



FRAGMENTED PATHWAYS IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION: KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF EDUCATION SYSTEMS

NESET II seminar summary

By **GEORGES VAN LANDEGHEM**,
Centre for Educational Effectiveness and
Evaluation, KU Leuven
Georges.VanLandeghem@kuleuven.be

and **MERIKE DARMODY**,
The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)
Merike.Darmody@esri.ie

INTRODUCTION

The pathways concept refers to movement through a set of educational and employment experiences leading either to a destination or another pathway; in other words, it refers to a destination, either temporary or final (as opposed to 'transition', which refers to a process). Embarking on new pathways is associated with changes to environments, relationships, behaviours, routines, roles and expectations (Dwyer, 1995). Diversity in pathways in Europe has attracted growing comparative research interest, reflecting the considerable heterogeneity in education systems and institutional arrangements. Pathways can be fragmented by individual decisions or broader structural factors (Dearn, 2011). It is important to note that it is difficult to consider 'pathways' without also talking about 'transitions', i.e. the process of moving towards a new pathway.

The pathways of young people within the education system have attracted the interest of policy-makers across Europe and elsewhere. Considering the complexities involved, it is not surprising that some young people may require considerable help in their planning and preparation, as well as support in adjusting to the process. To make effective decisions on pathways, the student, family/caregiver and teacher need to be well informed about the options available. The more affluent and privileged middle-class students are more likely to experience congruity between home and the educational environment compared to working-class students (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). Research has indicated remarkable commonalities across countries in the relationship between social class background and educational attainment (see, for example, Müller, 1996), and in the way in which education mediates the association between class origin and destination (Ishida, Müller, and Ridge, 1995). Research consistently documents that students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to drop out of high school than their middle- or upper-income counterparts (Rumberger, 2001) and are less likely to participate in higher education (Parker, Schoon, Tsai, Nagy, Trautwein, and Eccles, 2012).

A growing number of international studies identify school transitions as a time when students are most likely to disengage from education. The transition points include the transition from home to pre-school, from pre-school to primary school; from primary to secondary and from school to work or from youth to adulthood. These moves are often characterised by challenges, uncertainty and tension. In this context, the importance of seamless transitions between various levels of schooling cannot be underestimated, as the dispositions towards learning and academic achievement are moulded by students' early school experiences. These dispositions, in turn, have a strong impact on students' successful outcomes in education and beyond.

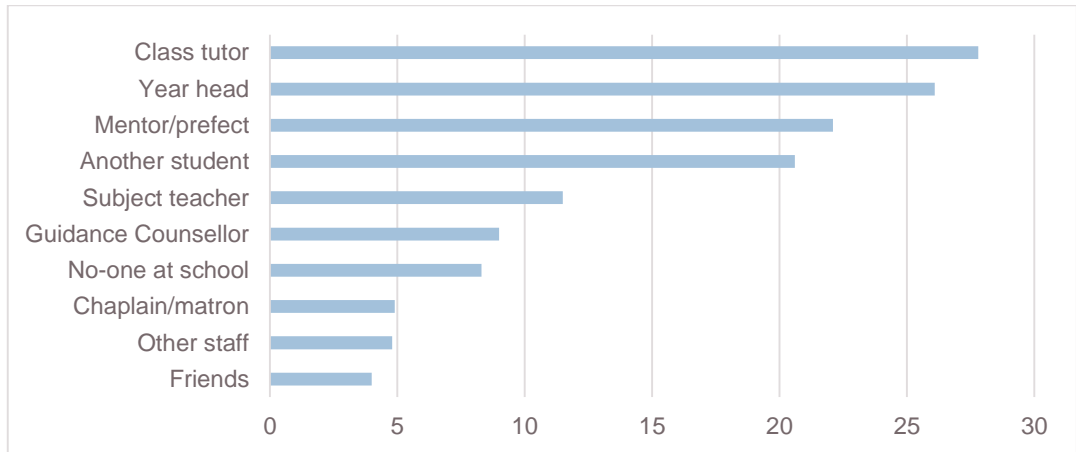
FRAGMENTED PATHWAYS IN IRELAND

In Ireland, secondary (generally called post-primary) education is compulsory up to the age of 16 or up to the end of the junior cycle (lower-secondary education), whichever occurs last. Primary and secondary education levels constitute two separate sectors of formal schooling, each with a different ethos. One post-primary school can have several feeder primary schools. Lower-secondary school (the junior cycle) covers years one to three and ends with the first state exam (Junior Certificate exam) at the age of 15. This is the minimum educational qualification that pupils are expected to attain. After this stage, pupils proceed either into the Transition Year programme, or straight into the senior cycle.

