



Migrant-origin children in Ireland: English language development in early/middle childhood and the role of school

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AUTHORS

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Introduction

- Ireland is an interesting case study into the experiences of second-generation migrants as a **‘new immigration country’** (OECD, 2023) with a **diverse and relatively highly educated migrant population**
- **The number of children with a migration background** in Irish schools has **increased rapidly** since the late 1990s.
 - Today, slightly more than 20% of Irish residents is foreign-born (Census, 2022) and even more children have at least one parent that is foreign-born
- **Proficiency of the host country language** is a crucial factor in the educational careers of migrant children and their integration.
- Key question: How do English language skills of migrant-origin children **develop** in Irish primary schools and what is the role of school factors?

Previous research I

- Students of migrant origin often at a **disadvantage** (e.g. Heath and Brinbaum, 2014)
- Inequalities in achievement are already present **early in the life course** (e.g. Washbrook et al. 2012)
- **Disadvantages may be smaller in Ireland** (McGinnity et al. 2015), although this differs across groups and skills tested (Sprong & Skopek, 2023)
- **Family language background** key for English language ability of migrant-origin children (PISA, Darmody and Smyth, 2018; McGinnity et al., 2022)
- Children of migrant origin in Ireland generally have **positive attitudes towards education** (e.g. Darmody et al. (2012); and **high aspirations** (Darmody et al., 2016; Sprong & Devitt, 2022).
- Moreover, **inequalities may narrow** during the primary school period (Sprong & Skopek, 2023).

