

Executive Summary

This is the latest in a series of reports on the formal evaluation of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) programme at primary level. Since 2007, the Educational Research Centre (ERC) has been evaluating the School Support Programme (SSP) under DEIS on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). As part of the evaluation, large-scale assessment of the reading and mathematics achievement of pupils in a representative sample of urban SSP primary schools has been carried out four times. Previous evaluation reports have provided detailed information on the reading and mathematics performance outcomes of pupils attending urban SSP primary schools in 2007, 2010, 2013 and 2016 (Archer & Weir, 2011; Kavanagh, Weir & Moran, 2017; Weir & Denner, 2013). In conjunction with the administration of the achievement assessments, contextual information has been collected via questionnaires completed by pupils and their parents, and through pupil information forms completed by teachers. The primary aims of the present report are to use this information to provide a context in which achievement outcomes may be understood, as well as to provide information on important non-achievement outcomes.

At the beginning of the evaluation in 2007, the decision was made to assess the achievement of pupils at multiple grade levels (originally Second, Third and Sixth class, with Fifth class added in 2010) in a sample of 120 participating urban SSP schools. Large numbers of pupils were involved in each administration of testing. In 2007, approximately 11,000 pupils participated in testing, while approximately 16,000 pupils participated in testing in 2010, 2013 and 2016 after the addition of Fifth class as a target grade level. There have been increases in the average reading and mathematics scores of pupils on each successive testing occasion, at all grade levels involved in testing.

At the time they completed achievement tests, pupils also responded to questionnaires which sought information about their attitudes towards school, their educational expectations and aspirations, and about how they spend their free time. Teachers provided additional information about pupils, including their levels of attendance at school and whether they were in receipt of additional learning support for reading or mathematics. Parents of pupils in Second and Third class were also asked to complete questionnaires, providing information on pupils' home lives and on their own involvement with their children's education. This report presents findings from analyses of these contextual data and includes separate chapters on school, pupil, and parent and family characteristics and their respective relationships with pupil achievement. Trends over time are also considered (i.e., from 2007 to 2016). Where possible, comparisons are made between findings of the SSP evaluation and findings of the 2014 National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics (NA '14) which were administered to nationally representative samples of Second and Sixth class pupils in primary schools in Ireland. The main findings for the current report are summarised in the following sections.

The Pupil and Achievement

Gender differences in achievement in 2016 were small, and were in favour of girls for reading at the more junior grade levels. No gender differences in reading achievement were observed at the higher grade levels. For mathematics, boys outperformed girls by a small margin at all grade levels, replicating a pattern that has been observed in all previous rounds of testing. A number of pupil

background characteristics were associated with achievement in 2016. Pupils whose families spoke a language other than English or Irish at home had lower average achievement in English reading than their peers (at all grade levels) and higher average mathematics achievement than their peers at all grades except Second class, where the difference was negligible. There were higher proportions of pupils with English as an additional language in 2016 than was the case at the beginning of the evaluation. The average reading and mathematics scores of Traveller pupils were considerably lower than those of non-Travellers, at all grade levels. The proportion of pupils identified as Travellers in urban SSP schools has changed little since 2007. Pupils who had attended preschool for two years had higher achievement than those who had attended for one year or not at all. Pupils receiving learning support for reading and mathematics had considerably lower average achievement than those not receiving such support. Engagement in some out-of-school activities was associated with higher achievement (e.g. reading a book at home for fun, membership of a music group such as a choir or orchestra), while others were associated with lower achievement (large amounts of time spent watching television or 'hanging out' with friends, membership of youth clubs). On the whole, large amounts of technology use and time spent online were associated with lower achievement, while moderate amounts were not.

When comparing findings from urban SSP pupils to pupils nationally in NA '14, some differences were noted. There was a slightly higher proportion of EAL pupils in the urban SSP sample in 2016 than in equivalent grades nationally in 2014. There were higher rates of learning support in urban SSP than the national sample of schools in NA '14. Urban SSP pupils were more likely to have televisions in their bedrooms, to have mobile phones/smartphones, to spend more than two hours per day watching television and to hardly ever or never read books at home for enjoyment than pupils nationally in NA '14. Each of these attributes/behaviours were associated with lower reading and mathematics achievement in both the SSP evaluation and the National Assessments.

