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Social Relationships and the Transition to Secondary Education

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Abstract: International research has pointed to the social and academic adjustment required of young people moving to secondary education and the importance of social support in easing this transition. However, studies have rarely looked at the simultaneous impact of different social networks on this process and how these networks may mediate the influence of social background. This paper draws on *Growing Up in Ireland* data to look at the influence of parents, peers and teachers on two dimensions of the transition process, which capture social, socio-emotional and academic aspects of the adjustment: the ease of settling into secondary education, as measured by parents' reports of transition difficulties among their children, and academic adjustment to secondary education, as reflected in changes in young people's academic self-image. Parental support is found to play a crucial role in helping young people adjust to the new school setting but, contrary to much previous research, formal involvement in their children's schooling, especially in helping with homework, plays a much less important role. Over and above supportive relations, parental cultural, economic and social resources are found to play a direct role in improving young people's confidence as learners and in enhancing transition experiences. Peer networks typically grow larger over the transition to secondary education but those young people who were more socially isolated at primary level experience greater difficulties. In keeping with previous research, the quality of relations with teachers emerges as a key driver of academic and social adjustment to secondary education.

I INTRODUCTION

Research on the transition to secondary[1] education has shown that it is a time of turbulence and turmoil (Hargreaves and Galton, 2002; Rudduck, 1996; Lucey and Reay, 2000). Young people encounter new approaches to

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[1] In the Irish context, the term "second-level education" is more commonly used. However, "secondary" is used throughout this paper as it reflects the usual terminology internationally.

learning and have several teachers rather than one. In the Irish educational system, they typically move from a small school to a larger one, with the sundering of old friendships and the formation of new ones. International research has shown that social relationships play an important role in supporting young people over this transition (see, for example, Lord *et al*., 1994). Thus, support from parents helps to facilitate settling into the new school context. Similarly, supportive relationships with teachers are found to foster a sense of belonging for new students (Gutman and Midgley, 2000).

Research has tended to focus on the common experiences faced by young people and/or the role of individual psychological characteristics in shaping transition outcomes (see, for example, Symonds and Galton, 2014). Although some studies have indicated greater transition difficulties among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (see, for example, Gutman and Midgley, 2000; Lucey and Reay, 2002), there has been little systematic attention to the way in which family background influences the transition process, directly through familial resources (economic, cultural, social and emotional) and indirectly through the nature of social networks and relationships. Furthermore, previous research has tended to focus on one set of social relationships at a time. In contrast, this paper draws on Waves 1 and 2 of the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) survey to look at three sets of relationships simultaneously: with parents, friends and teachers. Analyses capture the socio-emotional, social and academic aspects of the transition, as measured by parents' reports of transition difficulties among their children and changes in young people's academic self-image. The central research questions are:

- How do relationships with parents, friends and teachers influence young people's social and academic adjustment to secondary education?
- To what extent do these relationships mediate any effects of social background on transition outcomes?

The following section of the paper provides a more detailed discussion of the existing literature on the transition to secondary education, placing it in the context of the broader theoretical framework of social differentiation in educational outcomes.

II RESEARCH ON THE TRANSITION TO SECONDARY EDUCATION

There is a relatively large body of research on the social and academic adjustment involved in making the transition to secondary education (see, for example, Hargreaves and Galton, 2002; Eccles *et al*., 1993; Gutman and

Midgley, 2000). Before making the transition, young people report feelings of excitement but also feelings of anxiety about going to the new school, with anxiety centring on difficulties in making new friends and even the likelihood of being bullied as well as in encountering new teachers, new subjects and more demanding schoolwork (Hargreaves and Galton, 2002; O'Brien, 2004). At the same time, young people feel they have outgrown the primary setting and are ready for the new challenges they face at secondary level (Mellor and Delamont, 2011). In spite of their anxieties, research has found that only a relatively small minority of students experience serious difficulties settling into the new school (O'Brien, 2004; Hargreaves and Galton, 2002; Smyth *et al*., 2004). The picture is more complex when academic self-image is considered, indicating the importance of adopting a multi-dimensional approach to transition outcomes. Studies indicate that, on average, young people experience a decline in self-esteem over the transition because of changes in the learning environments to which they are exposed and, in many cases, more demanding schoolwork (Wigfield *et al*., 1991). In tandem with this decline, research has pointed to a dip in academic performance and motivation as young people make the transition to secondary education, a pattern that is evident across quite different educational systems (Whitby *et al*., 2006; Topping, 2011).

Although some studies have shown greater levels of anxiety and transition difficulties among those from more disadvantaged socio-economic groups and among those with special educational needs (Gutman and Midgley, 2000; Lucey and Reay, 2002; Hughes *et al*., 2013), there has been relatively little integration of transitions research and the broader literature on social class differentiation in educational outcomes.

