Behind the Scenes?

A Study of Parental Involvement in Post-Primary Education

Delma Byrne and Emer Smyth
The Economic and Social Research Institute

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This book forms part of a series which documents the experiences of young people as they move through the post-primary school system. Four books published to date, *Moving Up*, *Pathways through the Junior Cycle*, *Gearing up for the Exam?* and *No Way Back?*, indicate how parents are the main source of advice for young people regarding what subjects to take, which programmes to select, and even whether to remain in school or not. Even at post-primary level, many young people rely on their parents for help with homework and study. But what about the parents’ perspectives? It is noteworthy that, given their importance in their children’s education, this is the first systematic study in Ireland to examine parental perceptions of the educational system and their satisfaction with the information they receive about their children’s schooling. This book draws on a survey of, and in-depth interviews with, the parents of the cohort of young people involved in the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study, placing parents’ accounts in the context of the perspectives of school personnel and young people themselves.

Parents are quite active in choosing among schools for their children, with half of young people not attending their nearest or most accessible post-primary school. School choice is based on a range of factors, including the reputation of the school, its proximity to their home, and the prior choices made about primary school or about older siblings. Young people themselves also play an active role in selecting their post-primary school. School choice processes are found to differ across different groups of families, with parents with higher levels of education more likely to send their child to school outside the local area.
Parents are found to be broadly satisfied with the education their children receive but many parents highlight guidance, preparation for adult and working life, and computer skills as potential areas for improvement. Parents are generally satisfied too with the information they receive from their child’s school but many parents would like more detailed information on the content of junior and senior cycle subjects and on the consequences of taking particular subjects for their child’s later options. Furthermore, schools are found to vary in the degree of contact they have with parents and the information they provide.

The majority of parents are actively involved in their child’s education – they discuss how their child is getting on in school, they check whether homework has been completed and they discuss decisions for the future. They are very involved in the programme choices, subject choices and selection of subject levels that their children make as they move through the school system. They hold high aspirations for the children, with three-quarters wanting their son or daughter to go on to third-level education. However, levels of formal involvement are somewhat lower among parents – the majority attend parent-teacher meetings but are not involved in the parents’ association/council.

This book provides unique insights into parents’ involvement in their children’s education and the information flow between school and home. It highlights important issues for policy, suggesting ways to support the parental role and thus enhance student choices and outcomes.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study

It has increasingly been acknowledged that the educational choices young people make within post-primary education have a significant impact upon their later educational and occupational pathways. Those who leave school with higher grades in their Leaving Certificate are more likely to access post-school education and training opportunities, and have enhanced access to higher quality jobs upon leaving school (McCoy et al., 2007; Byrne et al., 2009). In fact, educational qualifications make more of a difference to subsequent employment chances in Ireland than in many other OECD countries (OECD, 2007). The introduction of new programmes, such as Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, has increased the range of choices open to students at senior cycle level. Research from the student perspective indicates that young people are highly reliant on their parents in selecting subjects and programmes as they move through the schooling system (Hannan et al., 1983; Smyth et al., 2004, 2007). However, little is known about the kinds of information parents rely on in advising their children and on the extent of information flow between school and home at key educational junctures.

This study complements the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS), which has followed a cohort of young people in twelve case-study schools, to explore the parental perspective on post-primary schooling. It draws on a postal survey of parents along with in-depth interviews to examine parental perceptions of their children’s path-
ways through post-primary education. The study addresses the following research questions:

- How do parents select particular post-primary schools for their children?
- What are parental perceptions of the junior and senior cycle curriculum?
- How satisfied are they with the information they receive from schools on programme and subject choices?
- How involved are parents in their children’s education?
- What are the potential barriers, if any, to their involvement?

These questions are addressed in the remainder of the study. Before doing so, we place the study in the context of policy developments regarding parental involvement in Irish schools and previous international research on the nature and influence of parental involvement in education.

1.2 The policy context

1.2.1 The legislative context

Countries differ in the extent to which parents are regarded as partners in the educational process rather than external to the school system (OECD, 1997). As a result, the opportunities for formal parental involvement in education vary across countries. In many countries, structures include parent councils or associations as well as parental involvement in school governing bodies (Eurydice, 2005). The existence of formal structures for parental involvement does not in itself guarantee a ‘voice’ since many parents feel their involvement is limited to practical rather than policy issues (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2003b). Studies from a number of countries also indicate that parental engagement is less evident as children become older (Williams et al., 2002). Furthermore, parents with lower levels of education are less likely to become involved in such structures (OECD, 1997).
In the Irish context, the historical role of parents in education has a Constitutional basis. The 1937 Constitution contained a considerable amount of detail on rights and duties in the sphere of education (Coolahan, 2000). Parents were acknowledged as the primary educators of their children:

The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children. (Article 42.1)

The freedom of parents to choose a particular type of education for their children was also given a Constitutional basis:

Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.

The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State. (Articles 42.2 and 42.3.1)

The role of the State was therefore perceived to protect and promote these parental rights with a limited right to prescribe that ‘a certain minimum education’ be attained by children (Coolahan, 2000). An attempt by the School Attendance Bill of 1942 to confer on the Minister for Education the express power to prescribe the content and the manner of imparting the education which children might receive other than by attending a national school, a suitable school or a recognised school, was adjudged to be unconstitutional when referred by the President of Ireland to the Supreme Court in 1943. This underlined the limited power of the Minister to define ‘a certain minimum education’ as set out in Article 43.3.2. Under the School Attendance Act of 1926, attendance at school was made compulsory from the age of 6 to 14 but, as Article 42.2 makes clear, provided parents made educational
provision for their children in their homes, school attendance was not obligatory. Coolahan (2000) argues that the role of the State in directing schooling activity was also severely curtailed by Article 42.3.1, which prohibits the State from directly designating the schools that children should attend.

The Education (Welfare) Act of 2000 goes further in specifying the ‘minimum education’ to be provided to each child. It requires that children who are educated outside regular schools should be registered to assess that the education provided reaches such minimum standards. Just over five hundred children were registered as being educated outside regular schools (excluding private primary schools) in 2007 (NEWB, 2008).

In the Irish context, legal interpretations of Constitutional and legislative provision have emphasised parental choice (subject to certain minimum standards) in relation to the education of children (Duncan, 1993). Parental liberty to determine the manner in which a child is to be educated may, however, be circumscribed by economic, geographic, and other circumstances. Not least of these is the dominant position that the Churches have held within the Irish educational system, especially at primary level. Chapter Two considers the implications of parental choice for schools, parents and students. A number of commentators (see, for example, Clarke, 1998; Coolahan, 2000) have contrasted the strong Constitutional basis for parental influence on education with the low levels of actual involvement; trends in the formal involvement of parents in the schooling system are discussed in the following section.

1.2.2 Formal involvement of parents in Irish education

Although the Irish Constitution of 1937 pays generous attention to the prior rights of parents in education, neither Church nor State made systematic efforts during the 1940s and 1950s to involve parents closely in policy-making, consultation or administration of schooling (Coolahan, 2000). However, the period from the 1960s onwards saw a dramatic increase in government and public interest in education, with ‘a greater tolerance and more scope for the expression of group and
individual opinions by teachers, parents and students … in evidence’ (Coolahan, 2000, p. 132).

There was an important change in the administrative structure of national schools in 1975, the first significant change in governance arrangements since the establishment of the system in 1831. Management boards for national schools were instituted in that year. For the first time, parents and teachers were directly involved with the patron’s nominees in the management of schools. For primary schools with more than one teacher, the board of management includes two parents of children enrolled in the school (one mother and one father) elected by parents. Changes in administrative structures were also evident within the post-primary sector. The first community schools, established in the 1960s, were run by ad hoc management committees comprising two representatives of the VEC, two of religious orders, and two parents. Parental involvement in the boards of management for other types of post-primary schools followed from measures included in the 1998 Education Act (see below).

One of the main mechanisms for parental involvement in education has been through parents’ associations/councils at the local and national levels. The National Parents Council Primary and the National Parents Council Post-Primary were inaugurated in 1985. The National Parents Council Post-Primary was put in place to be the umbrella group for parent associations of post-primary schools at the national level. Because of the diversity of provision within post-primary education, the NPC-PP operates as an umbrella group for a number of parents’ associations. These associations are outlined in Table 1.1.

A Department of Education circular, *Parents as Partners in Education* (1991), reinforced the emerging parents’ associations by requesting post-primary management to ensure that a parents’ association was formed in each school, and encouraging the affiliation of these local associations to the National Parents Council Post-Primary.
Table 1.1: Constituent parents’ associations within National Parents Council Post-Primary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Association</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Schools Parent Association (CSPA)</td>
<td>Represents parents of children in Catholic voluntary secondary schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation of Minority Religion and Protestant Parent Association Post-Primary (COMPASS)</td>
<td>Represents parents whose sons/daughters attend schools which promote a Protestant or minority religious ethos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Association for Vocational Schools and Community Colleges (NPAVSCC)</td>
<td>Established to represent the interests of parents of students in the vocational sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Associations of Community and Comprehensive Schools (PACCS)</td>
<td>Established to act as one national organisation for the parents’ associations of community and comprehensive schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Federation of Parents Councils in Christian Brothers and other Catholic Secondary Schools (FEDCBS)</td>
<td>Provides information and support services for affiliated parental councils.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moves towards the increasing formal involvement of parents in education were given increasing impetus by the White Paper on Education, *Charting Our Education Future* (1995). This document, which formed the basis for the Education Act of 1998, emphasised the educational process as one involving a partnership with the learner at the centre and parents, patrons, trustees, owners, governors, management bodies, teachers, the local community and the State as partners in education:

The parental role confers on them [parents] the right to active participation in their child's education. This entails parents' rights as individuals to be consulted and informed on all aspects of the child's education and their right as a group to be active participants in the education system at school, regional and national levels. Parents also have responsibilities. Parents should nurture a learning environment, co-operate with and support the
school and other educational partners, and fulfil their special role in the development of the child (1995, p. 4).

The parents’ councils at primary and post-primary level were given statutory recognition in the subsequent Education Act (1998). Both the NPC Primary and the NPC Post-Primary are represented on a range of statutory bodies, including the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. At the local level, the parents of students in a school were given the right to establish a parents’ association, whose role would be to ‘advise the Principal or the board on any matter relating to the school’ and to ‘adopt a programme of activities which will promote the involvement of parents, in consultation with the Principal, in the operation of the school’. The Act also outlines that schools are required to involve parents in the process of school planning and to ensure that all parents in a school receive a copy of the school plan. Once again, the right of parents to choose a school for their child is emphasised.

