

Growing Up in Scotland - 2012

Growing Up in Scotland: Early experiences of Primary School – the transition to school

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The Growing Up in Scotland study

The Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) is an important longitudinal research project aimed at tracking the lives of several cohorts of Scottish children through the early years and beyond. The study is funded by the Scottish Government and carried out by ScotCen Social Research. GUS provides crucial evidence for the long-term monitoring and evaluation of policies for children, with a specific focus on the early years. While the principal aim of the study is to provide information to support policy-making, it is also intended to be a broader resource that can be drawn on by academics, voluntary sector organisations and other interested parties. GUS collects a wide range of information about children and their families; the main areas covered include childcare, education, parenting, health and social inclusion.

Background to the report

This document is one of a series that summarises key findings from the sixth sweep of the study, which was collected in 2010/11 when children in the birth cohort were aged almost 6 years old. It is one of two summaries which presents key findings from the Growing Up in Scotland study report *Early experiences of Primary School*.

The full report presents the results of largely descriptive analysis of the considerable data which GUS has collected around this topic from both the birth and child cohorts between 2007 (sweep 3) and 2011 (sweep 6). This analysis seeks to provide a better understanding of the factors which lead to a positive early experience of school for children, the early engagement of parents with the school and the child's teacher, and the many practical issues associated with starting school such as school choice, transport, and wrap-around care.

The aim of the report is to provide an overview of these issues and experiences exploring how they vary according to characteristics of the child, family, area

(e.g. area deprivation), and the school (e.g. size). Both interview data and administrative data drawn from school records has been analysed.

This document presents a summary of the data on the transition to primary school, in particular parental perceptions of the child's 'readiness' for, and adjustment to, school.

Perceptions of the child's readiness for school

Whilst the notion of a child's 'school readiness' is contentious, one interpretation is that a child's readiness should be considered across five domains: social and emotional development, physical wellbeing and motor development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge. GUS examined parental perceptions of how ready the child was for school. To measure this general perception, parents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with five statements:

- I was worried that [childname] would find being apart from me too difficult



- I was concerned that [childname] would be reluctant to go to primary school
- I felt that [childname] was able to mix with other children well enough to get along at primary school.
- I believe that [childname] understood enough about taking turns and sharing to manage at primary school
- I was worried that [childname] was not independent enough to cope with primary school

These statements were aimed at capturing the parent's feelings about the child's readiness on a range of dimensions – the child's level of independence and how he or she would react to being apart from the parent, whether he or she would be generally reluctant to go to school and his or her social development and relationships with peers. The data was collected during the time the child was in P1 at school.

The vast majority of children were perceived by their parents to be ready for school. Only 7% of parents felt that their child was not independent enough, with similarly low levels worrying their child would find being apart too difficult or that their child would be reluctant to go. In contrast, around 93% believed their child was able to share and mix with other children sufficiently to attend school.

The individual items were summed in order to create an index of perceived readiness with a high score indicating higher perceived readiness. Mean scores varied according to key child and family characteristics. The differences outlined below were statistically significant but were also generally small.

- Girls had a slightly higher mean readiness score than boys (21.2 compared with 20.5) complimenting a range of other data on GUS which indicates that girls are generally reported by their parents to have fewer difficulties in other areas of development.
- Those children who were aged between 5 and 5.5 years at school entry had a higher average readiness score (21.2) than both those who were under 5 years (20.6) or older than 5.5 years (20.6).
- Children in higher income households, those whose parents had higher levels of education and those living in areas of lower deprivation had higher perceived readiness scores than children in lower income households, those whose parents had lower levels of education and those living in areas of high deprivation.
- Children who attended pre-school at a private or partnership nursery had a higher average readiness

score (21.3) than those who did not attend pre-school or who attended pre-school at a local authority nursery (20.4 and 20.3 respectively). These differences may reflect a higher proportion of children from professional households amongst those using private pre-school provision.

- Those children who were perceived by their parents to be less ready for pre-school (as measured at age 46 months) also tended to have lower school readiness scores.
- Children with below average readiness scores had higher mean scores on the SDQ total difficulties scale – indicating a higher level of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. They also had lower cognitive development scores indicating both lower problem solving and vocabulary ability.

As there is some overlap between those families belonging to the various social background categories considered and the characteristics of children in those families – for example, families where parents are more highly educated are more likely to have higher incomes and children in each of those groups are more likely to have higher cognitive ability and lower social development difficulties – multivariate analysis was used to determine which characteristics are independently related to having an average or higher than average school readiness score when holding the other, potentially confounding, characteristics constant.

After controlling for socio-economic characteristics, the key factors associated with perceived school readiness are the child's pre-school experience, and their cognitive and social, emotional and behavioural development around the time they enter school. Irrespective of social background:

- Children with average or above average cognitive ability and those with no social or behavioural difficulties were more likely to have an average or above average school readiness score.
- Children younger than 5 years old, or older than 5.5 years at school entry were less likely to have an average or above average readiness score.
- Compared with those children who attended pre-school between 12 and 12.5 hours, those who attended for shorter or slightly longer durations were less likely to have an average or above average readiness score.
- Children who were perceived less ready for pre-school were less likely to have scored average or above on the readiness for school scale.

Perceptions of adjustment to school

Parents were also asked about how well they felt the child adjusted to school. 92% agreed or agreed strongly that their child had adjusted easily to school. However, at the same time 22% agreed or agreed strongly that their child was happier with the way he or she learned things in pre-school.

A further four questions were asked about the child's adjustment to school: how often the child had complained about school, said good things about school, looked forward to going to school and had been upset or reluctant to go. Again, an index was created summing the responses on these questions.

Patterns similar to those observed for perceived readiness were also found for perceived adjustment. Boys were perceived to have had more problems adjusting than girls, as were children with higher social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and lower cognitive development scores when compared with those with lower difficulties and higher cognitive ability. In addition, children who were reported as having trouble adjusting to school had lower mean perceived readiness scores.

Conclusion

Cognitive and social development are two aspects often used to define school readiness. Whilst the perceived school readiness items used in GUS did not directly measure the child's ability or development in these domains, it appears that they are closely linked to the child's cognitive and social development. Such connections may also explain why those children who were older than 5 years 6 months (and thus had been deferred) at the point of entry were less likely to receive an average or above average readiness score; the report shows that deferred entry to school was often linked to parents' concerns about the child's development.

The findings do suggest that pre-school attendance is beneficial, on the whole, in preparing children for school, at least as far as parents' perceptions are concerned. Children who attended fewer hours of pre-school were less likely to have an average or above average readiness score. However, the same logic does not hold for the other group who attended for longer hours and who were also more likely to be perceived as 'less ready'. This group may in fact have other particular characteristics – explaining the greater use of pre-school provision but not otherwise controlled for in the analysis – which may be driving this relationship.

A range of previous analysis in GUS has demonstrated strong links between a child's developmental status around the time they enter pre-school and at the point they start primary school. It appears that perceptions of readiness also follow this pattern. This is perhaps unsurprising given the association between perceptions of readiness and measures of social development and cognitive ability. Nevertheless, this provides further evidence of the importance of early experiences in influencing outcomes and of the ability to identify support needs ahead of primary school entry.

Further information on the Growing Up in Scotland study can be found at: www.growingupinscotland.org.uk

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