There is a large body of research in the sociology of education which focuses on how middle-class parents can, due to their insider knowledge, better support their children in navigating their way successfully through their school career. In Bourdieu's terms (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), upper- and middle-class families possess more economic, cultural and social capital, resources which foster the kinds of skills and competencies valued by the school system and thus facilitate the educational development of their children. Thus, socio-economically advantaged parents are more involved in the school through parents' associations, for example, and through informal networks with other parents which serve as a conduit for the exchange of valuable information (Lareau, 1989). It is also argued that these parents provide greater exposure to learning opportunities outside the school context (a process termed "concerted cultivation" by Lareau, 2003), thus enhancing the academic development and self-confidence of middle-class children. Other studies have focused more directly on the nature of direct parental involvement in their children's learning, indicating that those whose parents attend parent-teacher meetings,

monitor their children's progress, and help with homework do better academically (see, for example, Stevenson and Baker, 1987; Bogenschneider, 1997). Greater cultural, economic and social resources are also found to facilitate smoother transitions to secondary education among middle-class children (see Gutman and Midgley, 2000). Commentators have remarked on the relative neglect of emotional rather than social ties in Bourdieu's work and have extended his perspective to focus on the emotional resources provided by families, particularly by mothers given the gendered division of household labour (see, for example, Reay, 2000). Thus, empirical studies have found that, over and above the influence of parental resources, the quality of the emotional relationship between parents and children plays a part, with parents who provide more support while at the same time encouraging autonomy among their children easing the transition process (Lord *et al*., 1994).

Bourdieu's work has tended to focus on family networks rather than other sets of social relationships (Field, 2008). However, relationships with friends and even teachers could also be seen as providing social and emotional resources and thus as playing an important role in the transition process, a perspective that is supported by empirical findings. As young people move into adolescence, the importance of the peer group is found to increase, with teenagers spending more time with their friends and paying more attention to them as a source of their identity (Crockett and Losoff, 1984). However, the transition often disrupts existing friendship networks, with peer groups forming and reforming in the new school setting (Weller, 2007). Despite this disruption to existing networks, research points to greater support from peers and a decline in feelings of social isolation after the transition (Galton *et al*., 2003; Gillison *et al*., 2008), and indicates that peer support can ameliorate the effects of anxiety around the transition (Topping, 2011).

The transition involves different relationships with teachers as secondary subject-specific teachers are less likely to know students personally than at primary level (Lord *et al*., 1994), with the result that relationships between teachers and students may become less close than previously (Eccles *et al*., 1993; Ferguson and Fraser, 1999; Martinez *et al*., 2011). More supportive relations with teachers emerge as key to a successful transition (Hargreaves and Tickle, 1980; Gutman and Midgley, 2000), with personal relationships providing a crucial foundation for the emergence of positive learning relationships (Tobbell, O'Donnell, 2013). In fact, the informal climate has been found to play a stronger role in easing the transition than the existence of formal support networks such as integration programmes and peer mentors (Smyth *et al*., 2004).

Building upon existing research, the current paper sets out to examine the way in which relationships with parents, teachers and peers shape the ease of transition to secondary education and young people's confidence in themselves

as learners (their academic self-image). It is hypothesised that young people whose families have greater levels of economic, social and cultural resources will have fewer difficulties adapting to the new school setting and will be more confident about their academic abilities. This will have direct effects on social and academic adjustment because of the greater cultural and economic capital available to these young people as well as indirect effects through parental formal and informal involvement in their schooling. Over and above these background effects, it is expected that those with closer and more supportive relationships with their parents will have better outcomes. In relation to friendship networks, it is hypothesised that those with fewer friends and those who had experienced difficulties in establishing positive peer relations at primary level will find the transition more difficult and be more negative about themselves in general. Because the analyses presented in this paper focus on the size and quality of friendship networks rather than their social composition, there is no *a priori* reason to expect friendship patterns to mediate social background effects. Finally, it is predicted that the quality of relationships with secondary teachers will contribute to the settling-in process and to maintaining more positive self-image among young people. To the extent that working-class young people experience more negative interaction with their teachers (see Smyth, 2016), it is hypothesised that teacher-student relations will partially mediate the influence of social background on transition outcomes. The next section discusses the data used for this paper.

III DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This paper uses data from the child cohort component of the GUI study. The child cohort sample was generated through the primary school system in 2007 when the children involved were nine years of age. A nationally representative sample of 1,105 schools was selected, approximately one-third of all primary schools in Ireland at that time. Eighty-two per cent of these schools were recruited into the survey and a sample of children and families generated from within these schools. The response rate at family level was 57 per cent, yielding information on 8,568 children as well as their primary and secondary caregivers, their school principals, their teachers and child minders. Four years later, these children were followed up at 13 years of age, with a response rate of 88 per cent (of those taking part in the initial survey). Data for both waves were reweighted to be representative of the population of young people in Ireland.

By 13 years of age, almost all young people had made the transition to secondary education; just three per cent of the sample was in sixth class of

primary school or attending a special school (counted as primary level in Ireland). One of the two main outcomes analysed in this paper is a measure of transition difficulties based on the response of the primary caregiver (hereafter termed the mother). Mothers were asked to respond to a series of statements describing their child's experience of the transition:

- My child settled/is settling well into secondary school;
- My child missed/misses old friends from secondary school;
- My child was/is anxious about making new friends;
- My child coped/is coping well with schoolwork;
- My child made/has made new friends;
- My child is involved in extracurricular activities;
- My child gets too much homework at this school.

The measure has a range of 6 to 35, with a mean of 13.7 (and a standard deviation of 3.9), indicating a relatively low level of difficulties. There are some limitations to this measure: firstly, it would have been preferable to have had the young person's own perspective on the transition; secondly, the reliability for this scale is 0.59, which is not as high as might be desired. Nonetheless, the measure provides useful insights into the extent to which young people experience transition difficulties and captures both academic and social dimensions of the process.