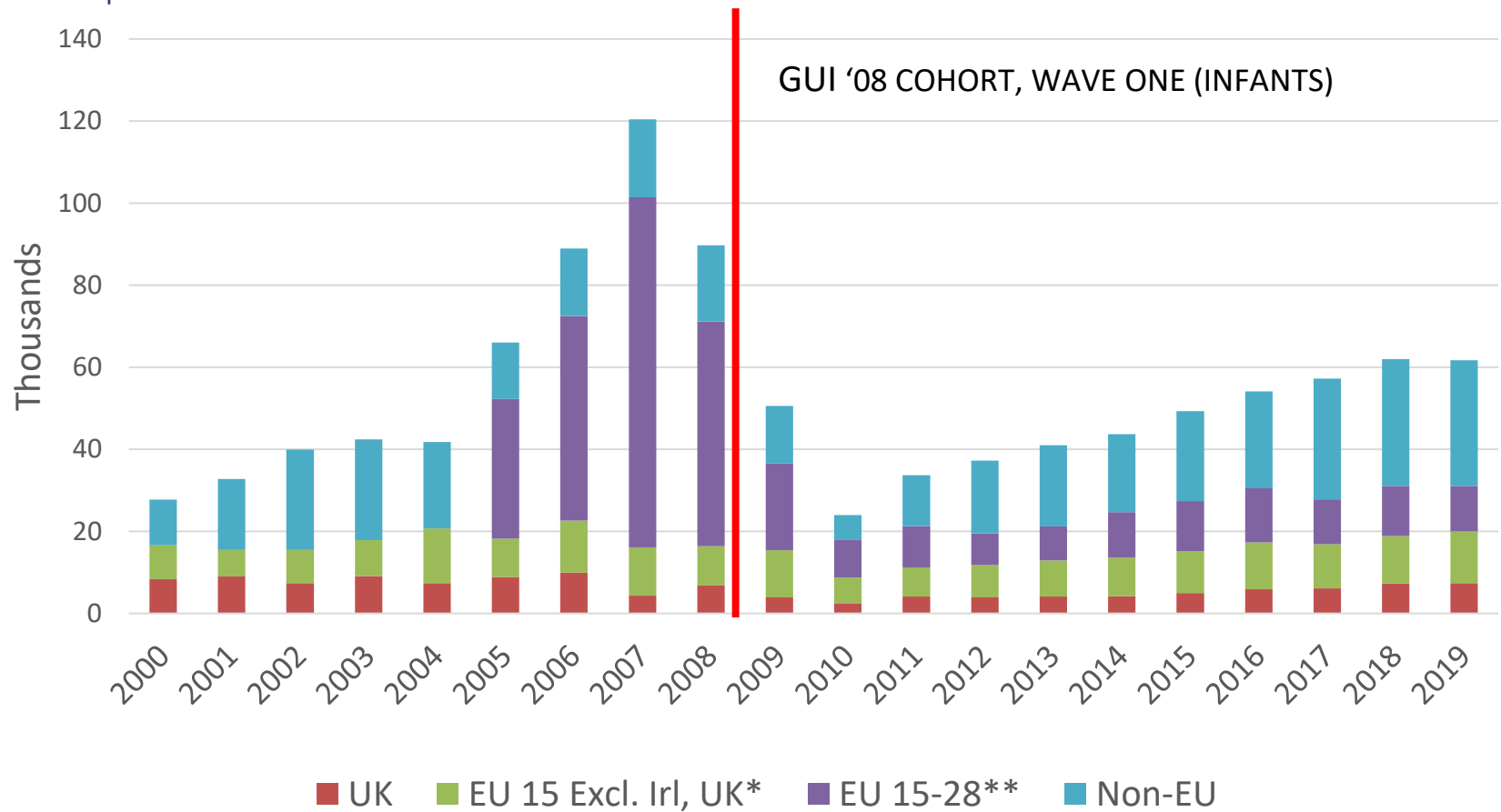
Previous research II

- Migrant achievement gap typically attributed to **socio-economic differences, exposure to the host country language** and factors such as parents' lack of knowledge of the local educational system (e.g. Heath, Rothon, & Kilpi, 2008).
- **Schools are one of the primary learning environments for children** (Lave and Wenger 1991), and the school environment **may affect the child's educational achievement**.
 - E.g. students who attend schools with a concentration of disadvantaged students tend to achieve lower grades than those in socially mixed or middle-class schools (Jarness and Stromme, 2021)
 - E.g. Borgen (2023) finds a small, negative effect of the proportion of migrant student on secondary school completion, but suggests this is mostly due to other school traits than immigrant peers.

School context in Ireland

- In Ireland additional resources are provided to schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged populations through the **Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme**
 - Children attending DEIS schools tend to come from working-class and non-employed households, with lower maternal education (McCoy et al., 2014)
 - In spite of extra resources, attending an (Urban) DEIS school related to lower achievement (Smyth 2014)
- **Residential segregation** is not a marked feature of migrants overall, tho non-English in disadvantaged areas (Fahey et al., 2019)
- But **active school choice** is a feature of education system, with middle-class Irish parents choosing ‘desirable’ schools (Byrne et al., 2010; McGinnity, Darmody et al 2023)

Immigration to Ireland 2000-2019



Source: CSO, 'Population and migration estimates', up to end April of reference year.

This study – key questions & evidence

- This paper considers
 - a) To what extent English language skills differ by migration and linguistic background;
 - b) How these achievement gaps develop between age 5 and age 9; and
 - c) What role school characteristics play in this.
- It uses nationally representative, longitudinal data from the Growing Up in Ireland study (GUI) – '08 Cohort – from families, teachers, principals

WAVE 1
Age 9m



2008 (11,134)

- Migration background and other socio-economic and family factors

WAVE 2
Age 3



2011 (9,793)

- Additional background information on the child and their caregivers

WAVE 3
Age 5



2013 (9,001)

- English language achievement
- School's DEIS status and other characteristics (reported by teacher)

WAVE 5
Age 9



2017 (7,563)

