



Fringe benefits? Educational experiences of migrant and non-migrant youth in the urban-rural fringe of Galway City, Ireland



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A B S T R A C T

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the educational achievement of young migrants living in the urban-rural fringe. Specifically, the paper examines how socio-economic status and mobility intersect in the urban-rural fringe to influence the educational outcomes of young migrants. The paper uses survey data collected from over 500 students and 230 parents in Galway city and urban-rural fringe. The analysis highlights the overlapping and mutually constitutive relationship between Galway city and its urban-rural fringe in terms of student commuting patterns and suggests that potential achievement gaps may in part be related to residential patterns and segregated attendance between schools. It also highlights that the ability of foreign born students with foreign born parents to acquire educational capital is diminished in the urban-rural fringe, with important consequences for realizing future educational aspirations.

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1. Introduction

Beginning in the mid-1990s, Ireland embarked upon a remarkable demographic transition from a country of emigration to one of immigration, as returning Irish nationals and migrants from other parts of the world arrived to take advantage of opportunities arising from the country's unprecedented economic growth. Despite a return to net emigration since the economic downturn, a sizeable number of migrants remain in Ireland. According to Census 2011, the majority of non-Irish national migrants (63 percent) live in cities and large towns ($\geq 10,000$ inhabitants), with 20 percent living in rural areas and 17 percent in small urban areas (1500 to 9999 inhabitants). Many of these migrants who live in urban and rural communities throughout Ireland have children who are currently moving through various stages of the education sector. This paper focuses on the educational experiences of migrant teens living in the urban-rural fringe of Galway city, the most diverse city in the country, and considers how socio-demographic status and mobility, in terms of their migrant status and their school commuting patterns, intersect to influence their educational outcomes.

Despite their rapid physical and socio-demographic transformation during the economic boom beginning in the mid 1990's

(O'Hagan and Newman, 2005), urban-rural fringe locations in Ireland continue to be regarded by both old and new residents as rural, possessing features such as green spaces, and a sense of community, neighbourliness, and feelings of safety and security (Mahon et al., 2012). Addressing the educational experiences and outcomes of students in these places will provide insights into an area of research that has primarily received attention in US based studies examining the effects of rural poverty and deprivation on educational opportunities (Lichter and Johnson, 2007; Roscigno et al., 2006). Given the strong admission rates to third level education in Ireland from rural counties (Flannery and O'Donoghue, 2009) the rural deprivation model is unlikely to provide an adequate explanation for the educational achievement patterns in the urban-rural fringe. Additional research in the US draws attention to the influence of social resources in rural communities that help promote positive youth outcomes (Howley et al., 1996; Demi et al., 2010; Elder and Conger, 2000). Indeed, previous analysis by Ledwith (2009) using the ESRI Early School Leavers Survey and the Haase Pratschke Deprivation Index (2008) suggests that attending school in rural communities provided a buffer against early school leaving, even if the school was classified as disadvantaged.

Of course, the bonding capital that is implicit in such social, community and family ties has the potential to act as a double edged sword, benefitting long-time community members, while simultaneously excluding those who do not have adequate resources, expertise and social capital (Featherstone et al., 2011). In

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the context of education, [Ledwith and Reilly's \(2013\)](#) examination of school attendance patterns in Galway highlight the ways in which long-term residents disproportionately occupy privileged spaces of education, thereby producing a segregated and 'racialized' social landscape. [Bryan \(2010\)](#) also highlights the privileged status of Ireland's dominant cultural group (white, heterosexual, Irish-born, settled, Catholics [WHISCS]), suggesting that inter-culturalism at the school level is informed by national level policies which bestow conditional acceptance on minority groups, whose 'welcome' is contingent on what migrants have to offer (see also [Devine, 2005](#); [Kitching, 2011](#)). Considering the implications of such contingent welcomes for educational outcomes of migrant students living in the urban-rural fringe is especially important, since previous research on the dynamics of rural repopulation in Britain ([Boyle and Halfacree, 1998](#); [Cloke et al., 1998](#); [Stockdale et al., 2000](#)) and Ireland ([Hegarty, 1994](#)) highlighted tension in terms of the local-incomer interface. It is possible that migrants students living in and/or attending school in the urban-rural fringe may not benefit from residing in small rural communities because they are least endowed with the kinds of cultural capital valued in those communities. Rather, these students may become situated as out of place ([Creswell, 1996](#)) and their ability to acquire educational capital may be diminished, with important consequences for realizing future educational aspirations.