Parental input into the composition of each school’s board of management was enshrined in the Education Act (1998), and responsibilities given to the board to develop procedures to inform parents on their children’s education. Currently, almost all post-primary school sectors, including voluntary secondary, vocational and community/comprehensive schools, have parent representatives on their boards of management. Groups of parents have also been involved in the setting up of schools at primary level, in the Gaelscoileanna and Educate Together sectors.

Although there has been an increase in the formal involvement of parents in the educational system in recent decades, public opinion would appear to indicate scope for greater involvement. A national survey of public opinion on education indicated the influence of parents on the education system was seen as ‘too little’ by the majority (57%) of respondents (Kellaghan et al., 2004). In relation to the management of schools, 42 per cent of adults felt that parents were not sufficiently involved in the management of primary schools while this
was the case for 36 per cent of the sample in relation to post-primary schools.

1.2.3 Home-school links

The White Paper on Education (1995) emphasised the importance of developing dynamic and supportive links between the home and the school. The resulting Education Act (1998) specified one of the duties of school principals as being to ‘encourage the involvement of parents of students in the school in the education of those students and in the achievement of the objectives of the school’. As mentioned above, the Act was also intended to foster home-school links by improving the information flow to parents regarding their child’s progress in particular and school policy in general.

Specific measures had already been put in place to develop home-school links in schools serving more disadvantaged populations. In 1990 the Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme was established as an initiative to counteract disadvantage by increasing cooperation between schools, parents and community agencies in the education of young people. Initially, it involved the appointment of 30 teachers as liaison coordinators in 55 primary schools in large designated areas of urban disadvantage. After a year, it was extended to a further 25 primary schools and to 13 post-primary schools which served the children who already had the liaison service at primary level. In 2009, 340 primary schools and 203 schools at post-primary level were participating in the scheme. Under the DEIS programme for disadvantaged schools, it is envisaged that ‘a renewed emphasis will be placed on the involvement of parents and families in children’s education’ (p. 40). A particular focus is being placed on facilitating parents to support their children in the development of their literacy and numeracy skills. In 2009, the remit of the National Educational Welfare Board was extended to include the HSCL scheme and a new integrated service is currently being formed.

The HSCL scheme involves the provision of a school-based coordinator to liaise with parents and the community. The scheme involves a number of features including financial assistance to the school, a
local coordinator, home visits, the provision of additional school facilities, and the education of parents through courses along with teacher education in relation to the process of partnership. The scheme is supported through regular in-service courses and cluster meetings of coordinators within a local area. Research and evaluation conducted in the first decade of operation of the scheme provide useful insights into its implementation. While the HSCL coordinators’ brief includes liaison with teachers and community groups, analysis of the actual workload involved indicates that contact with parents takes up at least two-thirds of their time (Ryan, 1994). Parents’ main area of involvement in the scheme amounted to attendance at courses and activities, in particular those related to their child’s education, self-development, parenting and home management. At primary level, there was greater parental involvement in paired-reading programmes and classroom activity than within post-primary schools (Ryan, 1994).

Evaluation was built into the programme from the outset and indicated some positive effects (Ryan, 1994, 1999). HSCL coordinators and teachers reported improved personal development among parents, with a greater awareness of, and involvement in, the school. The impact was seen as somewhat stronger at primary than at post-primary level. Most schools reported increased contact between parents and teachers. Coordinators reported greater understanding of parents among teachers, and parents found it easier to approach teachers. These effects were apparent at both primary and post-primary level. The scheme was also seen as facilitating the development of useful links between the primary and post-primary schools involved in the scheme.

However, a number of cautionary points should be noted. The positive effects of the programme were generally confined to parents who were actively involved in activities and those whom teachers often regarded as being least ‘in need’ of the scheme. A survey of uninvolved mothers indicated that they experienced greater socio-economic disadvantages, being more likely to come from unemployed households, to be single parents, and/or to have more children (Ryan, 1994). While home visits were considered an effective strategy to
reach parents who had no other contact with the school, the issue of self-selection in parental involvement needs to be addressed. Furthermore, very few parents had taken a leading role in parental activities, with a tendency to adopt a more passive role. In particular, fathers were much less likely to get involved in school-related activities than mothers (Ryan, 1994).

A central goal of the scheme had been to counter educational disadvantage among children by involving their parents in school life. The impact on students themselves was, however, mixed. Coordinators perceived effects on ‘some’ pupils in terms of improved behaviour, attendance, achievement, and more positive attitudes to school and teachers. However, few teachers noted any immediate effects on pupil performance. A formal assessment of student progress indicated achievement gains in reading and mathematics for third class students but not for fifth class students in schools with the programme (Ryan, 1999).

More recent evaluations (see Archer, 2006) indicate that the scheme was viewed to have a positive effect. However, changes in attitudes were seen as more prevalent than changes in behaviour. As in the earlier period, post-primary personnel were somewhat less positive about the outcomes of the scheme than those in the primary sector. The scheme was also seen as having less effect on students than on other stakeholders.

Home-school links are also facilitated through other programmes and have been emphasised in a range of recent policy documents. The Early Start programme is a one-year programme provided within primary schools, targeting three-year-old children in disadvantaged communities. The aim is to enhance the overall development of the child, to ensure a smooth transition to full participation in the formal education system, and to offset the effects of socio-economic disadvantage. The programme was intended to involve parents at three levels: through involvement in an advisory group in each centre, through participation in the everyday running and organisation of the centre and through joining their children in many of the centre's activities. From the perspective of school principals, the programme has been
seen as broadly successful in involving parents, resulting in improved rapport between teachers and parents. However, there is some variation across schools in the level of involvement and parents’ formal inclusion in the advisory committee is less prevalent than other forms of involvement (Lewis and Archer, 2002).

The Department of Education and Science Statement of Strategy 2005-2007 emphasises the promotion of partnership in policy development at both national and local levels:

The partners in education (parents, teachers, patrons/trustees/governors, management bodies, the community and the State) because of their constitutional, legal and moral rights and responsibilities are involved in both policy development and in the provision of education services (DES, 2004, p.15).

According to the Departmental Strategy document, information flow to parents is an important consideration:

The publication of reports on selected curricular areas and on educational programmes or services will provide schools, parents and the general public with meaningful information on quality and standards in the education system and will support the provision of high quality advice to policy makers (p. 40).

The *Statement of Strategy 2008-2010* further refers to the role of parents as partners and/or consumers of education.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) similarly points to the importance of establishing ‘strong links between parents, teachers and schools in order to make children’s education as successful as possible’ (NCCA website). The NCCA has produced a range of booklets and materials designed to inform parents on their children’s learning, the curriculum and standardised testing.

The importance of parental involvement has also been emphasised in relation to particular groups of children. In terms of Traveller children, the *Survey of Traveller Education Provision* (DES, 2006) suggests that:
The role of Traveller parents as partners in education must be developed, and they must be convinced of the benefits of the education system so that they will encourage their children’s regular school attendance and dissuade them from early school drop out.

Similarly, the Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy (DES, 2007a) outlines that:

The report recognises the role of parents as the primary educators and seeks to consult, support, and promote the capacity of Traveller parents to effectively execute that role in a concrete manner. In particular, Traveller parents will be enabled to participate fully in the education process and to support their children in remaining in mainstream education as long as possible (p.12).

In relation to children with special educational needs, the Report of the Task Force on Autism (2001) places a strong emphasis on ‘parents as partners’ but states that:

Although considerable progress has been initiated in the wider theoretical recognition of parents as partners in disability issues, barriers remain in practice, and significant shortcomings and obstacles continue to hinder full parental inclusion in the consultative process and the development of partnerships.

One of the functions of the National Council for Special Education, established in 2003, is to provide ‘information to parents in relation to the entitlements of children with special educational needs’ (Statement of Strategy 2008-2011).

The importance of parental involvement in education has been given an increasing amount of policy attention in recent decades. However, relatively little research has been carried out to date on the actual level and nature of such involvement in Ireland, especially at post-primary level. At primary level, Mac Giolla Phádraig (2003b) found a mismatch between the views of teachers and parents regarding
parental involvement in education; in the area of curriculum in particular, parents wished for a greater level of parental involvement than that preferred by teachers. Importantly, in general, parents and teachers equally expressed a desire for consultation rather than active partnership for parents regarding school policy. In relation to actual involvement, teachers perceived a greater degree of parental involvement than parents did.

To date, somewhat more research has been carried out on the informal involvement of parents in their child’s education in the Irish context. A large body of research in Ireland, as elsewhere, indicates significant differences in student academic outcomes by aspects of parental background, including parental education, social class, number of books in the home and so on (Sofroniou et al., 2000, 2002; Hannan et al., 1996). Parents see the transition from primary to post-primary education as involving significant challenges for their child, with particular concerns emerging about potential bullying (Smyth et al., 2004). As a result, mothers are found to engage in extensive education ‘work’ in providing emotional support during the period of their child’s transition to the new school setting (O’Brien, 2005). Lyons et al. (2003) emphasised the important influence of parents on their children’s education, not just through school choice and transfer but also through their on-going support for their child’s learning. However, they found that parents differed in their knowledge of the education system and consequently in their ability to help their child successfully negotiate their way through the school. They thus distinguished between ‘insiders’, who had in-depth knowledge of the school system and had the kinds of social networks which enabled them to support their children, and ‘outsiders’, who themselves had a negative experience of education and lacked the same capacity to intervene in their children’s education (Lyons et al., 2003, Chapter 11). Similarly, Hall et al. (2008) found that working-class parents were often unsure as to how to interpret the language used in primary school reports (such as ‘good’ or ‘fair’) and were less likely to question teachers than middle-class parents. The following section considers existing research on parental involvement in greater detail.
1.3 Research on parental involvement in education

In this section, we provide a brief overview of the extensive international research literature on parental involvement in their children’s education. This research provides a context for our own study of parental involvement in post-primary education in Ireland. The first part explores the relationship between parental resources, in the form of social class and education, and young people’s educational outcomes. The second part examines recent research on school choice and its implications. The third part outlines research findings on informal and formal parental involvement in the school, while subsection four examines the relationship between such involvement and student outcomes. In discussing existing research on parental involvement in education, it is worth noting that the bulk of research has focused on the primary level, with a smaller number of studies relating to the post-primary sector. In this section, we consider studies which relate to both primary and post-primary education, since many of the issues raised are common across the schooling system.