- English language achievement

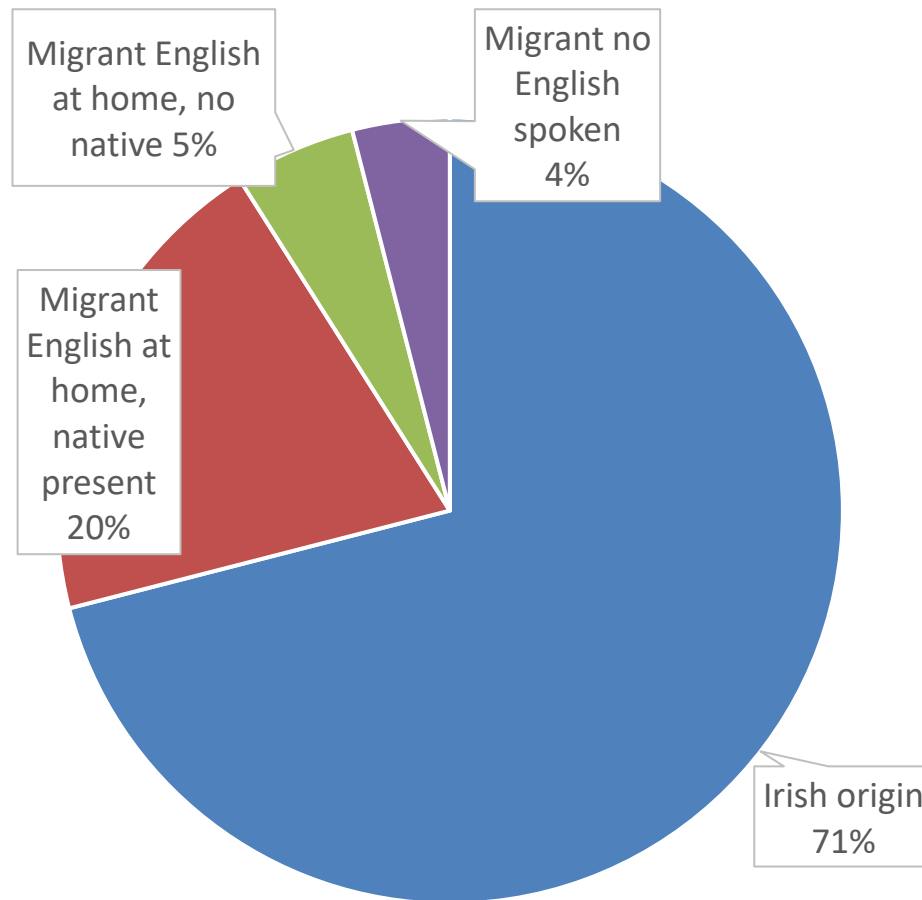
Why (English) Language?

- Host-country language proficiency major factor in migrant integration and outcomes of migrant children (Kristen et al., 2016; Isphording, et al. 2016).
- This is true for learning in school and academic outcomes - but also for forming friendships, sports participation etc (Darmody et al. 2016)
- Delay in language acquisition may undermine equality of opportunities – both in childhood and later life (Cavallo and Russo, 2020)
- How is **English language achievement** measured?
 - Age 5: Naming (English) Vocabulary scale from British Ability Scales
 - Age 9: Drumcondra (English) Reading Test (close to school curriculum)