In addition, in order to reflect young people's own experiences of the transition process, changes in academic self-image over the period from 9 to 13 years of age are examined. The Piers-Harris subscale of intellectual and school status is used as a reflection of how confident young people feel as learners. The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale 2nd Edition is a 60-item self-report instrument for the assessment of self-image in children and adolescents between the ages of 7 and 18. The items in the Piers-Harris 2 are statements that express how people feel about themselves, each with a yes/no answer option. The scales are scored so that a higher score indicates a more positive self-evaluation in the domain being measured. The intellectual and school status subscale consists of 16 items reflecting the child's assessment of their abilities in relation to intellectual and academic tasks, general satisfaction with school and perceptions of future achievements (e.g. "I am smart", "I am slow in finishing my schoolwork"). The measure ranges from 1 to 16, with a mean of 11.9 (and a standard deviation of 3.2) at 13 years of age (see Table 1). As the measure was collected at both 9 and 13 years of age, it allows us to assess changes in self-image over the transition period.

The GUI survey collected rich information on several dimensions of family background, including social class, mother's education, family structure and migrant status, all of which reflect the differential resources available to young

people over the transition period. Social class is measured using the Census of Population classification, taking a dominance approach whereby the higher of the two occupations is taken into account if both parents are in paid employment. A significant group of families could not be assigned a social class because of the lack of an employment history; this group is included in the analysis as the economically inactive and is highly disadvantaged in profile. A four-fold classification of mother's education is used: Junior Certificate (lower secondary) or less, Leaving Certificate (upper secondary), post-secondary and tertiary levels. The family structure measure distinguishes between lone parent and two-parent families. The family is defined as being an immigrant family if both parents were born outside Ireland.

The analyses also take account of the child's physical and emotional wellbeing at primary level; these measures include whether the child had an ongoing chronic illness or disability, whether the child had a special educational need, and misconduct and poor relations with peers as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire. This allows us to assess the extent to which prior challenges influence the transition process. In particular, until the GUI study, sample surveys of children and young people in Ireland were rarely large enough to provide detailed information on those with special educational needs. GUI therefore provides a new opportunity to explore the experiences of young people with special educational needs (SEN) over the transition to secondary education. In order to take account of whether parental involvement or relations with teachers and peers varied by the child's achievement levels, standardised Drumcondra test scores (Sheil, 1994, 1998) in reading and mathematics (measured in quintiles) conducted at the age of nine were used.

The analyses take account of parents' formal and informal involvement in their child's education, which have been a central focus of previous transition studies. Parents can, of course, influence their children's educational outcomes more generally through the choice of school and paying for participation in out-of-school learning opportunities. However, these factors are outside the scope of the current paper, given its focus on transition outcomes rather than academic performance. Formal parental involvement was measured in terms of attendance at parent-teacher meetings when the child was 9 and 13 years of age, attendance at another school event such as a concert or sports day when the young person was 13, and the frequency of family helping with homework at 9. As parental involvement in their children's schooling may reflect the broader quality of the relationship between parents and children, the Pianta Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS), a self-report instrument completed by the mother that assesses their perceptions of the relationship with their child, was used; the items formed two subscales reflecting closeness and conflict. The extent of day-to-day interaction between parents and young people is captured

by mothers' report of the frequency with which they talk with their children at the age of 13.

Peer relations were measured in terms of number of close friends at ages 9 and 13. Quality of friendship was not measured at 9 but is measured as 13 using two subscales of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA): the degree of trust (including items such as "my friends understand me") and the extent of alienation (including items such as "my friends do not understand what I'm going through these days").

Relations with teachers are captured by two scales developed for earlier studies of school climate in Ireland (see Hannan *et al*., 1996 and Smyth, 1999): positive interaction, based on four items assessing praise and positive feedback (with a reliability of 0.562), and negative interaction, based on two items measuring reprimand for misbehaviour or poor schoolwork (with a reliability of 0.675).

As the sample was selected on the basis of the school attended, each school contained several respondents so it cannot be assumed that these respondents represent independent observations. Traditional regression techniques assume no autocorrelation within the data; that is, that students represent independent observations, rather than being clustered within schools. However, it cannot be assumed that students in the same school are completely "independent" of each other in this way as they experience a common school climate. In contrast to regression procedures, multilevel modelling techniques take into account the clustering of individuals within groups (Goldstein, 2011), thus providing more precise estimates of the effects of school (and teacher) characteristics. The models presented in this paper were carried out using the MLwiN computer package developed at the Institute of Education, University of London (see Rasbash *et al*., 2012). The coefficients for the fixed effects can be interpreted in the same way as traditional regression coefficients. In addition, the models specify variance terms for the school and individual levels, which indicate the degree of variation between schools and children/young people in the outcomes studied.

The analyses present a series of nested models for both outcomes. The first model takes account of gender and different dimensions of family background, indicating the overall scale in social differentiation in transition experiences. The second model adds in prior achievement at primary level since young people from more advantaged families may experience fewer difficulties because of their greater academic preparedness. The third model examines the influence of social relationships on the outcomes and assesses the extent to which these relationships mediate the effects of social background shown in the first model. Where information is missing on any of the independent variables, these cases are included in the model but with a dummy variable indicating missing values. This has the advantage of retaining as many cases as possible in the analyses.

IV DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSES

In terms of formal parental involvement in education, there were high levels of attendance at scheduled parent-teacher meetings; almost all mothers reported attending such a meeting when their child was nine but this dropped slightly to 88 per cent over the transition to secondary education (see Table 1). Levels of attendance at other school events were somewhat lower at 62 per cent. Because of the high levels of attendance at parent-teacher meetings, there was relatively little social differentiation, though mothers with lower secondary education or less had lower levels of attendance than other groups. Similarly, those with higher levels of education were more likely to attend other school-based events but this difference was not large.