1.3.1 Parental resources and children’s education

There is a well-developed theoretical and empirical literature on the relationship between parental resources, especially social class and parental education, and educational outcomes (see, for example, Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks et al., 1972; Karabel and Halsey, 1977; Halsey, Heath and Ridge, 1980). Clear differences are evident across countries in how long young people stay in the educational system, depending on the social class and education of their parents (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Breen, 2004). This pattern is evident within Ireland; the vast majority (84%) of young people from higher professional backgrounds who have completed a Leaving Certificate go on to third-level education compared with 38 per cent of those from unskilled manual backgrounds (School Leavers’ Survey 2004, own calculations). A similar pattern is found in relation to parental education, with rates of participation in third-level education increasing with higher levels of parental education. At any given level of education,
students from more middle-class backgrounds are found to achieve higher grades than their working-class counterparts and parental education has a significant impact on achievement over and above that of social class. For example, on average, there is a difference of 1.2 grade points per subject in the Leaving Certificate exam (out of a maximum of 10 grade points) between students from higher professional backgrounds and those from working-class backgrounds (School Leavers’ Survey 2004, own calculations). In addition, family size and birth order have also been shown to be important, with those from smaller families and older siblings doing better academically (Breen, 1986; Hannan et al., 1996).

Broadly speaking, a number of explanations have been advanced for these socio-economic differences in educational attainment. Firstly, the ‘culture of poverty’ perspective argues that lower socio-economic groups have distinct values and forms of social organisation. This thesis suggests that working-class families do not value education as highly as middle-class families. In contrast, a second explanation lies with ‘reproduction theory’ which focuses on the unequal distribution of economic, social and cultural resources across classes and their transmission from parents to children (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Familiarity with the dominant culture operates as a form of ‘cultural capital’ and influences an individual’s ‘habitus’, that is, an individual’s predispositions in terms of values, motivations and so on (see, for example, Lareau, 2000; Reay, 2004). Middle-class parents possess the kinds of cultural and social capital which enable them to effectively support their children’s education (see Lyons et al., 2003). School success is predicated on such cultural capital so that middle-class students who are more familiar with the dominant culture will fare better academically. Thus, young people’s engagement in high culture activities with their parents, such as arts-related leisure and visiting museums, facilitates their educational progress (DiMaggio, 1982; Robson, 2003). From this perspective, early school leaving and underperformance among working-class children are seen as products of a ‘mismatch’ between the cultures of home and school.
A third approach, the ‘rational choice’ perspective, regards social class differences in educational outcomes in terms of the costs and benefits associated with continued participation (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996; Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997). The relative costs of schooling are likely to be higher for working-class or low income families. Furthermore, parents with higher levels of education have greater ‘insider’ knowledge of the educational system and will be better equipped to help their children with homework and study. The middle classes have more to lose by not staying on in education since they risk social demotion, whereas young people from working-class backgrounds may not see much benefit to staying on at school. The probabilities of educational success may also differ between social groups (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996).

These theories regard the influence of parents on their child’s education from the macro perspective, emphasising social differentiation in educational outcomes. However, a large body of research has emerged internationally on the micro-level processes whereby parents are involved in their child’s education, processes that take account of differences within as well as between social groups. Research on these processes is considered in the remainder of the section.

1.3.2 School choice

Recent decades have seen an increasing diversity in many countries in the types of schools available to students and their parents (OECD, 2006). As a result, school choice processes have been the subject of much research in Britain and elsewhere (see Gorard, Taylor, Fitz, 2002; Lucey and Reay, 2002; Sugerman and Kemerer, 1999; Willms and Echols, 1992). Parental choice of school may be influenced by the school’s curriculum, academic reputation and ethos, parental educational ambitions for the child, the social status of the school, and the socio-economic level of the students attending it (Madaus et al., 1979). Parents who are better resourced are generally found to be in a better position to take advantage of increasing school choice. In Scotland, research conducted by Willms and Echols (1992) indicated that the parents who exercised more choice were more highly educated and
had more prestigious occupations than those who did not. Furthermore, Bauch and Goldring (1995) found that parents who chose their child’s secondary school were subsequently more involved in their school life. There has been considerable debate among researchers as to the impact of greater school choice on social segregation (Noden, 2000; Reay, 2004; Gorard and Fitz, 1998) since non-State schools are more likely to use potentially selective admissions criteria (West et al., 2006). Similarly, there is a lack of consensus on the implications of school choice for student achievement and other outcomes (see, for example, Sugerman and Kemerer, 1999).

In contrast to the situation in Britain and the US, there is a paucity of systematic research in Ireland on how and why students and their families choose particular schools and the implications of these choices for their later life-chances (Smyth et al., 2004). This lack of research perhaps reflects the ‘taken for granted’ nature of school choice in Ireland in contrast with the on-going policy debates about school diversity in many other national contexts. Some existing research gives insights into these processes in Ireland. Lyons et al. (2003) contrasted ‘insider’ parents, who actively chose their child’s school, usually on the basis of the school’s reputation, with ‘outsiders’, who tended to send their child to the local school. There is some indication in Ireland of a parental preference for single-sex education for their adolescent daughters (Lynch 1989), as evidenced by the higher proportion of girls who attend single-sex schools (DES, 2007b). Furthermore, Smyth (1999) indicated that post-primary schools differ in the socio-economic and ability profiles of students. Although research on school choice generally focuses on the preferences of parents, Smyth et al. (2004) found that the majority of first year students had discussed the choice of post-primary school with their parents.

1.3.3 Parental involvement in education

Parents can be informally involved in their child’s education through supporting their learning, providing help with homework and study, giving advice on educational choices, and providing encouragement in
relation to schoolwork and post-compulsory educational participation (see Desforges, 2003). Parents can also be involved in their child’s education on a more formal basis through participation in school-based activities and involvement in school associations. While formal involvement is more ‘visible’, research has indicated that informal involvement has a greater influence on children’s outcomes (Harris and Goodall, 2007). A number of studies indicate that support for their child’s learning involves a good deal of ‘emotional labour’ on the part of parents (O’Hara, 1998, on farming families; O’Brien, 2005). O’Brien (2005), for example, examined the role of mothers as key education workers during their child’s transfer from primary to post-primary education. Her research suggests that mothers’ lives are shaped by caring labour which includes education work, labour that is largely unseen but highly demanding of mothers’ time and energies. In general, involvement of parents in their child’s education tends to decrease in intensity as children grow older (Williams et al., 2002; Stevenson and Baker, 1987; Dornbush and Glasgow, 1996).

A number of Irish studies have focused on parental involvement in educational decisions, many using qualitative methods to tap into parental involvement. Issues of parental involvement have been explored in the context of educational disadvantage (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002), decision-making within post-primary education (McCoy et al., 2006), influences on learning, especially mathematics (Lyons et al., 2003), and influences on the move from primary to post-primary education (Smyth et al., 2004; O’Brien, 2005). Research consistently indicates that young people see their parents as having the main influence on decisions in relation to educational and career choices (McCoy et al., 2006; Smyth et al., 2007).

Research in the English context indicates that the majority of parents feel ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ involved in their child’s education (Williams et al., 2002; Moon and Ivins, 2004). However, the majority would like more involvement in their child’s education; work and childcare commitments were seen as the main barriers to such involvement. The majority of parents were informally involved in their child’s education, for example, by helping with homework, and a sig-
significant minority had some level of formal involvement in the school. However, both informal and formal involvement levels tended to decline as children became older.

Dornbush and Glasgow (1996) attribute this decline not only to parents granting their children more autonomy as they move into adolescence but also to the structures of the school itself. They argue that moving from having one teacher to having several is likely to generate corresponding changes in the nature of teacher-student relations, as well as in the opportunities for parental contact. Teachers of teenagers in the United States are found to have neither the time nor the resources to closely monitor the performance of each student and keep parents informed in the ways in which they can assist their children. Thus, the attitudes of teachers and the degree of parent-teacher contact can be seen in part as arising from structural arrangements within lower secondary schools.

Eccles and Harold (1993) observed that the absolute levels of several types of communication between teachers and parents were surprisingly low. Research conducted by Dornbush and Ritter (1998) does not support the view that teachers want more parent contact and greater parental involvement. Furthermore, Dornbusch and Glasgow (1996) found that, when contacts were made with parents, teachers often had bad news to convey about the student’s progress. Teachers were more likely to contact parents when students were exerting little effort or were having discipline problems. This led to differences in teacher-parent contact across ability groups, with teachers of lower track classes initiating significantly more contact with parents than did teachers of higher track classes. There was also a slight tendency for more parent-initiated contact with teachers in high track classes than with teachers in lower track classes.

Critical information may flow from school to home indirectly through informal social networks. Laureau’s (1987) work on social class differences in family-school relations points to the importance of social networks as informational sources. In her study, parents from a middle-class community had more extensive information about schooling due to compositional differences in parents’ social net-
works. The networks of middle-class parents consisted of other parents from the school community. The social contacts of working-class parents, by contrast, were limited to relatives in the area. These parents seldom socialized with other parents from their children’s school and consequently did not obtain information that could be used to build a strong-family school link. Useem (1992) also noted that middle-class parents learn about the course assignments of their children from informal networks of friends and acquaintances. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) found that the role of school personnel in information networks was also supportive of existing structures of inequality, but only those of middle-class backgrounds were aided by their information networks. In response to particular issues, middle-class parents were also more likely to act collectively, increasing the likelihood of them having an impact on school policy (Horvat et al., 2003).

Children’s leisure time activities also affect the amount of information flowing to parents about school. Laureau (1987) found that the leisure activities of working-class children tended to be predominantly informal; middle-class children on the other hand were more likely to be enrolled in formal after-school activities. Parents would often stay to watch these activities, providing an opportunity to interact with other school parents. Discussions among parents usually centered on teachers’ reputations and the children’s academic progress. Thus, the characteristics of social networks may either block or assist the flow of school-related information, thereby influencing the nature and frequency of parent-teacher contacts.

Policy rhetoric in Ireland (see section 1.1) and elsewhere emphasizes ‘parents as partners’ and promotes greater involvement of parents in the educational process. However, some commentators (see, for example, Stanley and Wyness, 1999, on the UK context) have argued that such involvement is more apparent than real, with the power advantage in favour of teachers remaining largely unchanged. The main channels for communication between the school and parents in Britain remain school reports, parents’ evenings and what parents are told about school by their child (Williams et al., 2002). However, the
frequency and number of reports and meetings tends to vary across schools (Power and Clark, 2000). While most parents are broadly satisfied with the information they receive (Williams et al., 2002), many parents feel that written reports are too generalised and do not adequately explain the grading systems used (Power and Clark, 2000; see also Hall et al., 2008, on Irish reporting practices). Similarly, some parents see parents’ evenings as frustrating in terms of the amount of information they can glean on their own child’s progress (Power and Clark, 2000).

