how parents' approach to learning at home and children's exposure to early childhood education and care (ECEC) shapes differences in reading ability. The evidence shows that both children's gender and their family's social class influence their cognitive development between age 3 and 9, though the effects are additive, with little variation in the gender gap across social-class groups. Parental reading, participation in ECEC, and length of primary school exposure were found to

facilitate language development and partly explain differences in reading scores at age 9, although strong direct effects of social class remained, even accounting for vocabulary score at age 3 (McGinnity et al., 2022).

The second theme relates to student participation in grinds. New evidence shows 60% of final year students engaging in such tuition, with wide social differentials in participation – not just in terms of social class, but also as a product of motivation and expectation. In taking a mixed-method approach, the evidence highlights that students acted agentively – reflecting both on the direct role of grinds in a high-stakes exam system and on its disadvantages in terms of the financial burden placed on parents and the inequalities it reproduces. However, some young people lack agency and are propelled towards the grinds culture by parents (parental control) and most likely social norms (class effects, etc.). High achievers and those who display greater tendencies towards conscientiousness seem less influenced by the grinds culture. This new evidence provides a valuable lens on the role and impact of grinds in a high-stakes system. Students highlight how the grinds culture has become normalised, an accepted component of exam success for many students (McCoy & Byrne, 2022).

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The third topic focuses on understanding how disability and socioeconomic factors (particularly family resources and school context) shape post-school educational outcomes. The evidence reveals multiple challenges facing disabled young people in Ireland, in particular reflecting the direct and indirect impact of socio-economic disadvantage at family, school, and community levels. All else being equal, children who are identified with a socio-emotional or behavioural difficulty are less likely to progress to higher education in Ireland. The results also highlight the importance of attendance, engagement, and achievement during primary and early secondary years, and of parental expectations, for later outcomes – raising important implications for inclusive education and policy addressing educational disadvantage.

The evidence shows the disproportionate representation of disabled students in DEIS schools and in economically vulnerable households, and the significance of these factors in students' post-school pathways. The clustering of students with complex needs in DEIS schools emerges as a clear issue. While the DEIS programme has shown strong results in tackling gaps in achievement, attendance, and engagement, adequately supporting the complexity of needs that their students are facing clearly demands more resources, the authors argue (Carroll, Ye, & McCoy, 2022; Carroll, McCoy, & Mihut, 2022).

Using European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey data administered in all EU countries, the study of Currigan et al. (2022) provides unique insights into how unequal educational attainment may translate into deprivation in later stages of life. Using descriptive and regression model analysis of 2005, 2011, and 2019 EU-SILC data, the study finds that educational attainment is a key pathway linking childhood poverty and increased risk of deprivation and income poverty in adulthood

in Ireland. Approximately one-third of the association between poverty in childhood and deprivation in adulthood can be explained through educational attainment.

Meanwhile, poverty experienced in childhood is associated with the inequality in educational attainment. The evidence shows that those who experienced bad or very bad financial circumstances in childhood are less likely to progress to third-level education compared to their peers with better financial situations, both in Ireland and in the EU. Although Ireland has one of the lowest levels of inequality among the EU-27 countries with respect to obtaining a tertiary level of education, the gap between those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and those who were most advantaged is still substantial.

The study emphasises that policies seeking to reduce persistent inequalities in educational outcomes, from early childhood through to higher education, are crucial. Among the key policies highlighted are ensuring access to high-quality education at primary and second level, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds; providing additional supports for the most disadvantaged schools and children; and ensuring greater equality of access to third-level institutions.

Finally, the comparative study on the education and training systems from primary to third level in Ireland and Northern Ireland offers rich insights into the nature of the two systems (Smyth et al., 2022). The study finds sizable differences in educational attainment between Ireland and Northern Ireland, which persist even when the underlying demographic differences are taken into account. In line with previous research, the study finds pronounced barriers for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who have poorer exam grades at secondary level than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds, with wider inequality in exam grades in Ireland. Meanwhile, expectations of going to higher education vary by students' social profiles in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, with lower expectations found among those from working-class backgrounds. Ireland has a lower incidence of early school leaving than Northern Ireland, partly explained by the DEIS programme.