Table 1: *The Nature of Social Relationships at 9 and 13 Years of Age*

	9 years of age	*13 years of age*
Relationships with Parents		
Level of closeness	44.8	32.1
Level of contact	22.1	15.3
Help with homework (at 9):		
Always/nearly always	51.1	7.9
Regularly	20.4	15.1
Now and again	17.8	38.9
Rarely/never	10.7	38.1
Attended a parent-teacher meeting	97.6	88.2
Attended a school concert, play or other event	–	62.0
Talk about things together:		
Every day		65.6
3-6 days per week		23.3
1 to 2 days per week or less		11.0
Relationships with Friends		
Number of close friends:		
0/1	8.3	5.3
2-3	41.2	32.7
4-5	33.4	34.2
6 or more	17.1	27.6
Trust in friends (mean)	–	42.9

Table 1: *The Nature of Social Relationships at 9 and 13 Years of Age (Contd.)*

	9 years of age	*13 years of age*
Alienation from friends (mean)	–	13.9
Relationships with Teachers		
Attitude to teacher (at age 9):		
Always like	51.9	–
Sometimes like	42.2	
Never like	5.9	
Positive teacher-student interaction	–	2.8
Negative teacher-student interaction	–	1.7
Academic self-image (Piers-Harris intellectual and school status subscale)	12.3	11.9
N	7,525	7,525

There was a high level of parental involvement in helping with homework when the child was nine years of age with half of parents helping "always" or "nearly always". By the time young people were 13, however, parents were much less likely to help with homework, with only 8 per cent helping always or nearly always. However, despite this shift, a significant minority (four-in-ten) helped with homework "now and again" when their child was 13 and a further one-in-six helped regularly. This decline was attributed by parents to their child not needing or wanting help from them. There was some, but not marked, social differentiation in assistance with homework, with slightly lower levels found in economically inactive families, lone parent families, low income families and where mothers had lower levels of education. Young people with a special educational need were much more likely to receive frequent help with their homework. Perhaps surprisingly, levels of formal and informal involvement were not strongly related, indicating the importance of taking a multi-dimensional approach to parental involvement.

The nature of the relationship between parents and children also changed over this period (see Table 1). Using the Pianta scale, the level of closeness between parents and children decreased over the four-year period while, perhaps surprisingly given commonsense assumptions about the turmoil of adolescence, levels of conflict also decreased slightly. Thus, it appears that young people become more autonomous as they grow older rather than there being a worsening of the relationship between parents and children. This increased autonomy is likely to provide an important resource to young people within lower secondary education.

In keeping with the findings of international research (Crockett and Losoff, 1984), young people acquired a larger friendship network as they grew older, with the proportion having six or more close friends increasing from 17 per cent at age 9 to 28 per cent by the age of 13. Few differences were found in the size of friendship networks by social background, though there was some tendency for working-class young people to have larger networks than those from professional backgrounds. Even taking account of other background factors, young people from immigrant families had fewer friends than their Irish peers. Young people with a special educational need had significantly fewer friends than other groups. There was a strong relationship between the size of the friendship network at ages 9 and 13, suggesting that many young people remained popular over the transition process despite the potential disruption to existing friendship groups. Quantity and quality of friendship were positively related; in other words, those who had more close friends reported higher levels of trust and, to a lesser extent, lower levels of alienation. While moving school involved some degree of disruption to friendship networks, the majority (79 per cent) of young people had made the transition with at least three friends from their primary school. In addition, over three-quarters had at least one primary school friend in their class.

At primary level, only a very small proportion of children described never liking the teacher; six-in-ten girls and four-in-ten boys always liked their teacher. After the transition to secondary education, the majority reported having been frequently praised by their teachers for their schoolwork and for answering questions in class. Only a minority reported very frequent reprimands from their teachers but a significant group (four-in-ten) had been scolded a few times. Gender was a significant driver of the quality of teacher-student interaction, with girls experiencing more frequent positive interaction and less frequent negative interaction than boys. The frequency of negative interaction was socially structured to some extent, with young people from highly educated and two-parent families less likely to experience frequent reprimands. Young people with special educational needs had poorer quality relationships with their teachers than their peers.

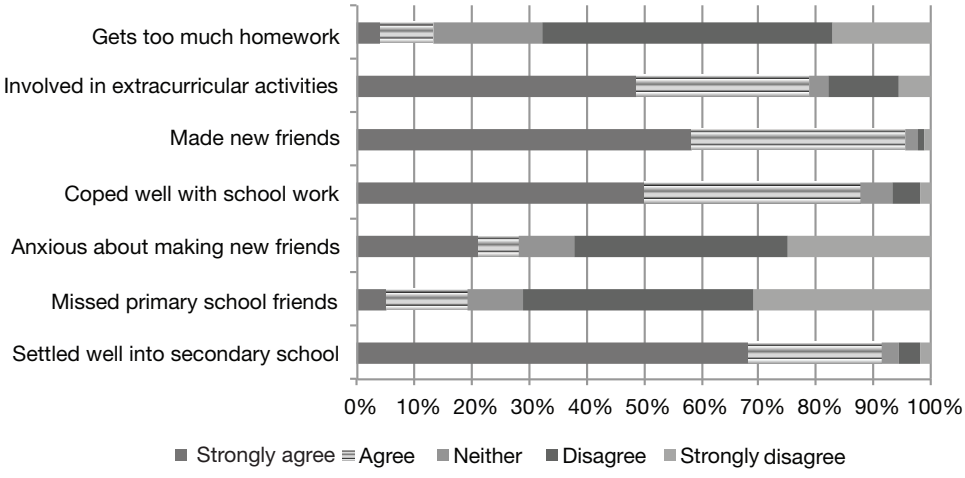
V FACTORS INFLUENCING TRANSITION DIFFICULTIES