In the Irish context, Hanafin and Lynch (2002) make the distinction between two strands of parental involvement in schools with two distinct rationales. They characterise one strand, that involving programmes for disadvantaged groups, as deriving from ‘a cultural deficit model of explaining educational failure’. In contrast, the second strand is aimed at all parents, through initiatives such as parents’ associations or councils:

Its rationale derives from the perception that parental involvement is a ‘distinct, possibly irreplaceable influence on children’s learning’ (Hallgarten 2000: 2) as well as from the belief that ‘positive home-school partnership is a key factor in school effectiveness’. Within this strand, parental involvement is not explicitly ‘classed’ but in practice, it is middle class parents who are most involved, most visible and who are, therefore, proximal to schools (Hanafin and Lynch 2002, pp. 35-36).

Hanafin and Lynch (2002) suggest that parents from working-class backgrounds have been absent from educational debate and decision-making, largely because they have been seen as unable to participate. They found that general lack of consultation was the single most important issue identified by parents when asked to prioritise their concerns. Furthermore, parents felt that current consultation practices were inadequate and unsatisfactory. The research by O’Neill (1992) on working-class mothers suggests that value orientations, present or future, depend on economic circumstances. She argues that the ethos of school is at variance with working-class culture and that low par-
ticipation and achievement in education are caused by the cumulative effects of poverty, low income and lifestyle as well as by the cost of education to large families.

Variation in parental involvement may also reflect differences in school structures and ethos. Mac Giolla Phádraig (2003a) found that parents whose child attended a gaelscoil felt that they had more access to the school principal to discuss child-related issues than those attending English-medium schools and also reported greater involvement in discussing school policy issues, access to teachers, principals, board of management members and parents’ associations in gael-scoileanna.

1.3.4 Parental involvement and student outcomes

The bulk of international research on parental involvement has focused on its effect on educational achievement. However, other outcomes, including retention within full-time education and the tracks or subjects selected, have also been considered.

A broad consensus has emerged that parental involvement enhances educational outcomes among children and young people, although involvement and educational outcomes have been measured differently in different studies (for a review, see Desforges, 2002). Such an effect is evident even for very young children. Aspects of the home learning environment (including parents’ drawing children’s attention to sounds and letters) were associated with improved cognitive development at the age of three and later at school entry (Melhuish et al., 2001). Similarly, children who were helped with their reading at home by their parents had a greater improvement in their reading scores (Tizard et al., 1982). Within primary and post-primary education, parents who are more involved in education through attending parent-teacher meetings, monitoring their children’s progress, and helping with homework are more likely to have children who perform well academically (see, for example, Baker and Stevenson, 1986; Epstein, 1985).

Stevenson and Baker (1987) examined the relationship between parental involvement in schooling and the child’s school performance.
They found that the higher the educational status of the mother, the greater the degree of parental involvement in school activities. Children of parents who are more involved in school activities do better in school than children with parents who are less involved. Bogen-schneider (1997), in a study of 10,000 high school students, similarly found that parents who were more involved in their adolescents’ schooling had offspring who performed better in school. These effects were relatively constant across different groups of parents and children, and applied irrespective of gender, parental education, ethnicity, or family structure. Furthermore, mothers’ school involvement exerted a larger effect on grades among students whose mothers had fewer resources than among students whose mothers were more advantaged.

Studies have generally found that mothers’ educational level is more important than that of fathers’. The greater effect of maternal education is presumed to be the result of more direct ‘transmission’, through greater time involvement and more emotionally supportive relationships with younger children, of maternal ‘cultural capital’: the socially conditioned attitudes, expectations and habits/skills differentially characteristic of families in the social class hierarchy (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Murnane et al., 1981).

A number of studies have indicated that differences in the nature and level of parental involvement in their child’s education account for observed achievement differences by parental education. Thus, in one American study, parental involvement emerged as a particularly powerful predictor of school performance in that it mediated almost all of the effect of parental education (Stevenson and Baker, 1987). Similarly, parental encouragement for educational achievement is found to operate independently of social class of origin and, combined with support, supervision and help with homework and study, is a very important influence on educational achievement levels (Davies and Kandel, 1981; Heath and Clifford, 1990).

While studies have generally focused on the impact on academic achievement, other studies have established a link between parental involvement and a reduction in the risk of dropping out of school (Rumberger et al., 1990) as well as favourable attitudes towards
school, positive attitudes towards homework and good homework habits. Useem (1992) also indicates that middle-class parents are more likely to intervene in the ability group within which their child is placed by trying to secure them a place in a higher curricular track.

In sum, parental involvement in their child’s education, both informally through supporting learning and formally through contact with the school, emerges as a significant influence on educational outcomes among young people.

1.4 Research methodology

This section describes the methodology used for the study. This study should be seen in the context of the on-going Irish Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) since it aims to complement this research by incorporating the parental perspective. The approach taken is a mixed methods design, combining survey-based information on a broader group of parents with in-depth interviews with a smaller subset of parents. Information from the parents themselves is supplemented by data on parental involvement from the school and student perspectives.

1.4.1 Research design

The information relates to a theoretical sample of twelve case-study schools, initially identified on the basis of a postal survey of all post-primary principals conducted at the beginning of the study in 2001. These case-study schools were selected to capture diversity in approaches to ability grouping, subject choice and student integration. The profile of these schools is presented in Table 1.2. The schools selected vary in terms of sector, size, location and social class mix. Students in these schools have been followed as they move through the schooling system (see Smyth et al., 2004, 2006, 2007). At the time of the parents’ survey, the student cohort was in fifth or sixth year depending on whether the student had taken Transition Year.
Table 1.2: Profile of the case-study schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Social Mix</th>
<th>Response Rate to Postal Survey (%)</th>
<th>No. of Qualitative Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argyle Street</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Coeducational Secondary</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrack Street</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Girls’ Secondary</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belmore Street</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Girls’ Secondary</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawes Point</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Boys’ Secondary</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawson Street</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Community/Comprehensive</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixon Street</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig Lane</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Coeducational Secondary (Fee-paying)</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris Street</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Girls’ Secondary</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hay Street</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lang Street</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park Street</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Boys’ Secondary</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wattle Street</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Boys’ Secondary</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Pseudonyms are used to represent the case-study schools.
The collection of information on parents was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, a questionnaire was sent to all parents of students in fifth and/or sixth year in each of the twelve case-study schools. This resulted in a total of 1,362 questionnaires being sent out. The questionnaires covered a range of topics, including parents’ decisions relating to school choice, parental perceptions of the junior and senior cycle curricula, parental involvement with the school as well as parental views of the information flow from the school regarding educational decisions to be made by students. The questionnaires were distributed in April 2007, with a second round sent out in May followed by reminders and a third round of surveys where necessary. A total of 461 questionnaires were returned by parents, covering 34 per cent of the target sample. Approximately half of the questionnaires returned related to fifth year students and half to sixth year students. The response rate varied across schools, generally falling within the range of 22 to 47 per cent, although two schools fell below this figure (see Table 1.2). While a higher response rate would have been preferable, we have explored the patterns of non-response to examine whether we have captured the views of different groups of parents. The possible implications of non-response are discussed in section 1.4.3 below.

In the second phase of the study, the survey data were complemented by telephone interviews conducted with parents between July and August 2007 by one of the authors of the study. The research design set out to interview five parents in each of the twelve case-study schools. This target was achieved in seven of the schools. Four interviews were conducted with parents in two of the schools, three in two of the schools and just one in one school. A total of 51 in-depth interviews were conducted. These interviews explored many of the issues covered in the survey in greater depth, allowing us to capture a more nuanced view of parental involvement in educational decision-making. By necessity, the questionnaires administered to parents had contained a number of ‘closed’ questions, that is, questions in which parents were asked to respond to a set of pre-given categories. Interviewing parents in greater depth meant that we could assess whether
issues other than those included in the questionnaire were important to parents and allowed us to address these issues. These interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were later analysed using the QSR N6 package to identify the emerging themes. Quotes from these interviews are included in Chapters Two to Seven in order to illustrate the perspectives of parents themselves. Because of variation by gender and socio-economic background, each quote is labelled in terms of the gender of the parent-child dyad (e.g. mother-daughter, father-son etc.), the educational level of the parent, and the social mix of the school.

Given the objectives of the study and the necessity to provide an overview of parental involvement in post-primary education not only from the viewpoint of parents but also from student and school perspectives, other data sources were used in this study. The study draws on in-depth interviews with key school personnel in the case-study schools conducted over the course of junior cycle to glean the school perspective on parental involvement. Information collected from students about their parents’ involvement in their education is also included in the current study. Furthermore, the chapter on school choice places the findings of the current study in the context of data from three national studies, which have addressed the issues of school admissions and selectivity: the *Schooling and Sex Roles* study of 1981, the *Schools Database* of 1994 and the *Moving Up* survey of 2002. These data allow us to explore the extent to which the pattern of admissions to different types of school has changed over the period since the 1980s.

### 1.4.2 Profile of the parents

Mothers were more likely to complete the survey than fathers, a pattern which applied across all schools. In all, 78 per cent of respondents were mothers with just 20 per cent being fathers and two per cent ‘other guardians’. This is so despite the survey being addressed to ‘the parents/guardian’ of each of the students in either fifth year or sixth year. The fact that mothers chose to fill in the survey than fathers could possibly support the observation by Reay (1995) that parental
involvement in school matters is likely to be gendered. A majority of mothers is not unusual with respect to interviews with parents of schoolchildren at either primary or post-primary level and has been evident in a number of studies (see, for example, David et al., 2003). The sociological and economic literature has found significant effects of child gender on parental time allocation pointing at different patterns in the parenting of sons and daughters. Evidence from time allocation studies indicates that fathers of sons are more involved than the fathers of daughters with their children’s discipline, schoolwork and their activities (Lamb et al., 1987; Morgan et al., 1988; Lundberg 2005). Furthermore, Figure 1.1 indicates that, while mothers were more likely to complete the survey overall, fathers were somewhat more likely to do so when the questionnaire related to their son.

**Figure 1.1: Percentage of mothers and fathers who completed the survey according to the gender of the student**

In terms of educational level attained, Figure 1.2 illustrates that the highest level of education of parents varied greatly across the case-study schools. The schools with middle-class student intakes have a significantly higher proportion of parents whose highest level of education is third level. This is particularly evident for Fig Lane, a fee-
Figure 1.2: Educational level of parents by school
paying school. Schools with mixed social intakes have a mix of education levels among their parents – a mix of post-primary, post-secondary education (including Post-Leaving Certificate courses and apprenticeship) and tertiary levels. Finally, within schools with a working-class intake, parents generally have post-primary or post-secondary training qualifications rather than third level, although the proportion of parents with third-level qualifications varies somewhat across working-class schools.

