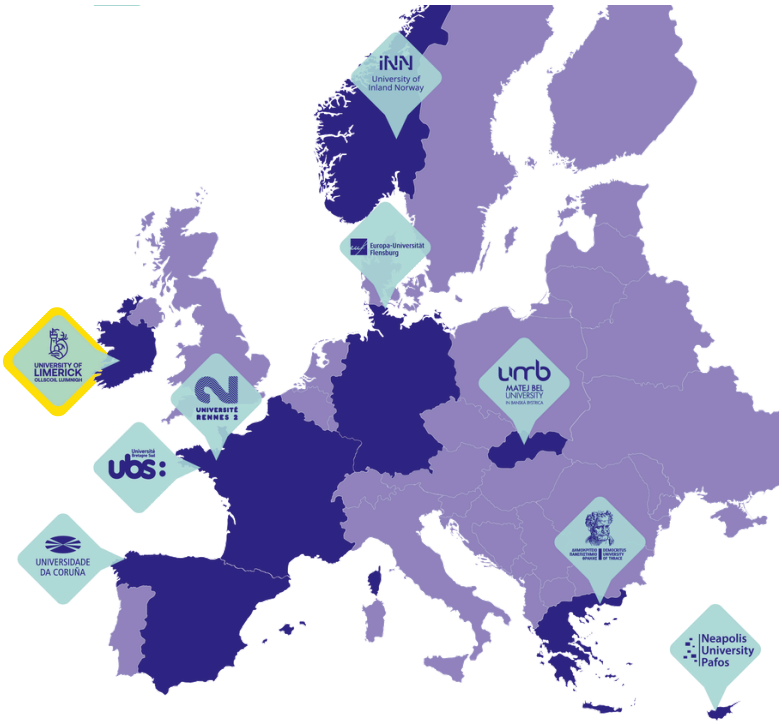
emerge
EUROCAMPUS UNIVERSITY

ENGAGED RESEARCH Exemplar

Social Sciences

PROGRESSION RISKS/ RESILIENCE IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATION (PRIME)



A multi-cohort longitudinal study to assess children's acquisition and development of age-appropriate skills – cognitive, physical, and social - in an innovative, interactive way

The PRIME project assesses children's basic skills – physical, cognitive, and social – at the beginning and end of each school year through a series of interactive games that take place in the school during the school day. Assessing at the beginning of the year enables schools to identify children in need of support quickly. Assessing at the end of the year enables the PRIME team to assess the most effective interventions at various ages and stages. Assessing again after the summer at the start of the next school year enables schools to identify children most at risk, whose progress has fallen back during the summer break. Such information is vital for understanding individual developmental trajectories, as well as peer group assessments and comparisons within and between participating schools and measured against national and international norms.

University of Limerick
IRELAND

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Co-funded by the European Union

RESEARCH RATIONALE

Despite decades of educational research, we still have limited knowledge about the impact of factors in early life – both familial and community-based – on these key developmental trajectories that are so critical to progression outcomes. Equally important, we know little about the impact of school environments, teaching activities, and direct interventions on both offsetting early life risk factors, and on their role in developmental trajectories that are the fundamental drivers of grade progression. This gap in knowledge is particularly acute in the context of multi-disadvantaged children where risks of developmental delays and progression difficulties are particularly salient.

The PRIME project will establish a long-term data base on children's basic skills that are the foundation of numeracy and literacy, that increase attendance and retention, and that support educational transitions and overall attainment throughout their educational journey. The data collected will include children from junior infants to sixth class who will be followed over the entirety of their primary school career.

COMMUNITY RATIONALE

This project was conceived as a response to a request from schools for robust, evidence-based assessment of their children's development. The project plan was co-designed and developed with participating schools and clinicians and is partially funded by Limerick City and County Council.

> "The PRIME project is transformational for our school. It enables us to track our children and provide invaluable, evidence-based data to improvie educational outcomes and attainment"
>
> Eoghan O'Byrne, Principal
> St Mary's National School, Limerick

ENGAGEMENT

Educational and Clinical partners worked with academics to co-design children's assessed activities, supporting the co-creation of a complete assessment manual indexing all assessment items, providing their rationale, explaining how they should be set up and outlining the scoring system.

Schools provide critical logistical support in the design and implementation of the assessment stations and on-site administration.

RESEARCH METHODS

The proposed research is a multicohort, longitudinal study of school entry characteristics, skill development in the early years, and progression outcomes among junior infant, senior infant, and 1st class students at the six DEIS schools in Limerick city.

Information will be collected at the start (September) and the end (May) of each school year to facilitate study of progress (or lack thereof) towards developmental milestones both within- and across-grade groups.

