

Quarterly Economic Commentary

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Research Bulletin

What Do We Know About Special Educational Needs? Evidence from *Growing Up in Ireland*

Joanne Banks and Selina McCoy*

Despite the recent policy emphasis on educational inclusion little is known about children with special educational needs in Ireland. The *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs* (2004) Act highlighted a commitment to inclusive education and in particular to increasing the number of students with special educational needs attending mainstream schools. While significant changes have taken place, crucial information has been lacking – including the numbers of children with special educational needs (SEN), their profile and how they fare in school. Based on *Growing Up in Ireland* data on nine year old children, this bulletin draws together three journal papers and a research report¹ to provide valuable insights into special educational needs in Irish primary schools. This research provides much needed evidence for policy decisions by focusing on the scale and prevalence of SEN, the characteristics of students identified with SEN and the social and academic experiences of these students in school.

Prevalence

The term special educational needs can mean different things, depending on the context. The definition has changed considerably over time and as a consequence so too has our understanding of which students are likely to have such needs. Increasingly, the policy trend is to broaden the definition of SEN and create more inclusive education systems, but wide variations in prevalence estimates persist across countries. In Ireland, the EPSEN Act (2004) introduced a broader definition of SEN than heretofore, which includes a broad range of difficulties ranging from physical disabilities to learning disabilities and emotional-behavioural difficulties. For the first time, information collected about 8,578 nine-year-old children in the *Growing Up in Ireland* survey has provided a unique opportunity to combine data from two sets of key informants (parents and teachers) to identify the cohort experiencing SEN. Overall one-in-four children were found to have some form of SEN – a rate consistent with recent studies internationally – with boys showing higher levels than girls.

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Identifying Students with SEN

Analysing the *Growing Up in Ireland* data allows us to move beyond measuring the scale of special educational needs in Ireland and explore the composition of children with SEN as identified by their teachers and whether SEN levels vary across different social groups. This new research shows that children from working class backgrounds are far more likely to be identified with SEN. This is particularly the case for working class boys who display high levels of SEN (of a non-normative type such as emotional/behavioural difficulties – EBD). Moreover, children attending schools designated as socio-economically disadvantaged are significantly more likely than their peers to be identified as having EBD. We further examined whether EBD as identified by teachers, or within certain schools, is matched by the child's own performance on an internationally validated emotional and mental health self-concept measure. When we take account of children's performance on this self-concept measure, we find that certain groups of children are disproportionately likely to be identified with EBD. This includes boys, children from economically inactive households and children attending designated disadvantaged schools.

School Experiences for Students with SEN

These issues in SEN identification highlight the importance of understanding the everyday school experiences for this group of students: in essence, how do they get on in school? Importantly, school experiences and overall attitudes towards school vary among children with SEN according to the type of disability or need they have. It is clear that children with SEN, particularly those identified with learning disabilities, face considerable barriers to fully engage in school life. In line with previous research on boys in school more generally, findings show that boys with SEN are more likely than girls with SEN to dislike school. Moreover, children with SEN from semi- and unskilled social class backgrounds are also more likely to be disengaged from school. For students with such additional needs, low levels of academic engagement and poor relations with their peers and teachers play a central role in explaining their low levels of school engagement and overall enjoyment of school.

Policy Implications

These research findings highlight the need for discussion by policymakers and practitioners around the definition of SEN as per the EPSEN Act. In reaching a new prevalence estimate of 25 per cent this is an opportune time to have a meaningful debate around our understanding of special education and our commitment to inclusion in our schools. These findings raise questions around the processes of SEN identification in schools and, in particular, whether being identified with a SEN is influenced by the social background characteristics of the child or the social

mix of students in the school. From a policy perspective the over-representation of boys, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children attending disadvantaged schools within the SEN group, highlights the need to review the ways in which children with SEN, and in particular children with EBD, are identified. This research highlights the practical implications of placing children with SEN in mainstream schools. By simultaneously examining the role of academic and social relations in shaping the engagement of children with SEN, the analysis provides a unique opportunity to fundamentally assess the barriers to true inclusion for children with special needs.

¹ Banks, J. and S. McCoy, 2011. *A Study on the Prevalence of Special Educational Needs*, Trim: National Council for Special Education.

Banks, J., M. Shevlin and S. McCoy, 2012. "Disproportionality in special education: identifying children with emotional behavioural difficulties in Irish primary schools", *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, Vol. 27, No.2, pp. 219-235.

McCoy, S. and J. Banks, 2012. "Simply academic? Why children with special educational needs don't like school", *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 81-97.

McCoy, S., J. Banks and M. Shevlin, 2012. School matters: how context influences the identification of different types of special educational needs, *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol.31, No.2, pp. 119-138.