Measurement and Methods

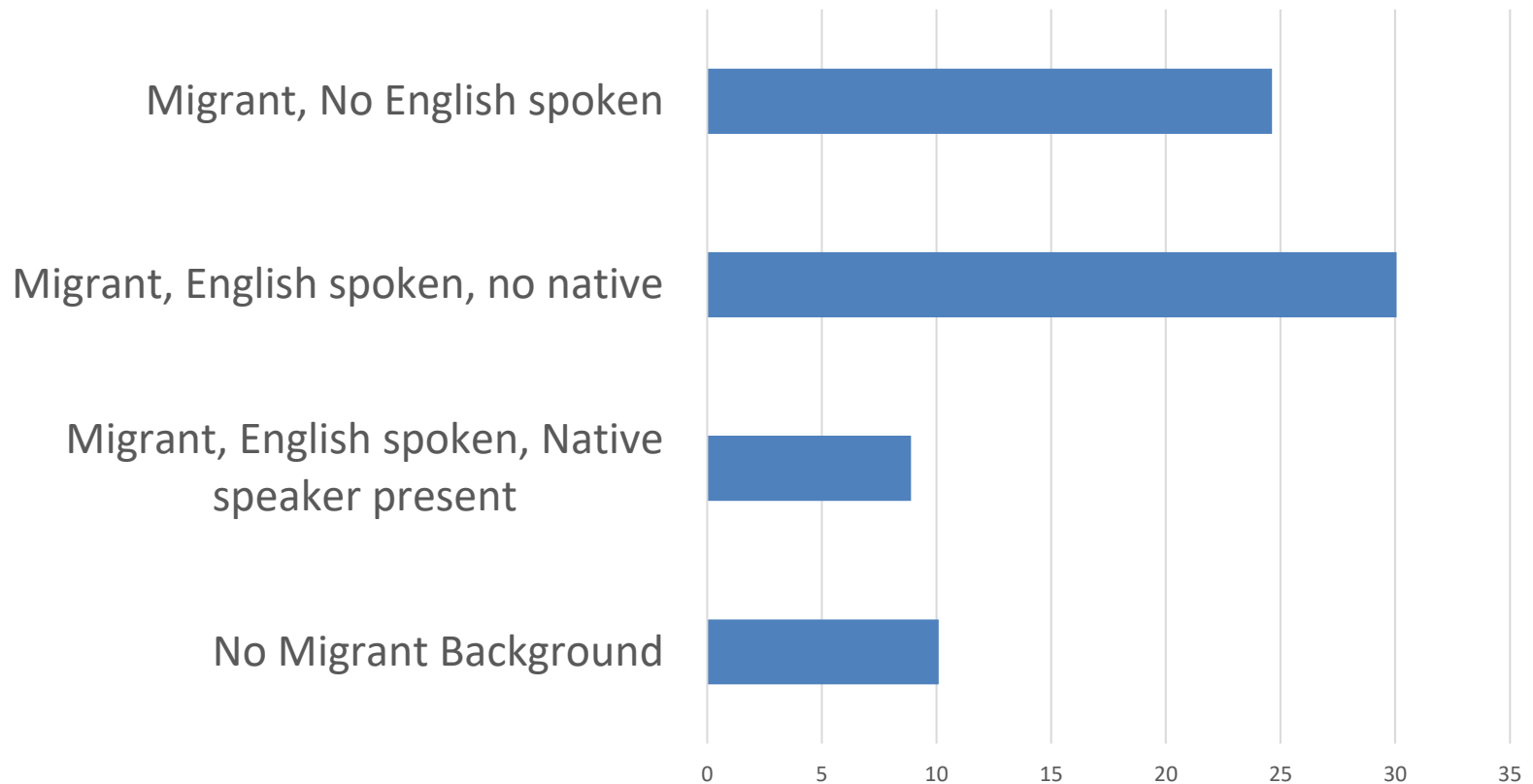
- **Migration background:** based on parents' place of birth and linguistic background and use (all children born in Ireland)
- **School characteristics:** Urban DEIS (disadvantaged) status; also test ratio of non-native/native speakers in school class (age 5); language support in the school
- **Controls:** child gender, hsd occupational class, maternal education, financial strain, number of books (all lagged), region, child disability
- **Models** of mean English vocabulary (age 5)/reading scores (age 9) (OLS for mean)/ progression over time In language (LDV) with
- **Imputation** (multiple imputation with chained equations model (MICE))
- **Robustness Checks:** School status age 9; adjust for measurement error; alternative school measures; examine selective attrition of migrant-origin children

