

Participation in shadow education and academic performance in Ireland and Germany¹

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INTRODUCTION

Taking part in shadow education, private supplementary tuition outside school (called ‘grinds’ in Ireland), has become increasingly common in many countries, with a good deal of debate about its effect on academic performance. Growing research on shadow education has highlighted commonalities and differences in this practice across different jurisdictions. It might be expected that shadow education would play a different role depending on the educational system, but this has rarely been looked at in existing research. This paper contrasts shadow education take-up and outcomes in two very different systems, Ireland and Germany, to look at the patterns found.

DATA AND METHODS

This paper draws on two longitudinal datasets – Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) and the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS). Some measures in the two studies could be easily compared, for example, gender, parental education and household income. However, the grading systems are different, with teacher-assessed test results at end of each school year mattering in Germany and externally-assessed Leaving Certificate grades counting in Ireland. An equivalent measure of grade point average was derived, with the analyses also taking account of the effects of being on a non-academic track in Germany.

¹ This Bulletin summarizes the findings from: Benz, R., Darmody, M. & Smyth, E. (2024). Participation in shadow education and academic performance: a comparison of upper secondary school students in Ireland and Germany, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207152241266791>

This work has received funding from the European Union’s 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101004392 (PIONEERED).

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RESULTS

Participation in shadow education is much higher in Ireland than in Germany, with over half (55%) of Irish students taking part in their final year of school compared with 16 to 20 per cent per year in Germany. Female students are more likely to take part than male students in both countries. Participation is more socially selective in Ireland, with those whose parents have higher-status jobs and higher income levels more likely to take part. In Germany, only being in the top fifth of household incomes makes a difference to take-up.

The countries differ too in the prior achievement levels of participants, reflecting the nature of the system. In Germany, students have been tracked by ability at an earlier stage but must reach a 'sufficient' grade each year to avoid having to repeat a year. As a result, lower-achieving students are more likely to take shadow education to avoid being kept back a year. In Ireland, grades matter for higher education entry, so shadow education is used, particularly among medium-achieving students, to enhance their chances of doing well and securing the university place they want.

The analyses looked at differences in grade point average between those taking shadow education and those not, taking account of other factors that might affect performance like social background. In Germany, the findings show that shadow education can benefit low-achieving students by helping them maintain the grades needed to progress to the next year of school. In Ireland, there are some positive benefits of shadow education to lower-achieving students, with little, if any, gain for their middle- and higher-achieving peers.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings show the way in which take-up of shadow education reflects the particular educational system and the incentives for different groups of students to try to boost their academic performance. In Germany, participation is less socially differentiated and is instead, focused on keeping up with academic work in order to avoid being held back a year. In Ireland, in contrast, participation is socially selective and focused on securing advantages in higher education access. However, this strategy appears to pay off only for students with lower levels of achievement. Taken together, the findings suggest that private tuition is frequently used to avoid educational failure for lower-achieving young people from more advantaged families (higher income in the case of Germany, and higher status and income in Ireland), thus reinforcing educational inequality.