Parent and Family Factors

A number of family background characteristics were associated with pupil achievement in 2016. Pupils who were from one-parent households, whose parents were not employed outside the home, and whose parents held medical cards had lower average achievement in reading and mathematics than their peers. Pupils whose parents had higher educational attainment had higher achievement, on average, in both reading and mathematics. Having more books in the home and having access to educational resources (e.g. educational games) at home were associated with higher achievement in both reading and mathematics. Parents who read books more frequently themselves had children with higher average reading scores than parents who read books less frequently; the converse was observed for magazine reading. Additionally, pupils who engaged in reading with someone at home with greater frequency had higher achievement than pupils who did so less frequently.

Overall, parents had high aspirations and expectations for their children's future educational attainment. Pupils whose parents had lower aspirations and expectations for them had lower achievement in both reading and mathematics. Nearly all parents agreed that there was support for children's learning (e.g. for homework, practising spellings, etc.) at home. Some forms of school-based parental involvement were found to be associated with higher pupil achievement (e.g. committee membership), while others were not (e.g. volunteering to go on class trips).

When comparing urban SSP pupils to pupils nationally in NA '14, some demographic differences were observed. As would be expected, there were higher rates of parental unemployment and medical card possession, and lower levels of parental educational attainment in the SSP sample

than nationally. Additionally, there was less access to home educational resources (e.g. books), and lower rates of parental school committee membership in the SSP sample than nationally in NA '14.

The School and Achievement

Pupils in urban SSP schools were more likely to attend single sex schools than pupils nationally and less likely to attend Irish-medium schools. There was some variation in achievement scores by gender composition, but no clear patterns of association across grade levels and domains were observed. School size was significantly associated with pupil achievement in 2016, with pupils in the largest one third of schools having significantly higher average achievement than pupils in the smallest third of schools, at all grade levels and in both domains. However, this was probably related to the larger size of schools in Band 2, in which disadvantage is less concentrated. Average school attendance was marginally higher in Band 2 schools than in Band 1 schools. Overall, average school attendance rates in SSP schools in 2016 were slightly lower than those nationally in 2014. School percentage attendance rate was significantly but weakly positively correlated with school-level achievement in reading and mathematics in 2016. Although the overall average reading and mathematics achievement of pupils at all grade levels in the sample schools increased at every testing occasion from 2007 to 2016, individual schools displayed different patterns of achievement change over this period. In order to explore school-level changes, schools were classified based on a) their pattern of achievement changes over each round of achievement testing (i.e. all increases in average scores, all decreases, or a mixed pattern of change), and b) the magnitude of any net changes over this period. Schools were much more likely to have experienced consistent increases than consistent decreases in average achievement since the introduction of the SSP, and were considerably more likely to have experienced net increases than net decreases over the period in question. No school-level characteristic was found to be reliably related to schools' changes in achievement over time.

Multilevel Analyses of Reading and Mathematics Achievement

Multilevel analyses of achievement in Third class revealed that, in 2016, 6% of the variance in reading achievement and 9% of the variance in mathematics achievement was between schools. Between-school variance decreased in both domains on every testing occasion since the introduction of DEIS. Given the low between-school variance, it is not surprising that very few school-level characteristics were significantly associated with achievement in either domain. At the pupil level, home background characteristics and home climate variables such as parents' employment status and number of books in the home were significantly associated with student achievement in both domains. Language of the home was significantly associated with student achievement in reading, but not in mathematics. Pupil attitudes were also significantly associated with achievement, with pupils who liked reading or mathematics and pupils who had high educational aspirations significantly outperforming their peers. Pupils whose parents had high expectations for their educational attainment and whose parents read frequently to them had significantly higher mean achievement scores than pupils whose parents did not. Smaller but still significant effects on achievement were found for a range of pupils' out-of-school activities, with reading books and playing sports more frequently associated with higher achievement and spending large amounts of time watching television associated with lower achievement. Overall, the model of reading achievement explained 30% of the total variance in reading achievement (60% of the between-school variance and 28% of the within school variance), and the model of mathematics achievement explained 27% of the total variance in mathematics achievement (48% of the between-school variance and 25% of the within school variance).

Conclusion

The finding that pupils who have participated in the SSP have demonstrated improved outcomes on four successive occasions and at all grade levels is very welcome. However, while the achievement gap may have reduced, the achievement of pupils in schools with concentrations of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds is well below that of those in non-SSP schools. Analyses undertaken for the current report indicate that, of a wide range of variables considered, family poverty remains the largest determinant of educational outcomes. Although adding measures that have been identified as effective in addressing disadvantage to the existing suite of resources available to schools in the SSP is recommended (for example, quality preschool education), there are probably limits on what educational measures can achieve in relation to closing the achievement gap. It seems that until economic inequality is addressed, the achievement gap between children from poor backgrounds and their more affluent counterparts is likely to persist.