Children by migration-language background in *Growing Up in Ireland*

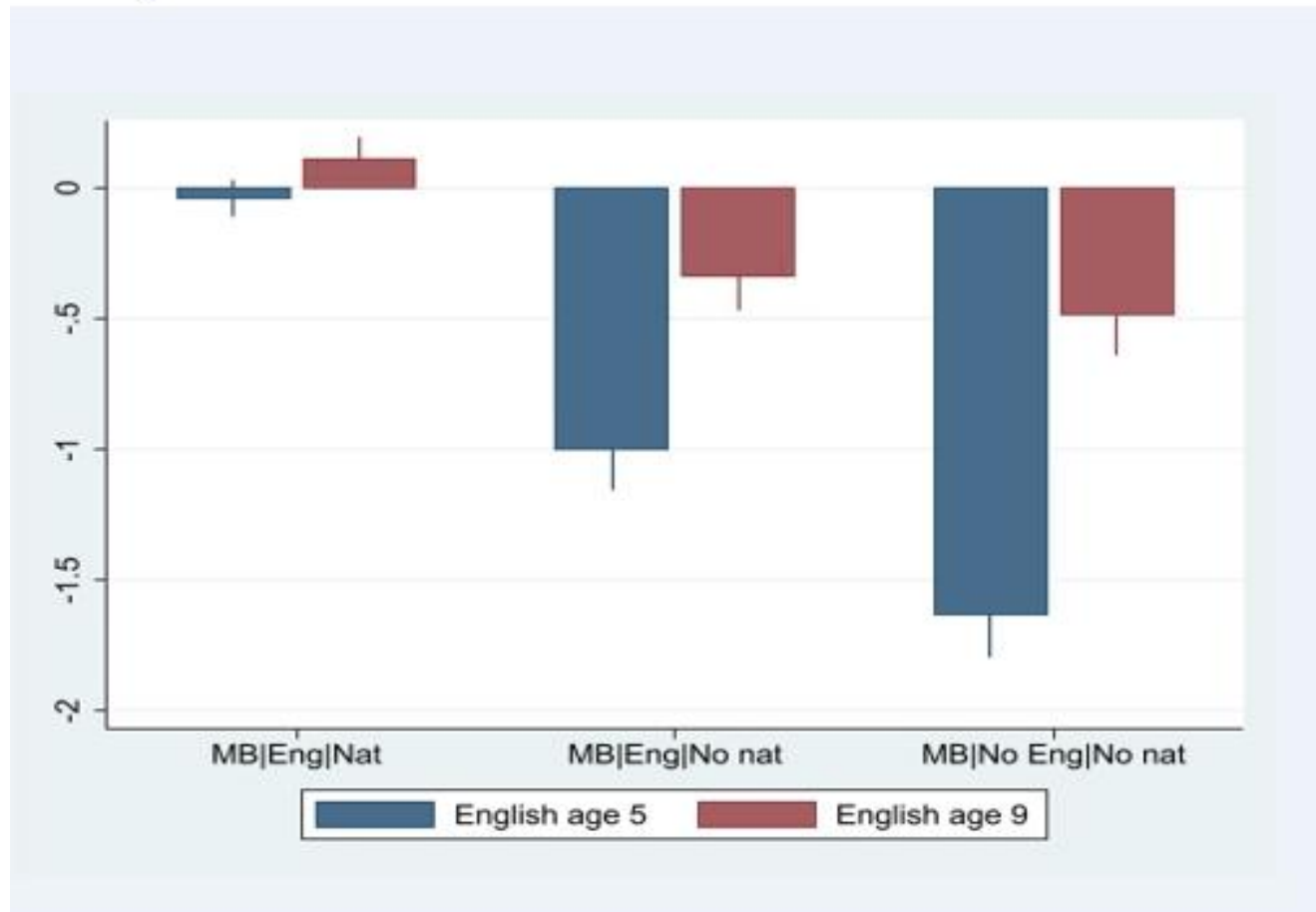


Source: Growing up in Ireland, 08 cohort, age 5.
N=7,069.

Percent of each migrant/language group attending disadvantaged urban (DEIS) schools at age 5



Gap in English reading scores: migrant-origin children v Irish children at age 5 and age 9 (OLS)



