



ESRI Research Bulletin

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INTRODUCTION

Policy to address educational inequality in Ireland focuses on providing additional funding to schools with a high proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A recent study by Selina McCoy, Amanda Quail and Emer Smyth¹ examines whether students in primary schools that serve disadvantaged populations have lower test scores in reading and mathematics than their peers in other schools and, if so, what explains the variation.

THE DATA

The paper uses rich data on primary school children from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study. These data have distinct advantages. They record multiple aspects of children's social background, including social class, parental education, family structure and income. They also measure key aspects of the school and classroom context. The research compared students attending schools targeted for additional support under the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme, with students in non-DEIS schools.² It tested whether differences in reading and maths scores reflected the different individual social backgrounds of students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools, or whether being taught with disadvantaged peers had an additional negative impact. The analyses assessed the extent to which differences between DEIS and non-DEIS schools were due to (a) differences in teacher turnover, (b) the concentration of children with additional needs such as special educational needs and/or (c) differences in student attitudes and motivation.

RESULTS

Children attending DEIS schools are more likely to come from working-class and non-employed households than those in non-disadvantaged schools; their mothers have lower levels of education and their families have lower average

¹ S. McCoy, A. Quail and E. Smyth (2014). 'The effects of school social mix: unpacking the differences', *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 307-330.

² The DEIS scheme comprises three groups of schools targeted for additional support, two urban and one rural. The groups are named Urban Band 1, Urban Band 2 schools and Rural disadvantaged schools. Urban Band 1 schools have higher concentrations of disadvantage than Urban Band 2 schools, and the former receive greater resources. The main focus of the programme is on enhancing literacy and numeracy, particularly in the early years; an increased teacher allocation, particularly for the most disadvantaged schools; additional focus on school planning; and access to additional supports such as Home-School-Community Liaison Officers, library resources and information technology.

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income levels. In urban disadvantaged schools, lone parent families are also highly represented.

Children from different social backgrounds vary markedly in their reading and maths scores; children from middle-class families, those with more highly educated parents, those from homes with greater levels of educational resources (measured by the number of books) all achieve higher scores. Those with learning disabilities and immigrant children achieve lower scores than their peers.

Taking account of these social background characteristics, children attending urban DEIS (particularly the most disadvantaged Urban Band 1) schools perform less well than those attending non-disadvantaged schools. However, those attending rural DEIS schools have the same levels of achievement as those in non-disadvantaged schools.

The achievement gap between urban DEIS schools and non-disadvantaged schools is due to three sets of factors. First, teachers in urban disadvantaged schools tend to have less experience; and children taught by teachers with more than twenty years' experience achieve higher scores, all else being equal. Second, the greater proportions of children in these schools with literacy difficulties and additional language needs in the classroom, serve to widen the achievement gap. Finally, DEIS and non-DEIS schools also differ in average attendance levels and this also explains part of the achievement difference.

DISCUSSION

Children attending urban disadvantaged schools clearly have lower levels of a range of resources, economic, social and cultural, with implications for their achievement at school. In contrast, those attending rural disadvantaged schools have low levels of income but higher levels of cultural resources (particularly maternal educational levels), and achievement levels that do not differ from those attending non-disadvantaged school settings. Urban Band 1 schools in particular have a significant achievement gap. There seems to be a 'threshold' effect whereby once the proportion of disadvantaged children goes beyond a certain point achievement levels are lower.

It would appear that a combination of factors form a specific school climate, in which teacher expectations regarding a student group with more complex needs and lower attendance levels results in a slower pace of instruction and greater repetition of material in the classroom, meaning that the full curriculum may not be covered. Teacher turnover also impacts, with higher levels of turnover disrupting student learning and impacting on teacher professional development. The findings have important implications for broader policy, particularly regarding how to address educational disadvantage.