2. Contextualising educational achievement

Explaining the educational achievement of young people is an ongoing challenge for social scientists. Many studies consider educational achievement in the context of social class. [Condrón \(2013\)](#) highlights the role that affluence plays in promoting educational achievement, while [Lacour and Tissington \(2011\)](#) highlight the impact of poverty on educational outcomes. Of course, it is not only income differences that impact upon educational outcomes. [Lareau and Weininger \(2003\)](#) argued that social class-based cultural patterns, habits and skills influence the level of integration of young people into social institutions such as the school. Similarly, [Gillies \(2005\)](#) suggests that the 'high stock of middle class cultural capital' ensures that more affluent families are in tune with values and practices in educational settings. As such, schools and the teachers therein, may reward dominant socio-cultural norms, allowing the educational system to convert social hierarchies into academic ones ([Bourdieu, 1986](#); [Devine, 2009](#)). In the context of Ireland, [Devine \(2005\)](#) suggests that the relative value afforded to dominant norms comes at the expense of an increasingly diverse student population. For example, bi-lingual and multi-lingual students may be negatively characterised for their perceived inability or unwillingness to communicate in English ([Bryan, 2010](#)). As such any potential disparities in educational outcome become part of a deficit discourse used to explain non-dominant students' performance in school ([Devine, 2013](#)). [Devine \(2013\)](#), highlights the irony of the lack of value placed upon student diversity is given the value ascribed to migrant students as potentially productive and mobile members of the future adult labour force.

It is important to acknowledge that schools operate as sites of social geographical importance with channels of influence extending beyond school boundaries ([Collins and Coleman, 2008](#)). For [Sykes and Musterd \(2011\)](#), this extension of influence beyond the school gate is one of the reasons why neighbourhoods are important for young people's educational outcomes. Indeed, there is a large body of research that considers the school to be a pathway through which 'neighborhood effects' may influence children and youth. In this work, the emphasis is on viewing the Galway city and its urban-rural fringe as distinct but related

settings for the constitution of social relations that lead to a multitude of possible educational outcomes. In essence, each place reflects the influence of both formal and informal social processes and controls, all of which give rise to qualitatively distinct experiences of these spaces ([Meegan and Mitchell, 2001](#)). In particular, by focussing on the relationship between mobility and socio-economic status and how they intersect to influence educational achievement, we specifically consider the neighbourhood in relational rather than absolute terms, non-demarcated locations where everyday social interactions reproduce values, attachments and habits that structure social reproduction ([Martin, 2003](#); [Forrest and Kearns, 2001](#)).

3. Data and methods

The *Galway Education Survey* set out to collect adequate data to enable a quantitative assessment of differences in educational outcomes between young migrants and non-migrants attending school in Galway City and urban-rural fringe. The survey also includes qualitative data that provides additional insights into the values, beliefs and experiences of young people in Galway City and urban-rural fringe in terms of their educational achievement and future aspirations. Our pilot survey was conducted as a random sample of households from 5 electoral districts in Galway City. However, this approach made it difficult to include an adequate number of post Junior Certificate migrant students and their parents.¹ Given our desire to include young migrants, we developed a school based survey instead and approached all second level schools in Galway City and three schools located in two communities in the urban-rural fringe to the East of Galway City. Seven of the ten secondary schools in the city and all three of the schools in the surrounding communities allowed researcher access to classes of students that had completed their Junior Certificate in the previous academic year. In addition, migrant families were invited to participate with the assistance of Galway Migrant Services, a non-profit migrant advocacy group based in the city.

While three city-based schools declining to participate in the survey, all schools are represented in the final sample because the pilot survey recruited students from those schools, albeit with response rates of less than 10. The highest response rates were 95 and 102 respectively. In all, 519 teens aged 15–18 and 6 young adults from 19–22² were surveyed. 283 respondents lived in Galway city and 242 respondents lived in urban-rural fringe communities, with 126 of those students commuting to city-based schools. Student respondents provided data on demographic background, examination performance and future educational aspiration through a series of open and closed-ended questions. These data were then linked to school level data available from the Department of Education and Skills. The survey also includes responses from 230 parents who provided information via a questionnaire that was delivered by their child and collected in the school at a later date.

We decided to use Junior Certificate results as our measure of educational achievement, given the pivotal role it plays in the Irish education system. All students must attend school until they are 16 and sit the Junior Certificate examination, which takes place at the end of the junior cycle of post-primary education, which lasts for three years. There is a wide range of subjects from which students

¹ During the pilot in June–August 2009, only 30 students were surveyed. All of the respondents were non-migrants.

² These were migrant respondents who were recruited through Galway Migrant Services.

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