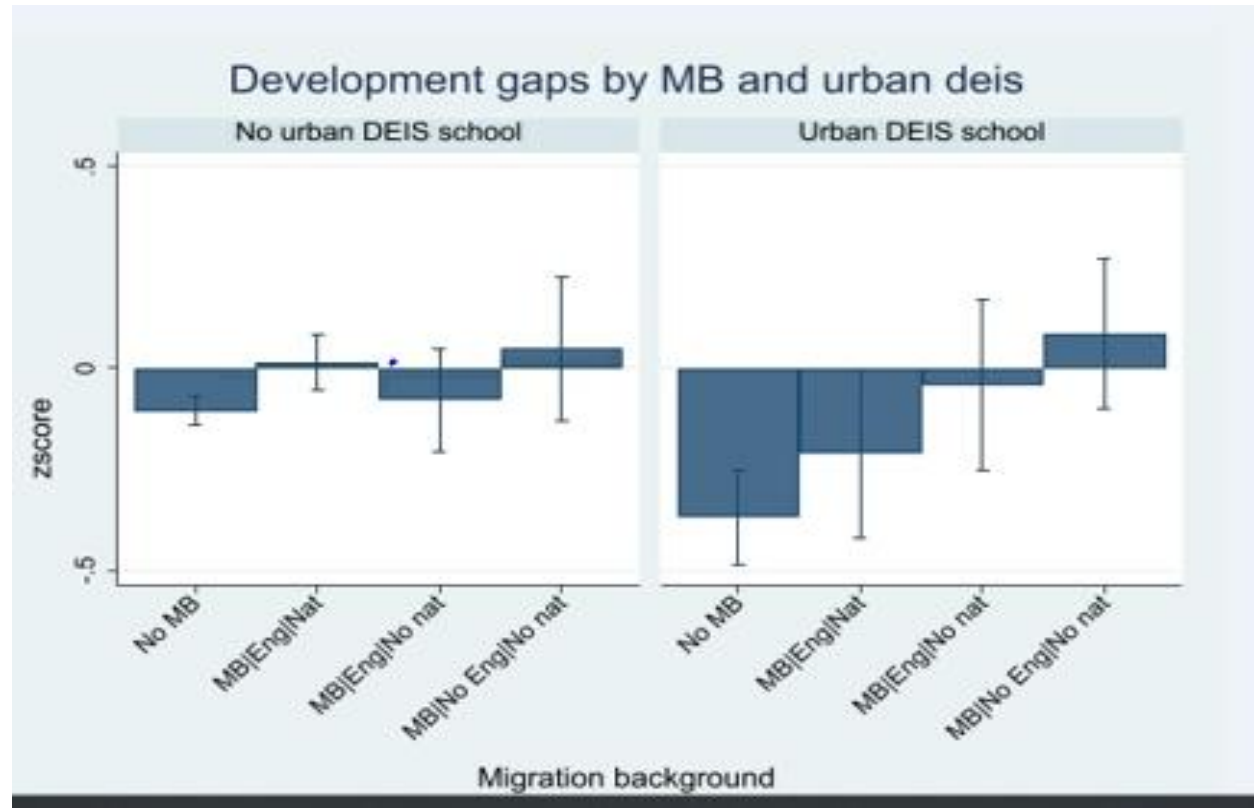
NB: GUI '08 Cohort at age 5 and age 9. N=6,888. Y axis indicates SD of language score. Controls for gender, region, exact age.

Language development between 5 and 9 by migrant background and school type (LDV model)

	Migrant background	Add DEIS	Add interactions Migrant*DEIS	Add SES, home learning, hsd structure
Ref: not migrant	b	b	b	b
Migrant, English native	0.132***	0.125***	0.120**	0.066
Migrant, English, no	0.091	0.111	0.028	0.073
Migrant, no English	0.219**	0.227**	0.156	0.194*
Score age 5	0.434***	0.426***	0.425***	0.373***
Ref: Non DEIS				
Urban DEIS age5		-0.218***	-0.263***	-0.038
Migrant, English native*DEIS			0.039	-0.042
Migrant, English, no native *DEIS			0.300*	0.13
Migrant, no English *DEIS			0.300*	0.11

Notes: Lagged dependent variable model. N of cases 6,888 in all models.

Development in English reading between ages 5-9 , by school type



Limitations

- English language skills just **one outcome** - though previous research in Ireland suggests gap lower in maths/science, and report suggests self-concept similar at 9 (MB/non migrant)
- This is just **one cohort** –
 - Migration is dynamic /groups change
 - These findings likely do not reflect the experience of arrive in Ireland as children (1.5) though see (McGinnity et al., 2023).
- Future research will follow these children as they move to second-level (at age 13)...

Some key messages from this research

- **Strong progress in English language achievement** for migrant-origin kids in Ireland **between age 5 and 9.**
- Despite catch-up, children who have live in a household without a native speaker are still somewhat disadvantaged at age nine.
- Migrant-origin children living in a household without a native speaker are also more likely to attend more disadvantaged schools.
- **Before SES controls, attending a more disadvantaged school** negatively impacts on English language achievement at age 9 for all children, but **less so** for migrant-origin children “migrant lift”.
- And even after controls, attending a DEIS school or other school characteristics **does not seem to impact the “catching-up” of migrant-origin children**
- **Differences between schools may matter less** than the general experience of being in school for migrant-origin children (with increased English language exposure)

Thanks for listening! Comments welcome

Want to read more (full report):

<https://www.esri.ie/publications/children-of-migrants-in-ireland-how-are-they-faring>

Research on post school transitions of migrant youth in Ireland:

<https://www.esri.ie/publications/post-school-expectations-and-outcomes-among-migrant-origin-young-people-in-ireland>

Event for this comparative book **at the ESRI on December 11th 2023:**

<https://www.esri.ie/publications/post-school-pathways-and-migrant-youth>

Edited by my ESRI colleagues Merike Darmody and Emer Smyth