

Lower secondary education in Ireland: the evidence for reform

NESET Expert Author:

Emer Smyth, Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), Dublin

There has been a good deal of debate internationally on the impact of 'high stakes' tests on student learning. In Ireland, students follow a three-year lower secondary programme at the end of which they take a set of external exams, the results of which have important implications for their later educational pathways. Evidence on the impact of this structure on student experiences has been gleaned from the ESRI Post-Primary Longitudinal Study, which followed a cohort of 900 students in 12 case-study schools from entry to secondary education (in 2002) to completion of upper secondary level in 2007 or 2008. The schools were selected to capture the key dimensions which influence student educational experiences, namely, the approach to subject choice, the use of ability grouping and the provision of supports to students.



The current programme structure means that young people's experience of lower secondary education is quite fragmented. First year involves a major adjustment as they encounter different teaching methods and more subjects than in primary school. However, the majority of students settle into secondary school fairly quickly and are particularly enthusiastic about the new subjects they study.

After the settling-in period of first year, second year is often described by teachers as one of 'drift' on the part of students. Without the focus of an examination, they are seen as becoming more disengaged and 'difficult' than previously. Second year emerges from our research as the crucial year in shaping longer term student learning, retention within school and academic performance. Clear differences in student engagement are evident by second year. Some students, mainly female students and those from professional families, are increasingly challenged by schoolwork and respond by investing time in homework and study. Others, mainly male students and those from working-class backgrounds, are drifting or even actively disengaging from schoolwork and investing less time in homework/study than in first year. These patterns have extremely important consequences: many students who struggle with their schoolwork in second year find it hard to regain the ground lost later on and underperform in the national exams. Furthermore, failure to complete upper secondary can often stem from difficulties coping with schoolwork and negative patterns of teacher-student interaction established within second year.

The Junior Certificate (lower secondary) exam sets the tone for student experiences in third year: students find schoolwork more difficult, spend more time on homework and study, sometimes pay

for private tuition, and often feel stressed about the exams. The presence of a 'high stakes' exam significantly influences the nature of teaching and learning, with the focus narrowing to one of preparation for the exam. Third year students generally prefer teaching approaches that allow them to have more autonomy in the learning process, seeing a strictly teacher-led approach as less helpful. They highlight the importance of interaction in class whereby everybody can contribute and discussions are encouraged. However, these active learning methods are less evident as they approach the exam, with more time spent on 'finishing' the course, completing homework, and on practising previous exam papers. These changes appear to further alienate those students who were already experiencing difficulties with schoolwork.

Our findings show growing disaffection with school as young people move through lower secondary education. Such disaffection is particularly evident among boys, especially those from working-class backgrounds. The Minister for Education and Skills has recently announced measures which will radically change the nature of lower secondary education in Ireland, with greater autonomy for schools to develop their own short courses and a move away from single-event external examinations to more continuous school-based assessment. This research has provided an important evidence base for these reform measures, showing the potential for research on young people's experiences to contribute to the policy process.

Further reading

Smyth, E., Banks, J., Calvert, E. (2011). *From Leaving Certificate to Leaving School: A Longitudinal Study of Sixth Year Students*. Dublin: Liffey Press.
http://esri.ie/publications/search_for_a_publication/search_results/view/index.xml?id=3332

Smyth, E., Dunne, A., Darmody, M., McCoy, S. (2007). *Gearing Up for the Exam? The Experiences of Junior Certificate Students*, Dublin: Liffey Press/ESRI.