Further education is commonly perceived as a 'second-best' option compared to higher education in both jurisdictions. Meanwhile, important differences occur across the two systems in terms of post-school opportunities provided. Stakeholders in Northern Ireland emphasised the challenges of having a multiplicity of providers and duplication of courses, as post-secondary vocational options are offered by many schools and higher education providers, while A-level courses (typically the remit of schools) are offered by many further education colleges. To address the educational attainment gap and facilitate more meaningful progression routes, the authors argue for the need to show the value of taking further education courses, and to ensure improved pathways from secondary to further education and from further to higher education.

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The study stresses the need for more sustained formal cross-border cooperation between education providers and policymakers. Although stakeholders acknowledge a few examples of good practice in North–South contact and cooperation, such links are ad hoc and rely on individual relationships or specific projects and initiatives.

## Evidence across the EU

Investing in high-quality education and training for all is a key priority for the EU, and has been centre stage at the European Commission this year. The Commission established the expert group on quality investment in education and training in May 2021 with the mandate to identify education and training policies that have the strongest potential to boost education outcomes and inclusiveness, while improving efficiency of public spending.

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The 15-member expert group published their final report in November 2022 (European Commission, 2022). It presents detailed analysis on areas that represent the bulk of education and training expenditure and have a major impact on education outcomes: teachers and trainers, digital education, infrastructure and learning environment, and equity and inclusion. These areas are of strategic importance to Europe's green and digital transformation and to building resilient economies and societies where no one is left behind. The report also covers evidence on the long-term consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and strategies to support the integration of newly arrived student migrants.

The report addresses several questions, including:

- Which education and training measures are most effective in EU countries?
- How can the efficiency and effectiveness of spending be improved?
- How can policy decisions be best evaluated?

The group identified many promising education and training practices in EU member states and highlighted areas where knowledge and evidence of quality investment in education could be strengthened. Recruiting effective *teachers* was identified as a key policy concern for education authorities across Europe. This was highlighted as all the more pressing given that most member states face general teacher shortages, sometimes exacerbated by unbalanced distribution across subjects and geographies, an ageing teaching force, and high attrition and low enrolment in initial teacher education.

The evidence highlights that the decision to become a teacher is influenced by financial rewards as well as expectations about what the work entails in terms of career opportunities or social status. Competitive salaries on par with what is paid to adults with similar education levels working in

comparable occupations enhance school systems' ability to attract and retain teachers. At the same time, teachers' working conditions (including leadership opportunities) are 'highly predictive' of teachers' stated intentions to remain in or leave their schools.

A second key aspect that affects teachers' working conditions is class size. Several studies on the link between class size and student outcomes in the EU reveal a beneficial impact of smaller classes on education outcomes, if teachers can adapt their pedagogical approaches. Therefore, ensuring adequate financial rewards and creating good working conditions for teachers are crucial to having an enthusiastic and dynamic teacher workforce. Alternative routes to full teacher qualifications can be an effective way to attract and retain teachers if underpinned by appropriate support in the form of induction, mentoring, professional development, and career opportunities. Recruitment financial incentives are found to work if well designed and targeted precisely, and if they include requirements to stay in a specific school or area for a certain period of time.

The results of available research on the effectiveness of *digital education* in primary, secondary, and higher education and in adult learning led the experts to draw a number of key policy conclusions. The use of digital technologies for teaching and learning can offer huge opportunities to boost educational outcomes, if properly planned and designed. At the same time, mitigating the risks of digital exclusion or inappropriate use of technology is vital. The impact of digital education on student outcomes mainly depends on which technologies are selected for use, and how they are implemented in the classroom and integrated into teaching. This points to the importance of supporting teachers' pedagogical digital competences.

