

Research Insight

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Parental Expectations and Educational Inequality in Irish Secondary Education

Educational inequality in Ireland begins long before students choose their Leaving Certificate subjects. New longitudinal research shows that parents' expectations for their children's education—formed as early as age nine—strongly influence later academic choices, even after accounting for family income, parental education, and prior achievement.

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LONGITUDINAL EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS: REDUCING INEQUALITIES
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1. The Problem: Why Parental Expectations Matter

Ireland is often viewed as a high-performing and relatively equitable education system, yet persistent socioeconomic inequalities remain embedded in students' educational pathways (Lynch & Crean, 2018). Students from more advantaged backgrounds are consistently more likely to follow academic routes and make choices that facilitate access to higher education and long-term opportunities (Banks et al., 2014). While these inequalities are typically explained by differences in income, parental education, and school context, less attention has been given to how parents' expectations shape these trajectories.

Parental educational expectations influence how families interpret children's abilities, respond to early signals of achievement, and navigate key institutional decision points (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2015). These expectations are formed early, evolve over time, and are shaped by broader social context. This raises an important policy question: to what extent do parental expectations reinforce or mediate socioeconomic inequalities in educational outcomes, and at what stages of development do they exert the greatest influence? Ireland offers a particularly useful case for examining this issue because, despite its comprehensive structure, differentiation occurs through relatively subtle mechanisms such as subject level choices and programme pathways rather than formal tracking.

2. The Study: Data, Design, and Context

This insight draws on longitudinal data from the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI '98) Child Cohort, following students from age 9 to age 20. The analysis includes up to 8,568 participants at baseline and 4,729 at age 20, capturing key transition points across the education system. The study focuses on two high-stakes outcomes at the end of secondary education: placement in an academic (Leaving Certificate) versus non-academic track, and subject level choices in English and Mathematics.

In the Irish system, students typically choose between Higher, Ordinary, and, in the case of Mathematics, Foundation levels.

These decisions are not strictly assigned but are generally made through a combination of student preference, parental input, and school guidance. Crucially, higher-level subjects are often required for entry into competitive higher education programmes. The academic Leaving Certificate track refers to the most demanding pathway, offering advanced versions of core subjects and providing direct access to higher education, in contrast to vocational alternatives.

Socioeconomic status is measured using household income and parental education, while parental expectations are captured at ages 9 and 13, well before key educational decisions are made. The analysis uses advanced statistical methods to assess both the independent and mediating effects of expectations.

3. Main Result: Expectations Powerfully Shape Educational Pathways

The findings show that parental educational expectations are a strong and consistent predictor of students' academic trajectories. Students whose parents expect them to complete a university degree are significantly more likely to take Higher-level Mathematics and English and to follow the academic Leaving Certificate track. These associations remain robust even after accounting for socioeconomic background, prior academic achievement, gender, school context, and neighbourhood characteristics.

Importantly, parental expectations are not simply reflections of children's performance. They exert an independent influence on how students are positioned within the education system. This indicates that inequality in Ireland is not only reproduced through structural factors such as resources and school environments, but also through family-level processes that shape how opportunities are perceived and pursued.

4. Secondary Results: Expectations Partly Mediate Socioeconomic Inequality

Beyond their direct effects, parental expectations also function as a key mechanism through which socioeconomic advantage is transmitted. A meaningful proportion of the relationship between both household income and parental education and students' educational outcomes operates through differences in expectations. Families with greater economic and cultural resources are more likely to form and sustain expectations that align with academic progression.

However, expectations do not fully account for socioeconomic disparities. Even after controlling for expectations, substantial direct effects of income and parental education persist. This suggests that while expectations play an important role, they operate alongside enduring structural inequalities that continue to shape educational outcomes.

5. Context and Interpretation: Timing Matters

The timing of parental expectations emerges as a critical factor. Expectations measured at age 13, just before key subject level and track decisions, are more strongly associated with outcomes than those measured at age nine. This indicates that expectations become increasingly influential as students approach institutional decision points.

At the same time, the significance of expectations at age nine demonstrates that inequality begins to take shape well before formal educational choices are made. Early signals about what is possible and desirable help establish trajectories that later decisions tend to reinforce. In the Irish context, where formal tracking is limited, subject level choices function as a subtle but powerful mechanism of stratification within an otherwise comprehensive system.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

These findings highlight parental expectations as an important, though partial, lever for addressing educational inequality. Supporting parents, particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds, to form informed and aspirational expectations may help reduce disparities in subject level choices and academic pathways. Providing clear and accessible information about the consequences of these choices, especially during early adolescence, could also help reduce informational inequalities that currently benefit higher socioeconomic groups.

At the same time, expectation-focused interventions cannot substitute for structural reform. Persistent inequalities in access to Higher-level curricula, differences in school resources, and variation between DEIS schools, which receive targeted support for disadvantage, and non-DEIS schools continue to shape outcomes. Addressing these broader systemic factors remains essential. More generally, the study underscores the value of longitudinal data in identifying when and how inequalities emerge, highlighting the importance of sustained investment in evidence-based policy development.

NOTE
Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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