5.1 *Social Background*

Mothers were generally positive about how their children had settled into secondary school. However, a significant minority expressed some concerns about their social adjustment in terms of missing old friends and making new ones (Figure 1). As discussed above, it is worth noting that previous research

has indicated that parents tend to be more positive about their children's transition experiences than the young people themselves (Smyth *et al*., 2004). Table 2 presents a series of multilevel models of the factors influencing transition difficulties. Girls were significantly more likely than boys to experience transition difficulties even taking account of social background and other factors; in keeping with previous research, this appears to reflect the greater reliance of girls on the friendship networks they created at primary level. Significant social differentiation is found in the prevalence of transition difficulties. Young people from professional backgrounds and, to a lesser extent, those from other non-manual or skilled manual backgrounds were much less likely to experience such difficulties than those from working-class or non-employed households. Over and above the influence of social class, mother's education was significantly related to the quality of the transition experience, with the greatest difficulties found among those whose mothers have lower secondary education. Thus, in keeping with the hypotheses, young people whose families have greater levels of social and cultural capital appear to adjust to the new school setting with greater ease. Young people from lone parent families experienced more difficulties in making the transition to secondary education, even taking account of other socio-economic factors. In addition, young people from migrant backgrounds experienced greater difficulties than their Irish counterparts. The greatest transition difficulties were found among young people with special educational needs, a pattern that has not previously been systematically investigated in the Irish context. Interestingly, young people who had experienced ongoing physical illness also experienced more transition

Figure 1*: Prevalence of Transition Difficulties among Young People, as Reported by the Primary Caregiver*



difficulties, though to a much lesser extent than those with SEN. Conduct difficulties at the age of nine were predictive of later difficulties, though the difference was rather small. However, peer difficulties at the age of nine were more highly predictive of transition difficulties, presumably because these young people had difficulties in forming new friendships after moving school.

Table 2: *Multilevel Models of the Influences of Social Relationships on Perceived Transition Difficulties*

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*
Constant	13.490	13.818	14.092
Female	0.499***	0.361***	0.455***
Social Background			
Social class:			
Professional/managerial	–0.705***	–0.554***	–0.629***
Non-manual/skilled	–0.395*	–0.324*	–0.380*
Non-employed	–0.153	–0.114	–0.221
(ref.: Semi/unskilled)			
Maternal education:			
Leaving Certificate	–0.626***	–0.500***	–0.498***
Post-secondary	–0.882***	–0.707***	–0.686***
Tertiary	–0.890***	–0.652***	–0.642***
(ref.: Lower secondary)			
Lone parent family	0.569***	0.500***	0.442***
Migrant family	0.646***	0.578***	0.505***
Prior Difficulties			
Has a special educational need	1.432***	1.271***	0.985***
Has an ongoing physical illness at 9	0.290*	0.303*	0.254
SDQ conduct difficulties at 9	0.075	0.052	–0.027
SDQ peer difficulties at 9	0.250***	0.237***	0.197***
Prior Achievement (9 years of age)			
Reading test score:			
Quintile 2		–0.033	–0.001
Quintile 3		–0.046	–0.013
Quintile 4		–0.105	–0.014
Quintile 5		–0.221	–0.076
Maths test score:			
Quintile 2		–0.475**	–0.402**
Quintile 3		–0.689***	–0.478***
Quintile 4		–1.003***	–0.791***
Quintile 5		–1.152***	–0.908***

Table 2: *Multilevel Models of the Influences of Social Relationships on Perceived Transition Difficulties (Contd.)*

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*
Relationship with Parents			
Help with homework at 9:			
Regularly			0.016
Now and again			–0.082
Rarely			–0.431**
Never			–0.842***
(Ref.: Always/nearly always)			
Attended a parent-teacher meeting at 9			–0.431**
Attended a parent-teacher meeting at 13			0.125
Attended a school concert, play or other event at 13			–0.143
Parents and children talk about things together at 13:			
3-6 days per week			0.422***
1 to 2 days per week or less			0.501***
(Ref.: Everyday)			
Level of closeness at 9 (centred on mean)			–0.028*
Level of contact at 9 (centred on mean)			0.052**
Relationships with Friends			
Number of close friends at 9:			
0/1			0.317*
4-5			–0.100
6 or more			–0.414***
(Ref.: 2-3)			
Trust in friends at 13 (centred on mean)			–0.027***
Alienation from friends at 13 (centred on mean)			0.086***
Relationships with Teachers			
Attitude to teacher (at age 9):			
Sometimes like			–0.223*
Never like			–0.013
(Ref.: Always like)			
Positive teacher-student interaction at 13 (centred on mean)			–0.390***
Negative teacher-student interaction at 13 (centred on mean)			0.011
In second year			0.623***
(Ref.: in first year)			
Between-primary school variance	0.764***	0.787***	0.687***
N	7,443	7,443	7,443

Notes: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ± p<.10.

5.2 *Year Group*

Around half of the 13-year-olds were in first year at the time of the survey with the remainder in second year. The parents of second-year students reported greater transition difficulties among their children; this may relate to the young people in question having made the transition at a younger, and presumably less mature, stage. Alternatively, the greater disengagement found among second-year students (see Smyth, forthcoming) may prompt parents to (re)assess the transition period more negatively.