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The group noted that the potential of using digital tools beyond classroom hours has not been fully realised in many countries. They also suggest that it is important to further develop a different paradigm for instructional design and delivery of content for adults, as they have more sophisticated needs and expectations than young learners.

Buildings, classrooms, and equipment are also crucial elements of *learning environments* in schools and universities. The evidence shows that well-built and well-maintained infrastructure can have positive effects on student well-being and learning outcomes. Educational buildings represent 17% of non-residential buildings in the EU and are among the oldest, with 75% constructed before 1980. A large part of the current stock would therefore need to be renovated to be more energy efficient and support the implementation of innovative and blended teaching practices.

Despite the high interest and the need to understand the impact of the physical learning environment and its design on learning outcomes, to ensure effectiveness and efficiency of education spending, robust empirical evidence is still very limited. But the group noted that it is vital to develop common tools or frameworks and to define indicators for assessing the

current condition and design of new learning spaces and their impact on education outcomes.

Assessing the current state of building stock would allow priorities to be established for the renovation and maintenance of educational facilities. Clear criteria and priorities for allocating construction, operation, and maintenance budgets should be designed at national level to support the quality and longevity of education infrastructure. Multiple use of educational facilities after school operating hours brings important benefits for communities – the school becomes the centre of their neighbourhood, the area is revitalised, and the community is brought together, resulting in improved well-being.

In terms of *equity and inclusion*, the evidence shows that education systems that aim at reducing inequality in students' learning conditions are also the ones that get better academic results and improve students' wellbeing. Given that socio-economic inequalities in cognitive and socio-emotional development emerge early in life, early interventions are key. High-quality ECEC is an essential foundation for successful lifelong learning,

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personal development, and later employability, especially for economically vulnerable families. School segregation is a second critical dimension of education inequality – education systems with more school segregation reduce the opportunities of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Desegregation policies aim at ending the practice of separating pupils among different schools based on their ethnic or social origins, academic performance, or any other attribute of social or educational vulnerability. Tracking and ability grouping also tend to create segregation

and may be counterproductive if not well designed.

Priority education policies, like Ireland's DEIS programme, take various forms across Europe. Overall, they have positive effects, even if they require considerable investment. In terms of student-centred compensatory education, one-to-one tuition and peer tutoring programmes are recommended if they are implemented in an individualised way or through small groups, and interventions should be cohesive, coherent, and sustained. Mentorships and summer programmes are appropriate student-based compensatory policies, but special attention should be paid to policy design and implementation.

Finally, in terms of the dramatic increase in the number of newly arrived *migrant students*, evidence repeatedly confirms the importance of learning the language of instruction for academic success, and likely for many social and emotional outcomes. Investments in systematic language-support programmes are therefore essential, and a blend of immersion and separation seems the best approach. The evidence shows that it is fundamental that schools provide sufficient and timely support for children to learn and master the language of instruction, ideally in an inclusive framework. There is evidence that the length of time that children without the language of instruction should spend in preparation classes should



be limited and should include a transition to immersion with support. It should be longer for older children, so they make the transition once they have basic competency.

The need for consistent and responsive professional development supports for teachers meeting the needs of migrant students is also key in ensuring effective educational provision. Teachers should receive effective training to be able to teach the host language as a second language. Parental involvement can bring a host of benefits for students in terms of academic achievement, school attendance, social skills and behaviour, wellbeing, and educational aspirations.

Support to parents of migrant students becomes even more important where parents lack proficiency in the host language, because they are less likely to get actively involved in family-school connections. However, the evidence across countries suggests there are insufficient policy-driven programmes to address the needs of parents of migrant students, to help them support either their children's learning or their children's inclusion (and their own) into the school community. Given the growing diversity in schools across Europe, teacher professional development and school leadership preparation programmes would benefit from engaging with a more dynamic view of culture, creating a space to explore opportunities for both students and schools to adapt their respective cultural practices (European Commission, 2022).

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