The major hiatus in Ireland takes place when pupils make the transition from primary to secondary school at the age of twelve. At this time, pupils encounter new teachers, new subjects and new peers, and in most cases attend a much larger school in terms of school building and student numbers (Smyth, McCoy, and Darmody, 2004). There is little between-school student movement; and suspensions and expulsions are rare.

Approximately 9 % of young people leave school prematurely. While there has been some improvement, the progress is slow. Males, young people from working-class and unemployed households, Travellers and migrants tend to be more likely to leave school early (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Patterns of disengagement and absenteeism can already become established in primary school (Darmody and Thornton, 2014). These students are more likely to have fractured pathways in education. Structural factors that influence student pathways include school admission policies, sorting students by ability, and access to different programmes at secondary school. However, there is some evidence of collaboration between primary and secondary schools at the time of transition involving information provided for the parents and students (Smyth, McCoy, and Darmody, 2004). Figure 1 indicates the help available to first year students in lower secondary school.

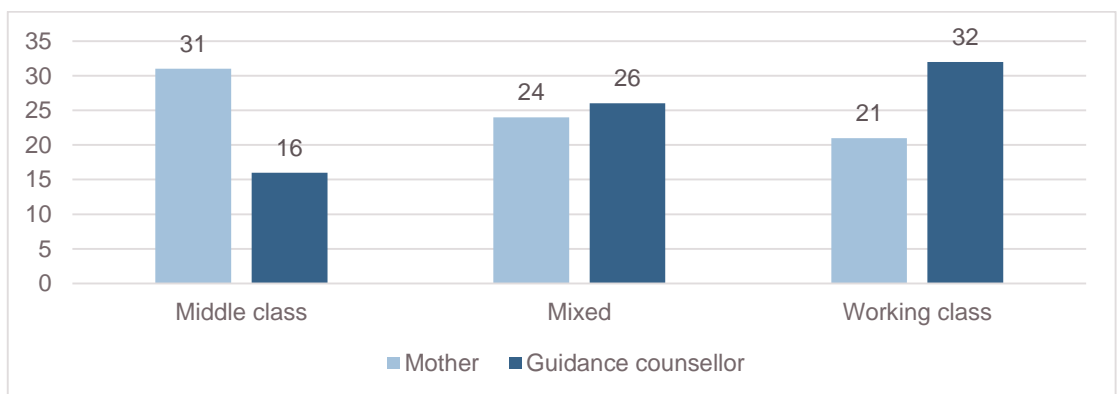
FIGURE 1. Potential sources of help at school



Source: Smyth, McCoy and Darmody (2004).

The decision made at the end of the junior cycle with regard to entry to upper-secondary school programmes (Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Vocational, Leaving Certificate Applied) determines the future pathways of students. At this juncture, parents emerge as the most important source of advice and support in choosing a programme. With regard to post-school pathways, parents, as well as the school are important sources of information and guidance. Students from working class backgrounds tend to consider help from the guidance counsellor at school particularly important. While both parents and schools support students during their educational career and in transferring from one stage of education to another, students from a lower socio-economic background are more likely to rely on school-based information (Figure 2). It is important, however, that parents, schools and other organisations (e.g. Child and Family Agency Tusla¹) work together in order to ensure the best results for students at school.

FIGURE 2. Most helpful source of advice by school social mix



Source: McCoy, Smyth, Watson and Darmody (2014).

¹ For further information see: <http://www.tusla.ie/services/educational-welfare-services/information-for-parents-and-guardians/school-attendance-what-every-parent-needs-to-know/>

FRAGMENTED PATHWAYS IN FLANDERS

Inter-school mobility in Flemish secondary education

The core group of pupils from a typical Flemish secondary school – i.e. those who start as well as finish their secondary education trajectory in that particular school – are not representative of the school's population as a whole. The other components of the student body, those who came from and/or went on to another secondary school, are both significant in size and different from the core group. This was demonstrated in a recent study about the development of a school indicator of early school leaving based on Flemish administrative data (Van Landeghem, De Fraine, Gielen, and Van Damme, 2013).