5.3 *Achievement at Primary Level*

The transition to secondary education involves not only a social adjustment but also an encounter with new subjects and different teaching methodologies. In spite of this shift, the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy may enhance academic preparedness for the secondary curriculum. Academic achievement at primary level was significantly associated with the prevalence of transition difficulties. Young people with a higher level of maths achievement at the age of nine experienced fewer difficulties over the transition. Reading performance is also predictive of this outcome but does not remain significant when maths performance is also taken into account. Comparing the coefficients in Models 1 and 2 shows a slight reduction in the size of the social class and parental education effects, indicating that more advantaged young people have an easier transition, in part because they have higher levels of academic preparedness. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the direct effects of social background remain sizeable, even taking account of prior achievement.

5.4 *Parental Involvement*

The focus of this paper is on whether social relationships influence the ease of transition to secondary education. Formal parental involvement was related to the prevalence of transition difficulties only to some extent, with fewer difficulties where parents had attended parent-teacher meetings at primary level. Given the small number of parents who had not attended such meetings, it is perhaps surprising that larger differences between the two groups are not found. Attending parent-teacher meetings at second level has no additional effect when attendance at primary level is taken into account. Those whose parents went to other school events were less likely to experience transition difficulties; however, this difference is no longer significant when other dimensions of their social network are taken into account. Interestingly, informal involvement appeared to play a stronger role, with those young people who had talked with their parents less often experiencing greater difficulties. In addition, those who had experienced a more positive relationship with their parents at the age of nine had fewer transition difficulties while such difficulties

were more common in cases of conflictual relationships. Having received help with homework from parents on a regular basis emerges as an indicator of academic struggle rather than of parental support per se, with fewer difficulties among those students who rarely or never received assistance from their parents.

5.5 *Friendship Networks*

The descriptive analyses have indicated a change in the size of friendship networks over the transition process. Young people who had no friends or only one friend at the age of nine experienced greater difficulties settling into the new school while those with large friendship networks had a smoother transition to secondary education. The quality of friendships also played a role, with trust in friends easing the transition and alienation from them making it more challenging.

5.6 *Teacher–Student Relationships*

The quality of the relationship with the teacher when the child was nine was not highly predictive of transition difficulties four years later, although those who sometimes liked their teacher fared slightly better. Interestingly, however, the prevalence of transition difficulties varied significantly across individual primary schools, as reflected in the between-school variance term, even taking account of the composition of these schools. This suggests a variation in the role of the school in fostering the academic and social preparedness of their students for the transition. Young people who had experienced positive interaction (in the form of praise or positive feedback) with their secondary teachers were significantly less likely to experience difficulties making the transition. Perhaps surprisingly, negative interaction with secondary teachers did not have a significant effect.

5.7 *Social Background: Direct and Indirect Effects*

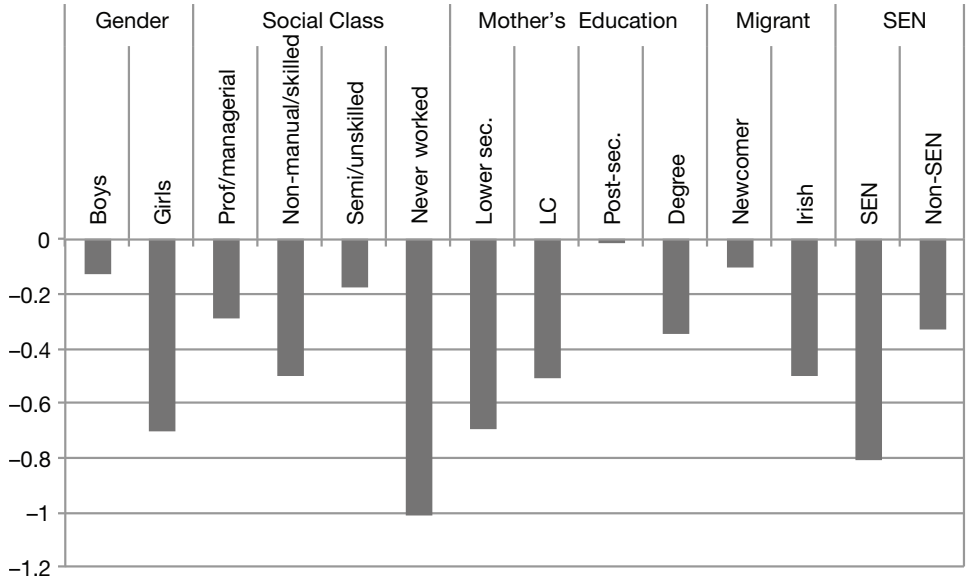
Comparing Models 2 and 3 (Table 2) allows us to assess extent to which the quality of relationships with significant others mediates social background and other differences in the prevalence of transition difficulties. The social background influences depicted in Models 1 and 2 are not accounted for by differences in the quality of relationships with parents or the nature of parental involvement in their child's education. In other words, the possession of greater social, economic and cultural resources (capital, in Bourdieu's terminology) among middle-class families rather than their greater direct involvement in their child's schooling appears to facilitate a smoother transition to secondary education. The findings show that two minority groups – young people from

migrant backgrounds and those with special educational needs – experience more transition difficulties than their peers, a new finding in the Irish context. These differences are not explained by lower levels of academic achievement at primary level or by the nature of relationships with peers or teachers, and highlight the potential need for a more nuanced account of the nature and impact of significant others on the transition process.