1.4.3. Issue of non-response
The overall response rate to the postal survey of parents was 34 per cent. It is important to consider whether the profile of respondents varies dramatically from that of non-respondents since this will affect the inferences we can draw on the basis of our sample. To do so, we can use information derived from the student survey to compare the two groups of parents.

Some demographic differences are apparent between responding and non-responding parents. Parents of daughters were more likely to respond to the survey than parents of sons. Furthermore, those from professional occupational groups were somewhat over-represented, and those from working-class groups somewhat under-represented, among respondents to the survey (see Figure 1.3). The level of paternal and maternal employment is similar for respondents and non-respondents. Response rates do not differ significantly between immigrant and other parents; however, parents from the Traveller community have somewhat lower response rates.
It might be hypothesised that parents who are more involved in their child’s education would be more likely to respond to the survey and that this may distort the overall findings. On the contrary, we found no significant differences in the level of parental involvement, as reported by the young person, between respondents and non-respondents. Figure 1.4 shows a similar profile of frequency of talking to their children about how they are getting on in school in the two groups. The frequency of helping with homework, checking that homework is completed and discussing tests or exams are also not significantly different between respondents and non-respondents. The two groups are also very similar in terms of their expectations for their child’s Junior Certificate exam performance, as reported by third year students. The children of respondents and non-respondents are found to take similar pathways through the schooling system, with no significant differences found in the Leaving Certificate programme taken (see Figure 1.5).
In sum, survey responses to our study somewhat under-represent working-class parents, which should be borne in mind in interpreting
the findings. Throughout the text, we highlight differences in responses according to the social and educational profile of parents in order to address this issue. However, respondents and non-respondents are very similar in relation to the key aspect of the study, that is, the involvement of parents in their children’s education. As a result, the study provides valuable insights into parents’ engagement with, and involvement in, their children’s education.

1.5 Outline of the study

Chapters Two to Seven present the main findings of the study. Chapter Two discusses the factors involved in school choice and the extent to which competition between schools impacts on this process. In Chapter Three, we explore parental perceptions of the schooling process within junior cycle, while Chapter Four focuses on perceptions of senior cycle level. Chapter Five examines the school perspective on parental involvement and the extent to which schools develop channels of communication with parents. Parents’ perceptions of their contact with the school and involvement in education are highlighted in Chapter Six, while Chapter Seven explores student perspectives of parental involvement and its association with their academic outcomes. The main findings of the study along with the implications for policy development are outlined in Chapter Eight.
Chapter Two

Parents and School Choice

2.1 Introduction

There has been a good deal of policy attention internationally to the issue of school choice, with many countries facilitating increased diversity in the type of schools available to post-primary students (OECD, 2006). A number of commentators in the English context have suggested that increased school choice has resulted in a polarisation of educational experiences between more and less advantaged groups (Noden, 2000; Reay, 2004), a finding that has been disputed by other researchers (Gorard and Fitz, 1998). Unlike in many other educational systems, in Ireland there is no requirement that young people attend the local school, or alternatively no overarching local education authority to ‘objectively’ sort and assign pupils to different schools on specified criteria. There is, however, quite active selection of schools on the part of students and their parents in the Irish context (Hannan et al., 1996). This pattern has its roots not in an impetus towards an educational ‘market’ but rather in the denominational nature of schools historically as well as the Constitutional guarantee of parents as the primary educators of their children (Lynch and Moran, 2006).

In the Irish context, the profile of students attending a school will reflect an interaction between the following factors: the school’s admissions policy; the presence of other schools in the local area and the degree of competition between those schools; and patterns of choice on the part of young people and their parents. These choice patterns have significant consequences since post-primary schools differ in
their influence on student academic and social development (Hannan et al., 1996; Smyth, 1999).

This chapter draws on the postal survey of parents as well as on qualitative interviews with parents to explore the process of school choice from their perspective. This new information is placed in the context of data from three national studies, which have addressed the issues of school admissions and selectivity: the Schooling and Sex Roles study of 1981, the Schools Database of 1994 and the Moving Up survey of 2002. These data allow us to explore the extent to which the pattern of admissions to different types of school has changed over the period 1981 to 2002.

2.2 The admissions policies of post-primary schools

This section looks at school admissions policy over the period 1981 to 2002. In order to contextualise this information, it is worth looking at the broader demographic patterns. Between 1981 and 1994, the population of young people entering post-primary education increased somewhat, from 66,488 to 70,909. Much more dramatic changes in the population structure took place after 1994; between 1994 and 2002, there was a 21 per cent decline in the post-primary school entrant population to 55,968 by the end of the period. Over the same time-frame, there was a slight reduction in the number of post-primary schools but this was merely in the order of 4 per cent (Figure 2.1).

What consequences, if any, did this decline have for schools? The reduction in the number of young people entering post-primary education meant that schools were drawing on a smaller pool of entrants. This is evident when we look at the extent to which schools are over-subscribed, that is, have more students applying for places than they can admit to the school. Over-subscription rates stood at 28 per cent in 1981; the level decreased to 22 per cent in 1994 with a further decline to 15 per cent by 2002. Thus, by the end of the period, fewer schools were in the position to ‘sort’ from among a large pool of applicants.
The extent to which schools are over-subscribed varies significantly by school type. Figure 2.2 indicates patterns of oversubscription for post-primary schools in 1994 and 2002. In both years, vocational schools are much less likely to be oversubscribed than other schools, accepting all students who apply to them. However, there have been some significant changes over time. In 1994, single-sex secondary schools were the most ‘selective’, that is, were more likely to be oversubscribed, a pattern that was also evident in 1981 (see Hannan and Boyle, 1987). By 2002, however, single-sex secondary, coeducational secondary and community/comprehensive schools had similar levels of selectivity.

How then do schools select students when they have more applicants than places? In the 1994 survey, post-primary principals in oversubscribed schools were asked about the relative importance of a specified set of factors in admitting students (see Figure 2.3). Having a sibling at the school emerged as the most important criterion. Having attended a feeder, attached or local primary school is also an important basis for accessing oversubscribed post-primary schools. Good character references and ability levels on entry were cited by a smaller proportion of schools.
**Figure 2.2: School oversubscription by school type**

![Bar chart showing school oversubscription by school type, with data for 1994 and 2002.](image)


**Figure 2.3: Criteria for student admissions in oversubscribed schools, 1994**

![Bar chart showing criteria for student admissions in oversubscribed schools, 1994.](image)

Figure 2.4: Criteria for student admissions in oversubscribed schools, 2002

Figure 2.4 shows the criteria indicated by the smaller number of oversubscribed schools in 2002. It should be noted that the two figures are not directly comparable as school principals were offered slightly different lists of criteria in the two surveys. As in 1994, having a sibling at the school emerges as the most important factor. Attending a feeder or attached primary school and living locally were also mentioned by significant numbers of school principals. In general, data from 1994 and 2002 indicate that, where a school is selective, access is based on the prior choices made by parents, that is, where they sent their older children to school and/or the primary school they selected for their child. This pattern is likely to have implications for ‘outsiders’, that is, those parents who do not have in-depth knowledge of how the schooling system operates, and may lead to social differentiation between schools.

As well as impacting on the selectivity of schools, the demographic decline in the school population has had consequences for student numbers in particular schools. In the 2002 survey, principals were asked about the extent to which they had experienced a change in student numbers over the previous five years. Forty-five per cent of
post-primary schools had experienced a fall in student numbers, one-third had a stable intake while just over a fifth had experienced an increase in numbers. However, it is clear that all types of schools did not have similar experiences. Vocational schools were most likely, and coeducational secondary schools least likely, to have declining student numbers (Figure 2.5). The coeducational secondary sector also experienced a greater increase in numbers than the other school types.

**Figure 2.5: Change in student numbers by school type, 2002**

![Bar chart showing change in student numbers by school type, 2002](image)


### 2.3 School competition

As well as being influenced by a school’s own selection processes, student intake is affected by the extent of competition between local schools. The vast majority of post-primary schools have at least one other school in their local area. Among those with other local schools, two-thirds of school principals in 1994 reported the existence of competition between schools. However, by 2002, between-school competition had become much more common, with 89 per cent of principals reporting competition. This increased competition between schools
must be seen in the context of schools seeking to attract a much smaller pool of young people in the later period (see Section 2.2).

To what extent do schools tend to ‘win’ or ‘lose’ in the face of such competition? Four categories of schools can be distinguished from survey data from school principals: those with no other local schools; those who report getting the ‘better’ students; those who do not experience cream-off; and those who experience cream-off, that is, the higher ability students tend to go to other schools in the local area. Figure 2.6 indicates that only a small proportion of schools are located in areas where there are no other schools, so in the majority of cases, parents make choices among a number of local schools. A significant proportion of school principals reported that their school experienced ‘cream-off’, that is, that higher ability students tended to go to other schools. In the face of increased competition between schools, the experience of cream-off increased somewhat between 1994 and 2002 (Figure 2.6). At the other end of the scale, the proportion of principals who reported that their school ‘gets the better pupils’ declined from one in five in 1981 to one in ten in 2002.

The extent to which schools experience cream-off is significantly related to school type1 (Figure 2.7). Vocational schools are more likely than any other school types to experience cream-off, with over two-thirds reporting this pattern. In contrast, single-sex and coeducational secondary schools are more likely to report that they get the better students. Although only a small number of schools are located in areas with no other local schools, this is not surprisingly more prevalent for the community/comprehensive sector.

---

1 The patterns for 1994 and 2002 are broadly similar so only the details for 2002 are presented here.
Figure 2.6: Impact of competition between schools

Source: Schooling and Sex Roles study, 1981; Schools Database, 1994; Moving Up survey, 2002.

Figure 2.7: Impact of competition between schools by school type, 2002

Source: Schooling and Sex Roles study, 1981; Schools Database, 1994; Moving Up survey, 2002.
As well as an increase in the level of cream-off, changes are also evident in the impact of such cream-off on the profile of students in the school. Principals were asked to estimate the proportion of in-coming students who have literacy, numeracy and behavioural difficulties. Figure 2.8 shows those schools where numeracy difficulties were estimated as applying to 30 per cent or more of the student cohort. In 1994, one-fifth of schools who reported that they experienced ‘a great deal’ of cream-off had a high incidence of numeracy difficulties among students. However, by 2002, this had increased to 44 per cent of schools experiencing a great deal of cream-off. Similar patterns are evident in relation to literacy and behaviour difficulties among students. It is apparent, therefore, that increased competition between schools in recent years has resulted in a greater concentration of students with literacy, numeracy and behavioural difficulties in schools which have experienced cream-off.