Traditional 'Ages and Stages' questionnaire assessments are sent to parents/guardians in survey form and the response rate from families in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities is poor. Instead of sending surveys home, which may seem complicated and often do not get returned, PRIME re-creates the skills assessment as a series of interactive, fun games and puzzles for children to play. Collecting this information directly from the children, supported by the school, provides valid and reliable data quickly and efficiently.

OUTPUTS

Key outputs from this project include:

- A robust and practical evidence base for more effective school planning and actions. Critical to this will be a detailed accounting of what schools can (and likely cannot) do to offset early life risk factors, to capitalize on positive features of children's early lives, and to enhance early skill acquisition that will foster subsequent positive development over the subsequent school years and beyond.
- The creation of a research dashboard where the key findings will be posted and made available for school administrators. All data on the dashboard will be aggregated, but will still allow for multiple points of comparison and assessment in a menu-driven environment (e.g., cross-classifications which will allow administrators to see aggregates changes over time, across stages of the calendar year, and across cohorts).
- Bi-annual reports to key stakeholders that will provide both up-to-date results from the study, key points of comparison with local, national, and international benchmarks, and longitudinal assessments to better understand changes over time and across cohorts in patterns of psycho-social development and schools progression.
- An annual stakeholder forum. This will bring together key stakeholders, including educators, parents, policy makers, researchers, and community leaders, in June of every year to discuss the project findings, share insights, and refine study objectives based on evolving educational needs.
- Research publication in scientific journals.
- Broader dissemination of research findings to mass media and policy forums will also be pursued.
- An enhanced curriculum for third level research on early childhood-school interactions. Specifically, we will provide training for students in early childhood (standardised) assessment and the collection and analysis of high quality observational data. This will involve a two module cycle for students in the social and data sciences that would ultimately culminate in a capstone project that would involve either a unique investigation using the PRIME data or a policy/practice analysis of school practices and their implications for developmental outcomes.

EVALUATION AND MONITORING

Project oversight is provided by an Advisory Board comprising school principals, professional OT, SLT and PT clinicians, plus a representative from the Government Dept of Education.

The project operates a system of continuous reflective practice, providing timely reviews of all project activities with participating stakeholders.

The project is supported by a UL Engage Mentor to ensure best practice programme management and university-community engagement.

Annual Reviews of project impact and progress are provided to the Local Authority in fulfillment of Economic and Social Intervention Funding (ESIF) criteria. ESIF social regeneration officers conduct independent assessment and review of the project's progress.

IMPACTS

PRIME data will advance evidence-informed policies, practices and services for schools to enable evidence-informed decision-making that delivers real and lasting societal impact, aligned with the missions identified in the DEIS Action Plan 2025-2028 (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools).

- For educational science, the research will illuminate the complex interactions of families and schools in developmental processes in more sophisticated and complex ways than seen in prior research.
- For the schools, the research will provide a stronger foundation of empirical evidence on what does and does not improve developmental and progression outcomes, particularly with respect to the critical role of school environment, teaching activities, and direct interventions in offsetting developmental risk factors, as well as enhancing protective, positive family and community resources.
- For governmental and educational stakeholders, it will illuminate in very practical ways the risks and resources outside of the school that are fundamental to positive child development.
- For the community, the collaborative nature of the project will build trust between the scientific community, the schools, and the families for the development of extra-school activities and interventions for strengthening children, families, and communities.

ACADEMIC TEAM

Prof Ross Macmillan, Sociology
Prof Maura Adshead, Politics and Public Policy
Elke Hayes, Educational Psychology
UL Students on the BSc Social Sciences

COLLABORATING PARTNERS

Mary Maguire, Deputy School Principal, Our Lady of Lourdes National School
Aileen Costelloe, Gaelscoil Sheoirse Clancy, National School
Eoghan O'Byrne, School Principal, St Mary's National School
Eamonn O'Connell, School Principal, Our Lady Queen of Peace National School
Shane O'Donoghue, Deputy School Principal, Le Chéile National School
Tiernan O'Neill, School Principal, Corpus Christi Primary School
Limerick City and County Council - Regeneration Directorate
Treasa McAuliffe, CEO; **Aine Kelly** Speech Language Therapist; ***Linda Reen***, Occupational Therapist, St. Gabriel's Foundation

> "The PRIME project provides a unique opportunity for innovation in educational assessment that has never been done before. The key to the success of the project is the collaboration between researchers and schools. First, educators in the trenches – principals, teachers, support staff – provide critical knowledge on what they need to know about skills and skill formation in the early years that are the foundation for successful learning deep into the life course. Second, the collaboration provides critical access and support that allowed for a unique, behaviour-based approach to skill assessment and skill monitoring that will set the standard for best practices moving forward.
>
> Finally, the collaboration with the schools helps develop the critical questions around skills and schooling that help untangle the complex interactions of communities, families, and schools that critical to positive child development yet have remained a black box for decades."
>
> Prof Ross Macmillan
> Academic Lead, PRIME

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