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SHAPING EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS AMONG 13-YEAR-OLDS AND THEIR PARENTS

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Shaping educational expectations among 13-year-olds and their parents¹

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INTRODUCTION

The majority of young people in Ireland now make the transition to higher education after leaving school. However, little is known about how their expectations are formed as they move through the school system. This bulletin summarises findings from the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study to highlight the key influences on their educational plans.

The GUI study is the first longitudinal study of children and young people in Ireland and is comprised of two cohorts: Cohort '98 (first surveyed at 9 years of age) and Cohort '08 (first surveyed at 9 months). This bulletin draws on information collected on Cohort '98 in wave two of the study, involving interviews with 7,423 13 year olds and their parents. Both parents and teenagers were asked about educational expectations along with details of school experiences over the transition to second-level education.

When the young people are 13 years of age, over three-quarters (79%) of mothers expect them to go on to higher education, but such expectations are held by only just over half (51%) of the young people themselves. This figure is lower than the actual proportion entering higher education (around 70% at the time of the survey), suggesting that young people's plans are not fully formed at this early stage. However, it is also likely to reflect the impact of the transition to second-level education. Previous research shows a drop in young people's academic self-confidence over the move to second-level education and this decline is likely to limit 13-year-olds' perceptions of possibilities for the future.

¹ This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Smyth, E. (2020). "Shaping educational expectations: the perspectives of 13-year-olds and their parents", *Educational Review*, 72(2): 173-195. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2018.1492518>

WHAT INFLUENCES YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS?

Girls hold somewhat higher expectations than boys. Mother's education is found to have a stronger impact than social class or household income, with much higher expectations among young people whose mothers have undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. Those with a special educational need are found to have much lower expectations than their peers. In addition, young people's views are shaped by both their primary and second-level school experiences. Those who developed better reading and mathematical skills at primary level as well as those who were more confident in their academic abilities have higher expectations at 13. In contrast, lack of engagement with Maths and Irish as primary school subjects emerges as a driver of lower expectations later on. Parental expectations when the child was nine are predictive of the young person's expectations four years later, even comparing like with like in terms of social background and levels of achievement.

Second-level school experiences also make a difference, with the quality of relationships with teachers having a strong effect; young people who have more positive interaction with their teachers in the form of praise or positive feedback have higher expectations, all else being equal, while those who have negative interaction (being reprimanded frequently) hold lower expectations. Settling into second-level school without difficulty, being allocated to a higher ability group and finding their school subjects manageable also enhance expectations for the future.

WHAT INFLUENCES PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS?

Parents hold much higher expectations for their daughters than their sons. Parental expectations are even more strongly differentiated by social background than those of their children, with a very large difference between mothers with a postgraduate degree and those with Junior Certificate or lower qualification. Parents of young people with a special education need hold much lower expectations for their children than the 13 year olds do for themselves.

Not surprisingly, mothers are less influenced by school factors than their children. Nonetheless, they appear to rely on a number of signals from the school in shaping their view of their child's potential. Mothers hold higher expectations where their child has higher academic achievement at primary level and where they have been allocated to a higher ability group at second level. Disengagement from Maths and more frequent teacher reprimands help to dampen parental expectations, most likely because the latter results in contact from the school about their child's behaviour.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Young people at 13 are in the flux of moving to second-level education and experiencing self-doubt about their capacity as learners but are required to make decisions about subjects and subject levels which will influence the options open to them at senior cycle and beyond. Insider knowledge of the educational system coupled with high expectations for their children are likely to heighten the importance of middle-class parents as a source of advice and support in helping

their children navigate the complexity of these educational pathways. The findings therefore highlight the importance of early access to school-based guidance in order to foster high expectations, especially for those without family educational resources. School climate, as reflected in day-to-day interaction between teachers and students, emerges as playing a crucial role in shaping young people's views on the possibilities open to them for the future and, in keeping with previous research, these findings support the need for schools to move towards a climate characterised by positive reinforcement rather than reprimand.

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