Table 2.1: Overview of case-study schools in relation to school competition and school selectivity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Changes in Student Numbers</th>
<th>Oversubscribed?</th>
<th>Other Local Schools?</th>
<th>Cream-off?</th>
<th>Social Mix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fig Lane</td>
<td>Increased</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No cream-off</td>
<td>Middle-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris Street</td>
<td>Increased</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some cream off</td>
<td>Middle-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belmore Street</td>
<td>Increased</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some cream-off</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park Street</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some cream-off</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argyle Street</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No local schools</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawson Street</td>
<td>Declined</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No local schools</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wattle Street</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Get the better students</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrack Street</td>
<td>Declined</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No cream-off</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixon Street</td>
<td>Declined</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No local schools</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawes Point</td>
<td>Declined</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Great deal of cream-off</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hay Street</td>
<td>Declined</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Great deal of cream-off</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lang Street</td>
<td>Declined</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Great deal of cream-off</td>
<td>Working-class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the schools.
Variation was evident in the twelve case-study schools included in the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) (Table 2.1). Half of the schools had experienced a recent decline in student numbers, five out of six of these schools having a working-class intake. Only one of the schools, Fig Lane, a fee-paying school, was oversubscribed. Three of the schools, all working-class in profile, reported that they experienced a great deal of cream-off, with higher ability students going to other local schools in the area. However, the profile of schools experiencing some cream-off was less distinctive, with some mixed or middle-class schools included in this category, most likely reflecting the interplay of factors at the local level.

2.4 Choosing a school

The discussion so far has focused on the effect of competition at the school level. This section considers the factors shaping the choice of post-primary school on the part of parents and young people.

2.4.1 What choices are being made?

To what extent do young people attend their local school or alternatively seek out a school further afield? Evidence from a national survey of Junior Certificate students in 1994 indicated that parents were making quite active choices regarding schools; only half of the student cohort attended their nearest or most accessible school. This pattern varies significantly across school sectors. Those in the community/comprehensive sector are most likely to be attending their local school. In contrast, those in voluntary secondary schools, especially single-sex schools, are more likely to be attending a school which has been actively chosen by their parents (Figure 2.9).

The pattern of school choice also varies by social class background. Figure 2.10 indicates that active school choice, that is, attending a non-local school, is quite prevalent across all social groups in Ireland. However, those from higher professional backgrounds are significantly more likely to be attending a school outside their local area than those from other class backgrounds.
Figure 2.9: Proportion of Junior Certificate students attending their local school by school type, 1994

![Bar chart showing proportion of Junior Certificate students attending their local school by school type, 1994.](image)


Figure 2.10: Proportion of Junior Certificate students attending a non-local school by social class background, 1994

![Bar chart showing proportion of Junior Certificate students attending a non-local school by social class background, 1994.](image)


Similar patterns of school choice were evident in 2002 within the case-study schools in the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study, with al-
most half of the students not attending their nearest or most accessible school. As in the earlier period, middle-class families were more likely to make more active choices of school; 59 per cent of those from higher professional backgrounds attended a school outside their local area compared with a third of those from semi-skilled/unskilled manual groups. Parents and students appear to get their choice of school since only six per cent of students report attending a school that was not their parents’ first choice. The case-study schools differ in the extent to which they draw only on a local population\(^2\) (Figure 2.11). The majority of those in working-class schools were attending their local school, the exception being Hay Street. Students in mixed schools were somewhat more likely to attend a school outside their local area. The exception to this pattern was Dawson Street, reflecting the fact that it is the only post-primary school in the locality (see Table 2.1). Fig Lane, a fee-paying school, draws the vast majority of its student intake from outside the local area.

Students in the case-study schools were also asked about the extent of their involvement in choosing a school. In the majority (71 per cent) of cases, parents discussed the choice of post-primary school with their children. There was some variation by social background in this pattern. Those from higher professional backgrounds were more likely to report some involvement in choosing the school (81 per cent) while this was less common among those from non-employed or farming backgrounds (67 per cent and 55 per cent respectively). There was no variation by parental employment status or being from a minority group (a Traveller or an immigrant). Students with higher reading and mathematics test scores on entry to post-primary school were more likely to have had some involvement in school choice.

\(^2\) Data are not available on Harris Street and Argyle Street since they joined the study in its second year.
Figure 2.11: Proportion of first year students attending their local school by school, 2002

Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study.
2.4.2 Factors influencing school choice

Using both the parent survey and the parent qualitative interviews, this section sets out to examine parental school choice processes and indeed whether parents feel they have the opportunity to exercise choice. This issue has important implications for equality and, given recent trends, it is also likely to have important implications for newcomer (immigrant) students (see Smyth et al., 2009). Parents were asked ‘How important were each of these reasons for you in sending your son or daughter to this second-level school?’.

Parents were asked to state whether it was ‘very important’, ‘important’, ‘not very important’ or ‘does not apply’ and the responses included:

- My older children went to this school
- The school is fairly close to our home
- I/we heard that this is a good school
- My son/daughter wanted to go there
- Most children from my son’s/daughter’s primary school went there
- This school has good facilities for sports and other activities
- This school has a good academic reputation
- Other (please state).

These items were selected based on their importance in previous research on school choice internationally. The responses to each item are shown in Figure 2.12. What is particularly evident is that the school’s reputation and the student’s own preferences are important considerations for parents. The vast majority of parents also take account of which school their older child(ren) had attended. Having good facilities and proximity to home are seen as of somewhat lesser importance but are still rated as important by the majority of parents. Around half of the parents also took account of the school attended by most children from their child’s primary school.
There was some variation evident across different groups of parents in the relative importance of different reasons for choosing a school. The most frequently occurring reason for choosing schools among parents with third-level education was because the school was deemed a ‘good school’. The most frequently occurring reason among parents with post-primary or post-secondary education was the child’s own preference (Figure 2.13). Parents with post-primary education were less likely to emphasise hearing it was a good school than those with higher levels of education.

Differences were also evident in terms of the social mix of the school. Parents with children in a middle-class school were less likely than other parents to emphasise proximity, the child’s own preference and the pattern of transfer from the primary school. Parents with children in working-class schools were somewhat less likely to rate hearing it was a good school than those with children in mixed or middle-class schools (Figure 2.14).
**Figure 2.13: Reasons for choosing the school by parental education (% ‘very important’)***

![Parental education chart]


**Figure 2.14: Reasons for choosing the school by social mix of the school (% ‘very important’)***

![School social mix chart]

The reasons for choosing the post-primary school were explored in greater detail in the in-depth interviews carried out with parents. In the questionnaire, parents had been given a pre-specified list of possible reasons but, in the interview, the process of school choice was discussed in a more exploratory way. However, there was a good deal of consistency between the quantitative and qualitative findings, with most parents emphasising it being a ‘good school’, a school attended by their older children, location and the school being a ‘natural’ follow-on from the primary school. The majority of parents mentioned multiple factors rather than one single reason.

One group of parents stressed that they wanted to send their child to a ‘good’ school; these parents sought to send their child to the ‘best’ school but interestingly such a choice operated within certain parameters, namely, that of the local area:

It was the best school in the area at the time. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, working-class school)

Several reasons, one for location, it’s close to where we live and I’m familiar with the area, we would have known the school and the history of it and so on. And I’d say the main reason would have been location, I should say a good school in the area you know, the closest, what we would consider a good school. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, middle-class school)

On further investigation, the definition of a ‘good school’ was found to reflect good academic performance but also issues such as school facilities:

Well it has a good reputation academically and it has quite good facilities … so basically I thought it was about the best school in the area. And also I knew that there was a long waiting list and a lot of people didn’t get in, so it would be known for its good reputation. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school)
Because it was the best school in the area at the time, I had researched it and it is close by, good results. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Some other parents emphasised the importance of providing their child with an ‘all-round’ education rather than focusing solely on academic results:

Well we sent her really because we thought it would give her a good rounded education, not specifically fantastic academically but a good rounding as a person. (Mother-daughter, post-secondary education, middle-class school)

The extent to which the school was seen as academic or practical in focus entered into the decision-making process, depending on the perceived abilities and needs of the child. One father indicated the importance of facilitating access to more vocationally-oriented subjects for his son who was not seen as ‘academic’:

Well we were advised to send him there because they have more practical subjects there than theoretical.

... 

We looked at a couple of them [other schools] and we just choose that one because he is not really academic like. (Father-son, third-level education, working-class school)

For another highly-educated mother, her choice of school involved a rejection of the vocationally-oriented alternative school and the selection of an ‘academic’ school:

It was sort of I suppose it’s an old fashioned thing, the [other local school] used to be for people who were going to use their hands and [this school] was more people who were sort of not inclined to be of that way. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)
Parents and School Choice

The previous sections of this chapter have indicated that oversubscribed schools often use having siblings at the school as an admissions criterion. The survey of parents indicated the importance of prior choices regarding older children in selecting a school. In keeping with these results, the school attended by the parents’ older children emerged as a factor in the in-depth interviews with parents:

Our attitude was that we wanted to send them all to the same schools, so that they would all have the same experience. And we felt that their attitude might be, why did you send one to one school and me to the other, was I not good enough or … why? So rather than have this, we were anxious that they would all go to the same school. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school)

Well her two sisters had gone up there and basically because it was more for convenience than anything else, because it was only five minutes walk from the house. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)

Choosing the same school for all of their children was seen as giving parents greater information on which to base a choice:

I have five daughters and they all went to [the school] and I found it was a very good school. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, working-class school)

Interviewer: Had you considered many other schools at the time?