For example: in a set of 139 multi-track secondary schools, only 53 % of the years of education provided were spent on the pupils from the core group (despite the range of tracks within each school). Within the core group, 5 % of the years of education were provided to eventual early school leavers, in contrast with a 10.6 % ESL indicator value for the entire population of these 139 schools.

The frequent transfers of pupils between Flemish secondary schools are essentially driven by two structural elements of the education system: (1) early tracking from the first grade onwards, with a built-in hierarchy between tracks (general → technical → full-time vocational → part-time vocational) and with different types of schools in terms of the combination of tracks on offer; (2) parallel networks of schools (free, community, state) and a considerable degree of free school choice, creating local 'markets' of secondary education.

In short: fragmentation of pupils' educational trajectories in the shape of changing schools during secondary education occurs frequently in Flanders, is associated with a heightened risk of early school leaving, and is driven by structural characteristics of the education system. It comes on top of other types of fragmentation such as the common transitions between levels of education and an intensive use of grade repetition.

Inter-school mobility in Flemish primary education

After decades of steady growth, the size of special primary education in Flanders reached a peak value in the cohort born in 2001, with an enrolment of 10.0 % of the boys and 6.5 % of the girls at the age of 11 (Van Landeghem and Van Damme, 2009, updated time series). These percentages refer to special education in separate schools. Moreover, enrolment in special primary education starts at the age of 6 – involving, for example, 2.6 % of the 2001 birth cohort – but continues throughout primary education.

As a consequence, the way special education needs are met in the Flemish education system causes a considerable amount of inter-school mobility during primary education. These are major events for the pupils involved: they typically move from a neighbourhood school to a special primary school further away from home; their educational environment changes markedly; they are often acutely aware of the stigma attached to special education.

Connecting fragments? Service providers approach versus collective responsibility

Pupil guidance centres in Flanders care for pupils in different schools via temporary service contracts. Despite the intensity of inter-school mobility in Flemish compulsory education, the latest audit and review of the system of pupil guidance centres (Struyf, Verschueren, Vervoort, and Nijs, 2015) does not mention or evaluate the potential role of the guidance centres in supporting pupils during such transitions. This is symptomatic of the prevalent approach to inter-school transfers. Apart from a potential passing on of documents via or between pupil guidance centres, the pupil and the parents are the main carriers of information from one school to the next. Pupil and parents act as clients moving between service providers.

Flemish schools are not equipped to organise ‘warm’ transfers of pupils, with staff of the consecutive schools meeting and cooperating closely during a transition period. They also lack the means to trace the educational pathways of new or former pupils outside the period of enrolment or to map out who their de facto partners are, from the point of view of pupil flows (Van Landeghem, De Fraine, Gielen, and Van Damme, 2013). In short: they are not ready to implement a collective responsibility of consecutive schools for individual pupil pathways.

COMPARING SYSTEMS: TWO SUGGESTIONS

Both Irish and Flemish pupils are confronted with discontinuities in their trajectories through primary and secondary education. But whilst in Ireland these are mainly situated at the common major transitions into, through and at the end of formal education, inter-school mobility during the primary and secondary stages is a major (and selective) cause of the fragmentation of individual pupils’ pathways in Flanders. This is only one illustration of how strongly education systems vary in structure across Europe. The general question is how the multifaceted variation between education systems relates to differences in efficiency and equity.

A first suggestion with regard to future comparative research is that the degree of fragmentation of individual pupils’ pathways may prove to be a relevant summary of the characteristics of multiple education systems. We suggest that it may serve as a mediating variable between detailed system properties and its outcomes.

Secondly, from the point of view of explaining the degree of equity within education systems, it may be useful to enquire into the nature of the connections between the fragments of pupils’ individual trajectories. Does the system lean towards a ‘service providers’ view on these links, or does it have structures in place to implement the ‘collective responsibility’ of all institutions involved in a pupil’s pathway through education?

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