VI FACTORS INFLUENCING CHANGES IN ACADEMIC SELF-IMAGE

There was a slight decline in academic self-image among the study cohort over the transition to secondary education (see Table 1). However, this average pattern conceals stark differences between different groups: girls experienced a much greater decline than boys (despite their higher levels of school engagement as reflected in their more positive attitudes to school and greater amount of time spent on homework and study, see Smyth, 2016); young people from non-employed households had a much greater decline than other groups; those whose mothers had lower levels of education also had a larger decline; while young people with special educational needs reported the greatest decline of all groups (see Figure 2).

Figure 2*: Change in Academic Self-Image between 9 and 13 Years of Age*



6.1 *Social Background*

Table 3 presents a series of multilevel models examining the factors influencing academic self-image at the age of 13; in order to capture the factors influencing change over time, these models control for self-image at the age of nine. All else being equal, girls reported a greater decline in their levels of self-confidence in their academic abilities than boys. Social class background was not significantly associated with changes in academic self-image but maternal education was a significant predictor, with growing self-confidence among those whose mothers had post-secondary or tertiary education. Thus, cultural capital appears to be a protective factor in relation to young people's academic self-image. Even taking account of socio-economic differences, young people from lone parent families had greater declines in self-confidence. The differences between migrant and Irish young people were not marked but there was some evidence of a narrowing of the gap in self-image between the ages of nine and 13. The most negative, and declining, levels of academic self-image were found among young people with SEN. Declining levels of academic self-image were also found among those who experienced peer and conduct difficulties while at primary level.

6.2 *Achievement at Primary Level*

Taking account of prior achievement changes the picture slightly. The greater increase in self-confidence among those from more educated families is found to be, at least in part, related to the higher levels of prior achievement among this group of young people. Young people from other non-manual or skilled manual households were found to have poorer self-image once their prior achievement levels were taken into account; in other words, they were more self-critical about their academic abilities than appeared to be merited by their actual achievement scores. Furthermore, relative to their prior achievement levels, migrant young people experienced an improvement in self-confidence relative to their Irish peers. The gap between young people with SEN and their counterparts remained substantial even taking account of primary level achievement. Young people with higher reading and maths test scores at the age of nine became much more self-confident as learners four years later. Both reading and maths test scores were found to enhance academic self-image. Second-year students experienced a greater dip in academic self-image than their first-year counterparts, most likely reflecting the greater academic challenges they faced as they moved through lower secondary education (see Smyth *et al*., 2007).

6.3 *Parental Involvement*

Young people who never received help from their parents with homework when at primary school had an improved academic self-image at the age of 13;

Table 3: *Multilevel Models of the Influences of Social Relationships on Changes in Academic Self-Image (Piers-Harris Intellectual and School Status)*

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*
Constant	12.584	12.193	13.288
Female	–0.350***	–0.279***	–0.906***
Social Background			
Social class:			
Professional/managerial	0.140	–0.051	–0.033
Non-manual/skilled	–0.239	–0.322*	–0.218±
Non-employed	–0.276	–0.310	–0.238
(ref.: Semi/unskilled)			
Maternal education:			
Leaving Certificate	0.290*	0.148	–0.145
Post-secondary	0.406**	0.201	–0.014
Tertiary	0.459**	0.170	–0.037
(ref.: Lower secondary)			
Lone parent family	–0.851***	–0.792***	–0.467**
Migrant family	0.240±	0.350*	0.302*
Prior Difficulties			
Has a special educational need	–1.042***	–0.854***	–0.338***
Has an ongoing physical illness at 9	0.083	0.065	–0.107
SDQ conduct difficulties at 9 (centred on mean)	–0.102*	–0.077*	0.060*
SDQ peer difficulties at 9 (centred on mean)	–0.079*	–0.074**	–0.076*
Prior Achievement at age 9			
Reading test score:			
Quintile 2		0.064	–0.008
Quintile 3		0.318*	0.248*
Quintile 4		0.468**	0.257*
Quintile 5		0.738***	0.455**
Maths test score:			
Quintile 2		0.378*	0.267*
Quintile 3		0.477**	0.261*
Quintile 4		0.712***	0.396*
Quintile 5		0.863***	0.500**
Relationship with Parents			
Help with homework at 9:			
Regularly			–0.035
Now and again			0.078

Table 3: *Multilevel Models of the Influences of Social Relationships on Changes in Academic Self-Image (Piers-Harris Intellectual and School Status) (Contd.)*

	Model 1	*Model 2*	*Model 3*
Relationship with Parents (Contd.)			
Rarely			0.263*
Never			0.059
(Ref.: Always/nearly always)			
Attended a parent-teacher meeting at 9			0.157
Attended a parent-teacher meeting at 13			–0.064
Attended a school concert, play or other event at 13			0.135*
Parents and children talk about things together at 13:			
3-6 days per week			–0.224*
1 to 2 days per week or less			–0.143
(Ref.: Everyday)			
Level of closeness at 9 (centred on mean)			0.019*
Level of contact at 9 (centred on mean)			0.000
Relationships with Friends			
Number of close friends at 9:			
0/1			–0.124
4-5			0.172*
6 or more			0.144±
(Ref.: 2-3)			
Trust in friends at 13 (centred on mean)			0.054***
Alienation from friends at 13 (centred on mean)			–0.140***
Relationships with Teachers			
Attitude to teacher (at age 9):			
Sometimes like			–0.093
Never like			–0.711**
(Ref.: Always like)			
Positive teacher-student interaction at 13 (centred on mean)			1.481***
Negative teacher-student interaction at 13 (centred on mean)			–1.225***
In second year (Ref.: in first year)			–0.301***
Academic self-image at age 9	0.075***	0.022±	0.065***
Between-primary school variance	0.148**	0.137**	0.056±
N	7,408	7,408	7,408

Notes: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ± p<.10.

thus receiving regular help with homework is again an indicator of academic difficulties rather than the investment of parental resources per se. Attendance at parent-teacher meetings was not significantly associated with changes in young people's academic self-image, though self-concept improved slightly where parents had attended a school-based event; this may, however, reflect other factors such as the type of school attended. In terms of broader relationships with parents, those with more positive interaction became more confident over time, though this effect was small in scale; interestingly, the level of conflict and the regularity of parent-child communication had little systematic impact.