Parent: Not for her but for the eldest one we had but we were pleased with that one with the other two and so we sent her there. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Interestingly, parents or other family members having attended the school themselves was also a factor in choosing the school:
The tradition of all the men from our side going to [the school] was very strong. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

In keeping with the survey data, the child’s own preference was perceived as important in selecting the school, a pattern which was more evident among parents with lower educational levels:

Basically because he [my son] chose it, I kind of put it up to him to decide which school he wanted to go to and he picked that one because it was very sporty, now I didn’t know a huge amount about the school so that's why I agreed with it. (Mother-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

It was the school that she picked out of three other schools in the area. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

In some cases, the child’s choice was seen as overriding parents’ own preferences:

He wanted to go there himself, we possibly would have preferred him to go somewhere else, but there was a whole load of things that [he] preferred to do and that was fine by us. (Father-son, post-secondary education, mixed intake school)

Other reasons emerged from the interviews than had been specified in the survey; these included the gender mix of the school, the range of subjects provided and school size. A broader range of subjects available in the school was a factor for some parents:

You know they have a wide range of subjects that they offer and that would be the main reasons really I suppose that I would have sent the two boys [there]. … Like I mean they offer nineteen subjects in first year, so … they can kind of see maybe what they might like to do for their Junior Cert, when they break it down into the nine or ten subjects. …Which I think now is a big plus … I see the value of that as an exercise alone, to introduce the
students to all the different variety subjects that are in the school. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

The gender mix of the school was also a factor for a small number of parents. This mainly involved a preference for single-sex schooling for their daughters:

Now things have changed of course you know but yeah she wouldn’t have been comfortable at that time in a mixed school and I thought and [my husband] thought yeah that for our daughter we prefer an all girls’ school, you know sort of traditional really I suppose. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school)

We decided to send her to the single-sex schools and we would also have had a leaning towards the school because of its religious ethos. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school)

However, some parents expressed a preference for coeducational schools:

I’d prefer a mixed school than in a single sex school and because I had been in a mixed school and I wanted to carry that through. (Mother-daughter, post-secondary education, mixed intake school)

I didn’t want to send him to an all boys’ school. (Father-son, third-level education, middle-class school)

For parents of children in one of the case-study schools, the small size of the school was seen as an attraction, allowing for more personal interaction between teachers and students:

The advantage of [the school] is it’s a small school and there’s not that many kids going to it, so they get a little bit more attention really. (Mother-son, educational level unknown, working-class school)
Mainly because it’s just a small school, you know and I think it’s more personal when the school is smaller, you know that way. Like schools that have kind of very big numbers, you kind of feel like you’re lost in the crowd, I just feel a small school is better, you know the teachers get to know the children even better. (Mother-son, post-primary education, working-class school)

A distinction was evident between parents who made a very active choice and others for whom the school was the ‘natural’ choice, either because they chose the local school or because their child was in a particular feeder primary school. Many of the parents who made an active choice had proactively gathered as much information as possible, by talking to other parents and visiting the school:

First of all I’d check it out with other parents in the area, asking, just checking results, discussion with [my daughter] of course, basically those. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

We asked parents of children who were going to the different schools so we knew, we got information through the school, the primary school they got information because the school visited them and they were given booklets and they had open days and that's how we did it. (Mother-daughter, post-secondary education, mixed intake school)

For other parents, the choice was less active, reflecting school proximity and the primary school attended. Thus, the post-primary school was seen as the ‘natural’ option:

It was recommended from the primary that he go there, he was used to the area so I mean it was just all around like so it was just one from the other you know and he went with all his friends. So it was just as simple as that, he didn’t want to be changed from his friends. (Mother-son, post-primary education, working-class school)

It's beside her, handy for her to go to.
Interviewer: Did you think of any other schools when you were considering what school to send her to?

No. … She went to the primary school beside it and then it was just a natural follow-on to the secondary school. (Father-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)

Some parents felt constrained by the absence of choice in their local area so that actively selecting a school would involve a good deal of time and effort:

We had very little choice around our area. Also it had to be a school that she could actually get to and get home, you know, independently to having to be brought there in a car and brought home because … I wouldn’t be able to collect her and bring her down, [my husband] would sometimes in the morning. But we hadn’t so much choice now. We’re actually very badly … served here. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school)

In other cases, school admissions policies were seen as potentially constraining choice:

Most of the schools would take people in their area before [others]. You wouldn’t have much of a choice in what school you were sending them [to] in other words. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

The parents interviewed generally felt they had enough information to make a decision, or at least that they could obtain such information themselves if they so desired:

I think that there was loads of information available, I mean when you’re living in a town with a school there's loads of people to talk to, I mean parents have either older kids maybe that went [to that] school, or they went there themselves or they knew people that did. People are generally very talkative about schools so from local knowledge I think there's plenty of information. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, middle-class school)
We went to the open days for all the schools, so I mean it was there you could talk to the teachers and get the information on the schools. So it was there, the information was there if you wanted. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

However, some parents felt that very little information was available about schools:

It’s very difficult to determine, no, you don’t have enough information about the schools, and that’s one of the difficulties in sending children to school, you have no way of actually making some kind of empirical judgment based on their academic achievements or whatever. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, middle-class school)

I didn’t really have information about other schools in the area, no, nothing at all. I had no information at all.

Interviewer: Would you have liked more information?

I would have, yeah, just like to make a choice to see … if they offered anything different. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)

In sum, the factors influencing the choice of post-primary school include the school’s reputation, the child’s own preferences, location and prior choices made for older children. Parents are found to differ in terms of whether they make an ‘active’ choice of school for their children.

2.5 Conclusions

There is quite a degree of active school choice in the Irish context, with around half of post-primary students attending a school outside their local area. However, the context within which these choices are made has changed over time. The decline in the size of post-primary school-going population in the 1990s and early 2000s had significant
consequences for both schools and families. From the school perspective, schools were trying to attract a shrinking pool of applicants and, as a result, competition between schools increased over time. This increased competition led to some polarisation within the post-primary system, with some schools experiencing ‘cream-off’ and therefore catering to a student population with a significant degree of learning and behavioural difficulties. From the family perspective, the potential choices open to parents and their children may have increased somewhat. In choosing a post-primary school, parents pay attention to a multiplicity of factors, including the reputation of the school, its proximity, a young person’s own preferences and the primary school they attended. However, while active choice is a feature for a significant proportion of all parents, those in higher professional occupations and those with higher educational levels are more likely to exercise such choices. In keeping with previous research in Ireland and internationally (see, for example, Lareau, 2000; Lyons et al., 2003), some groups of parents appear to have greater ‘insider’ knowledge of the educational system, using information acquired through social networks to select the ‘best’ school for their child. In contrast, working-class parents are somewhat more likely to see the choice of a post-primary school as a ‘natural follow-on’, relating to where they live and which primary school their child attended.

In the Irish context, research has indicated that significant differences are evident between post-primary schools in the academic and personal development outcomes of their students (Hannan et al., 1996; Smyth, 1999; Smyth et al., 2007). The school parents select will therefore have important consequences for their child’s experiences of education and their later life-chances. The following chapters consider other ways in which parents can influence the educational experiences of their children.

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3 The landscape of post-primary school choice is a changing one. There has been an increase in school enrolment at post-primary level since 2006 with a further increase projected up to 2025 (DES, 2010). Such demographic changes are likely to lead to further changes in between-school competition and the profile of schools.
Chapter Three

Parental Perceptions of the Schooling Process

3.1 Introduction

This chapter draws on the postal survey of parents and the qualitative interviews with parents to explore their perceptions of the schooling process in general and the junior cycle in particular. It begins by exploring parental perceptions of their child’s school and the overall benefits of post-primary education. Section three considers parental perceptions of the transition from primary to post-primary education. Section four considers variation in subject choice practices across schools while section five considers parental perceptions of the junior cycle curriculum.

3.2 Perceptions of the educational system

Parents of senior cycle students were asked to reflect on two aspects of their children’s education: the school they had attended, and the benefits they had derived from post-primary education. In relation to the school their child attended, parents were asked whether they were satisfied with the personal and social support for students, the range of subjects on offer, support for students with learning difficulties, career guidance provision, the quality of teaching and extra-curricular activities on offer. The majority of the parents in our sample were ‘very satisfied’ or ‘somewhat satisfied’ with all of the specified aspects of their child’s school. In general, satisfaction levels were highest in relation to the range of subjects on offer in the
school and to the personal/social support offered to students (Figure 3.1). Dissatisfaction was most evident in relation to career guidance, with almost one quarter of parents in the case-study schools expressing dissatisfaction:

Definitely the career guidance is something that I just think there is not enough of. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

I think there should be more career guidance and I think … they should have a class, at least maybe twice a week, and sit down and people should discuss bullying and discuss things like that, what’s going on in the school. (Mother-son, educational level unknown, working-class school)

Figure 3.1: Satisfaction with aspects of child’s school

Some differences in satisfaction levels were evident across different groups of parents and types of schools. Parents with lower levels of education (post-primary education or lower) were more likely to express dissatisfaction with provision for students with learning difficulties, with a fifth of them doing so (Figure 3.2). In relation to ca-
reer guidance, dissatisfaction was greater among more highly educated parents.

*Figure 3.2: Dissatisfaction with learning support and career guidance by parental education*

![Chart showing dissatisfaction with learning support and career guidance](chart.png)


Differences were also evident according to the social mix of the school. On average, parents with children attending working-class schools were more dissatisfied than other parents with learning support provision and extra-curricular activities (Figure 3.3). Parents of children in middle-class schools were more likely than other parent groups to express dissatisfaction with career guidance provision.
Figure 3.3: Dissatisfaction with aspects of school by school social mix

![Bar chart showing dissatisfaction with aspects of school by school social mix.](chart)


Significant between-school variation was evident in relation to satisfaction with the range of subjects provided in the school (Figure 3.4). Dissatisfaction levels were highest in Park Street and Dawes Point, with over a fifth of parents of boys in these schools expressing dissatisfaction. In general, dissatisfaction tends to be higher among parents of students who took fewer subjects in the first term of first year. Thus, the provision of a taster programme in junior cycle is associated with greater parental satisfaction with subject provision.

Between-school variation was also evident in relation to the level of dissatisfaction with learning support provision (Figure 3.5). Dissatisfaction levels were highest in Harris Street and Lang Street, and lowest in Dawes Point.
Figure 3.4: Dissatisfaction with range of subjects by school and number of subjects taken in the first term of first year

Figure 3.5: Dissatisfaction with learning support by school

As well as being asked about their perceptions of their child’s school, parents were asked about the extent to which post-primary education had benefited their child along a range of dimensions. The parents surveyed were most positive about aspects of personal and social development; the majority saw post-primary education as being ‘a lot’ of help in getting on with others, making new friends, communicating well, increasing self-confidence and becoming a well-balanced person (Figure 3.6):

I think the support system, peers, they’re very supportive of one another. They come out as very friendly individuals from that school. I’ve seen it over the years, it isn’t just mine, you know, the friends they make, they can be very loyal to one another, you know. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Facilitating young people to be able to think for themselves as well as enhancing reading and writing skills were also perceived to be achieved by post-primary education. Parents were somewhat more critical, however, about the extent to which post-primary education prepares young people for the world of work and adult life as well as the provision of computer skills:

The only thing is the curriculum itself, I think [it] is very narrow and academic and being honest, it doesn’t really prepare them for actually leaving school and going into the real world. I think there should be far more practical elements to some of the subjects, because at the end of the day that’s what they’re going to have to do. If they go into a career, they’ll have to put things into practice. So I would prefer a far more practical application of some of the subjects. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school)

Parents with children in working-class schools were somewhat less likely to see post-primary education as being a lot of help in their child forming new friendships, although this pattern may be related to the proportion of working-class children who followed on with their peers from primary school and thus retained their existing social net-
works (see Chapter Two). A quarter of parents of students in middle-class schools were critical of the degree of preparation for the world of work compared with less than a tenth of those with children in working-class schools. Highly educated parents were more critical of the (lack of) provision of computer skills and the extent of preparation for the world of work, with one-fifth reporting that post-primary education had been of no help at all in these respects. This section has focused on parents’ general perceptions of their child’s education; the following sections of the chapter look at their views on junior cycle education in greater detail.

