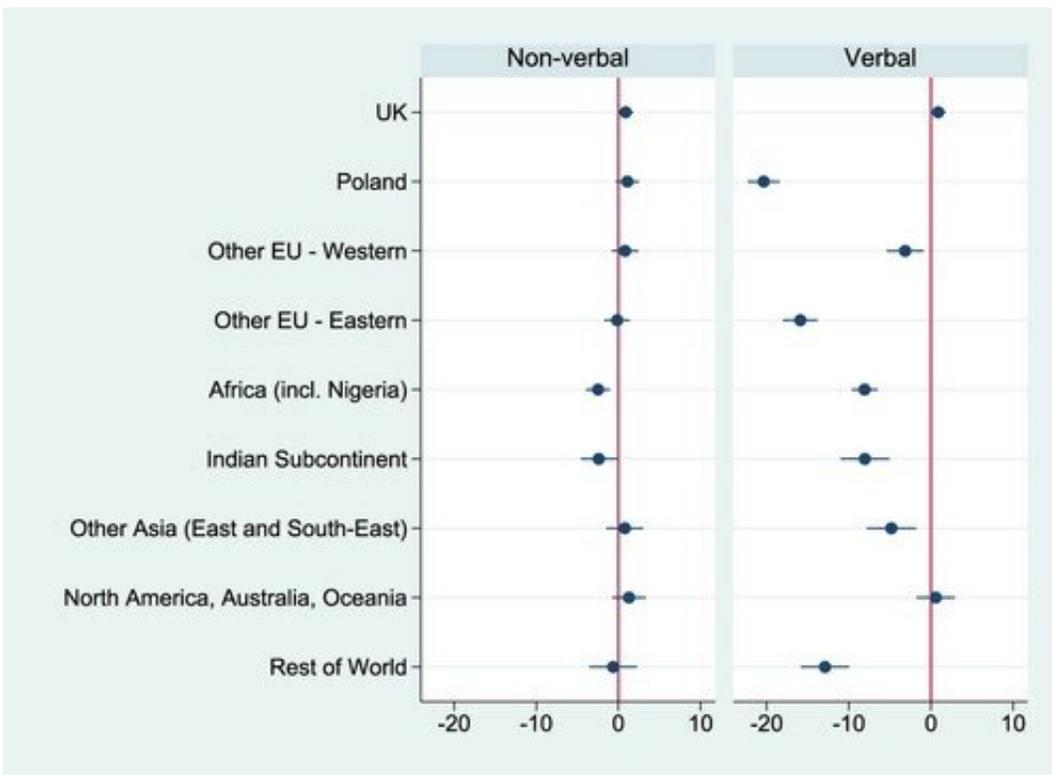


Gaps in verbal skills main educational challenge for children of migrant origin

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Estimated unadjusted mean differences in verbal and non-verbal skills at age 5 by parental region of birth. Note. Reference group is Ireland. Weighted data, $M = 20$ imputations. Credit: *European Societies* (2022). DOI: 10.1080/14616696.2022.2084558

Gaps in verbal skills are the biggest educational gap being experienced by young children of migrant origin, according to new research

conducted by sociologists in Trinity College Dublin.

The study, published in the journal *European Societies*, set out to examine academic inequalities among [children](#) of migrant origin by looking at the verbal and non-verbal skills of five year olds.

Drawing on data from Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), the national longitudinal study of children, the research found that academic underachievement among migrant groups already exists at the start of school. Contrary to the researchers expectation, these gaps, however, are limited to verbal skills with no evidence of difference between the non-verbal skills of children of Irish-born and foreign-born parents.

The study also found that the gap in [verbal skills](#) varies widely across migrant groups. Unsurprisingly, children who have a parent from a primarily English-speaking area (i.e. the U.K. and North America, Australia and Oceania) tend to have scores close to or slightly higher than the average. Children with an Eastern European background tend to have the lowest English skills compared to Irish children.

Interestingly, in contrast to most existing evidence from other countries, a child's social background plays a relatively minor role in explaining the differences in achievement between children with and without a migration background.

Commenting on the findings, author of the paper Stefanie Sprong, Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Sociology, said, "Classrooms in Ireland have never been more ethnically diverse, and in the last number of months this diversity increased even further with the arrival of thousands of Ukrainian, many of whom do not speak English as a first language. It is important to understand how children of migrant origin are faring in school because education likely lays the foundation for their later life outcomes and their integration into society.

"Our findings show that inequalities are already present at the start of school for some migrant groups, especially for language-related skills. We must ensure that these children get additional support to mitigate disadvantages so they can reach their full potential. However, when designing intervention, it is important to carefully consider which groups need the most support because our findings show that achievement gaps varied widely by region of origin and that the language spoken at home played an important role."

Co-author of the paper Dr. Jan Skopek, Associate Professor, Sociology, added, "In today's increasingly diverse societies, it is critical that we know how best to foster the structural integration of immigrants and their descendants. Migrant educational underachievement is a serious issue and already very well documented. However, relatively little is known about achievement gaps at younger ages and in relatively new immigration countries.

"Ireland provides an interesting context for studying immigrants and their children. The speed and scale of recent migration as well as the characteristics of its immigrant population makes Ireland different from many other Western countries. Our research provides fresh understanding of the immigrant experience in more recent countries of immigration."

More information: Stefanie Sprong et al, Academic achievement gaps by migration background at school starting age in Ireland, *European Societies* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/14616696.2022.2084558](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2022.2084558)

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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