6.4 *Friendship Networks*

There was little systematic relationship between academic self-image and the size of the friendship network, though those with four or five friends tended to become more self-confident academically. The quality of the friendship network has a significant effect, with those who were alienated from their friends becoming less self-confident while those who trusted their friends grew more self-confident. The impact of friendship quality may be related to self-concept in general rather than being specifically tied to academic self-image but is an interesting finding nonetheless.

6.5 *Teacher–Student Relationships*

Those who reported never liking their primary teacher at the age of nine experienced a decline in academic self-confidence over the four-year period, even taking account of the lower achievement levels of this group. The quality of interaction with teachers within secondary education had a significant and relatively large effect on academic self-image; those who had been praised frequently by the teachers became more self-confident while those who had received frequent reprimands became much less so. Thus, in keeping with previous research (Smyth, 1999), feedback from teachers plays a significant role in shaping young people's self-concept. Additional analyses (not shown here) indicate that having experienced transition difficulties was negatively associated with academic self-image; in other words, difficulties around the transition process contributed to a decline in young people's confidence as learners, reflecting the interplay between the social and academic dimensions of moving to secondary education.

VII CONCLUSIONS

The transition to secondary education entails both academic and social challenges. Young people are faced with new subject areas and, in many cases, new teaching methodologies. Analyses presented here indicate that the

academic skills developed at primary level provide an important foundation for the transition, with those with poor literacy and numeracy skills finding it more difficult to settle in and struggling academically. Social relationships operate as an important resource in adjusting to the new school setting. However, different networks provide different sorts of support, reflecting the complexity of the social world navigated by young people.

In keeping with the hypotheses, young people whose families had greater social and educational resources (or capital) made a smoother transition to secondary education and were more confident as learners. The social gap in transition difficulties was only partly explained by differences in skill development at primary level; in contrast, social differences in changes in self-confidence largely reflected prior achievement. What is interesting to note is that these patterns were not related to differences in direct parental involvement in the child's education and are thus likely to reflect, at least in part, the other skills and dispositions fostered in middle-class families (Lareau, 2003). Formal involvement, such as attending parent-teacher meetings, is partly predictive of ease of transition but there is a significant net impact of maternal education even taking this into account. In keeping with previous research (Lord *et al*., 1994), the quality of the relationship with parents matters, though again this does not explain the social differentiation in outcomes found. Parents helping with homework on a fairly regular basis is prevalent across all social groups at primary level. In fact, being able to operate independently of such parental help emerges as an indicator of academic preparedness rather than as reflecting the way in which parental resources enhance their children's transition. The analyses point to more subtle potential influences of social background on the transition process, for example, in choice of school, advice on navigating the complexity of choice of subjects and subject levels etc. rather than in direct support for within-school learning. The issue of certain groups having the insider knowledge to help their child negotiate the move to secondary education among middle-class parents is echoed in the findings on migrant young people. Even taking other factors into account, including lower reading achievement levels at primary level, young people from migrant backgrounds find the transition more difficult, which may, at least in part, reflect less culturally-specific knowledge about types of school and curriculum among their parents.

The findings add to the body of emerging research on the experiences of young people with SEN in Ireland (see, for example, McCoy and Banks, 2012), indicating significant transition difficulties and declining academic self-image among this group. These differences hold even taking account of lower prior achievement and more restricted friendship networks among these young people at primary level. It should be noted that these analyses relate only to

those young people who have made the transition to secondary education and therefore exclude those who have been retained within primary school or have moved to a special school (counted as a primary school in the Irish context) who may be experiencing greater academic difficulties.

Not surprisingly, given the fact that the measure of transition difficulties refers explicitly to friendships, those who have had more problems building up large networks of friends have a more difficult transition. Quality of friendship also matters with mutual trust contributing to a smoother transition. Teachers emerge as having an even more crucial influence on young people's experience of the transition process. Positive feedback and praise from teachers contributes to an easier transition as well as to greater self-confidence in engaging with learning. Interestingly, receiving frequent reprimands from teachers does not affect the settling-in process itself but serves to undermine young people's self-confidence as learners. The findings on the influence of peer networks and teacher-student relationships reinforce the importance of taking account not only of social networks but of emotional ties.

In summary, parents, friends and teachers influence young people's experience of the transition to secondary education but in different ways. The analyses point to the greater importance of parental resources, cultural and social, in facilitating this transition rather than the role of parents' direct help or involvement in the school. The paper presents new findings around the difficulties experienced by two minority groups – migrant young people and those with SEN – and highlights the need for further research on the processes of inclusion and exclusion shaping the school lives of these young people. The findings add to the growing body of research on the importance of school climate, as expressed in day-to-day interaction between teachers and students, in shaping student outcomes and point to the importance in policy terms of creating a positive school climate which supports student adjustment and enhances their wellbeing.

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