*Figure 3.6: Perceived benefits of post-primary education*

3.3 The transition from primary to post-primary school

A consideration of the transition from primary to post-primary school is important, as the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study has indicated that student experiences in first year are partly predictive of their examination performance in the Junior Certificate (Smyth et al., 2007) and processes of disengagement are often embedded in earlier experiences of school (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Student experiences and attitudes early in the junior cycle year are found to be significantly associated with Junior Certificate examination performance and engagement with school. Furthermore, a ‘mismatch’ of standards between primary and second-level curricula can contribute to a longer settling-in period and underachievement. Students who report discontinuity in curriculum and standards between primary and post-primary school achieve lower grades than other students (Smyth et al., 2007).

Findings from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study indicate that schools use a variety of approaches in helping their first year students to adapt to post-primary education (see Smyth et al., 2004). Such approaches include interventions such as a class tutor or year head system, induction day, mentoring system, study skills programme, language courses for those whose first language is not English, sports and social activities, meeting with parents and specific induction activities (such as summer camps). The class tutor system and induction day are the most frequently mentioned forms of support for first year students. However, the extent and ‘quality’ of induction practices were found to vary greatly between the case-study schools (see Smyth et al., 2004). Drawing on an overall examination of integration practices, the schools were classified as having a ‘stronger’ or ‘weaker’ integration programme. Those with stronger and more comprehensive integration programmes were Dawson Street, Dixon Street, Fig Lane, Lang Street, Dawes Point, Belmore Street, and Wattle Street, while Barrack Street, Park Street and Hay Street appeared to have somewhat less extensive integration programmes (Smyth et al., 2004).

Parents were asked ‘Thinking back, how long do you think it took your son/daughter to get settled into first year?’. One-third of the par-
ents surveyed claimed that their child had settled in straight away with a further forty per cent reporting that they had settled in within the first month; a quarter had taken more than one month to settle in, a figure which is slightly higher than that reported by students themselves (see Smyth et al., 2004). Parents of children in middle-class schools reported that they took longer to settle in than those in working-class or mixed schools. In contrast to the views of students themselves where girls reported taking longer to adjust to the new school setting than boys, there were no significant differences in the perceived length of the settling-in period for sons and daughters. Variation was also evident across individual schools, with greater transition difficulties reported by parents in Harris Street and Park Street. There was no clear-cut relationship between parents’ reports and school integration programmes. It may be the case that parents’ views, like those of students, reflect the informal climate of the school as well as formal provision (see Smyth et al., 2004).

Using the qualitative information from parents, we can examine parental perceptions of the factors that are associated with a successful transition from primary to post-primary education. Positive elements emphasized by parents included attendance at feeder schools or attached primary schools, mentor systems, and having an older brother or sister in the school. For many of these parents, knowing other children from the primary school or the local area meant that settling in was easier for their child:

Yeah, [he had] no problem at all, he was in the national school so his whole class were moving to this school so he had no problem integrating at all. (Father-son, third-level education, mixed intake school, high intake from feeder schools)

There would have been an awful lot from the area actually going down to [the school], so she would have known a few people. I’d say if the school that she was going to, where she knew nobody, it might have been different. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school, high intake from attached primary school)
Having an older sibling in the school was also perceived as easing potential transition difficulties among a number of parents:

My older son was there already, so I found it was a lot easier for him to settle in than it was for our older boy ... he already knew the school and he was familiar with being in and out, collecting his older brother and that. (Mother-son, third-level education, middle-class school)

In addition to having an established peer group, many parents also highlighted the importance of individual personality in making the transition, in keeping with the contemporaneous reports of first year parents (see Smyth et al., 2004). For some, the transition went without any problems because of the child’s own personality traits:

Oh, she settled in well but she’s the kind of person that would settle in anywhere, you know she’s a good quiet lass and she’d settle in anywhere. (Father-daughter, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

I suppose that he is a very social child, he gets on really well with his peers and with adults, so he settled in very easy. (Mother-son, third-level education, middle-class school)

For others, there was a ‘slight’ settling-in period but this was perceived as a ‘normal’ consequence of the significant changes that children were experiencing:

Obviously there was a short settling-in period, but I’m sure that’s the same for everyone. (Father-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

It took about six weeks, but that’s her own personality. ... I think it was just from herself, at that time it just took her that length of time to move on. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)
Some aspects of the change from primary to post-primary school were identified as raising particular difficulties. These included making the transition from a rural to an urban school and the different climate (social and academic) evident between primary and post-primary schools:

[She had] a difficult transition time settling in, [it was] a big step from national school into secondary school. … In the national school it’s a country school, a big enough school, but children were treated at their age level, they were treated as ten or eleven year olds. And I just felt when they went from national school into secondary school they were suddenly now young adults and she hadn’t that transition period made. They were very spoon fed in national school and they had to suddenly change over. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

It took her a long time, I’d say she didn’t settle really properly until she went into second year, she found first year tough going. … I think she found that she was now at the bottom of the ladder. Like she went from kind of being top dog to being a nobody and I think that was the thing that was hard to get used to. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, working-class school)

It took a good while to settle in because with some of the subjects I think there’s a big leap from one curriculum to the other, too much of a leap, and there should be far more of a bridge between the two. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school)

Some parents identified specific school supports, including mentors and school personnel, which they perceived as facilitating the settling-in process:

Oh, he settled in very well, right away like, they had mentors, tutors and year heads and they looked after them very well, he settled in pretty much right away. (Mother-son, post-secondary education, mixed intake school)
She settled in well, yeah, no problems, because the school that she went to, they had like older pupils that would come and talk to the young pupils and before they even went up there the older pupils went down to the primary school to talk to them. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)

We were absolutely delighted that she went there because she absolutely loves it, she loved the curriculum, she loved the students, she loved the, we’ll say, the ethos of the school and that, they’ve a great sports programme and extra curricular and all so she is absolutely thriving in it. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, middle-class school)

However, in some situations, parents felt that the ethos of the school did not contribute to a positive transition experience. A number of parents described a delayed settling-in period as the result of streaming practices, whereby students were allocated to their base classes as the result of an academic assessment:

He hated every minute from day one. ... He never settled, he never settled at all. … I think what happened [was] they had an entrance exam, but he didn’t do very well in the entrance exam, so he was put into … a lower class. … Most of his friends went into the high class, but [he] went into the middle class … he was separated from his friends and he’s quiet anyway … he didn’t get on very well because of that. (Mother-son, educational level unknown, working-class school)

Others indicated that expectations of school activities were not borne out, an issue which was particularly evident in relation to involvement in sports at a school level:

Another thing that pulled him to [the school], he said I can try out all these sports. And when he went to the school, unless you were the crème de la crème, you were not allowed near the sports field pitch or anything. … If you weren’t going to win the cup at the end of the year, they didn’t want to know you.  (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)
3.4 Subject choice within junior cycle

Post-primary schools nationally vary in the number of subjects they provide to first year students (Smyth et al., 2004). The number of subjects offered to first year students ranges from 11 to 23 across all schools, with the most common pattern being the provision of 17 or 18 subjects. Generally the number of subjects provided varies significantly by school type, with the highest level of provision found in the community/comprehensive sector and the lowest level in boys’ secondary schools. Subject provision is also found to vary significantly by school size, with the average number of subjects of offer being lower in smaller schools (15.7) and higher in larger schools (18.5).

Schools vary not only in the number of subjects provided but in the timing of subject choice. Some schools require students to choose their subjects before entry to the post-primary school while others allow students a period to try out the new subjects before they are required to choose. Table 3.1 gives an overview of the practices regarding subject choice for students in the case-study schools.

Parents were asked about subject choice in first year. Some parents perceived their son or daughter as having had ‘no choice’ of subjects:

Well they just got a list of what they were doing, like they didn’t get a choice of what they wanted to do, it was only later on then that they got a choice. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school, students pick subjects before entry to first year)

In first year there was no choice really, you just went and you did all these subjects and they told you what the subjects were going to be before you went in. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school, students pick subjects before entry to first year, more restrictive choice)

For other parents, the process of subject choice was seen as of little relevance due to problems of restricted subject choice:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Subjects Taken in 1st Term of 1st Year</th>
<th>Approach and Timing of Subject Choice</th>
<th>Ability Grouping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barrack Street</td>
<td>Girls’ Secondary</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Pick before entry</td>
<td>Mixed Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawes Point</td>
<td>Boys’ Secondary</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Pick before entry</td>
<td>Streamed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawson Street</td>
<td>Community/Comprehensive</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Pick before entry</td>
<td>Mixed Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixon Street</td>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Taster programme</td>
<td>Streamed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hay Street</td>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Pick before entry, more restrictive choice</td>
<td>Streamed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park Street</td>
<td>Boys’ Secondary</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Pick before entry, more restrictive choice</td>
<td>Streamed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wattle Street</td>
<td>Boys’ Secondary</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Pick before entry</td>
<td>Mixed Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argyle Street</td>
<td>Community/Comprehensive</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Taster programme, pick at the end of 1st year</td>
<td>Banded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belmore Street</td>
<td>Girls’ Secondary</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Taster programme, pick at the end of 1st year</td>
<td>Mixed Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig Lane</td>
<td>Coed secondary</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Taster programme, pick at the end of 1st year</td>
<td>Mixed Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris Street</td>
<td>Girls’ Secondary</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Taster programme, pick at the end of 1st year</td>
<td>Mixed Ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lang Street</td>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Taster programme, pick at the end of 1st year</td>
<td>Streamed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We had to use our own information … there was no real information they could have given, you know, it was basically you know History or Geography, French or German, you know this kind of thing, so there was no real information they could have given. (Father-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school, pick at the end of first year)

Many parents had positive things to say about attending a school where taster programmes, that is, students having the opportunity to experience different subjects before choosing, were available:

They do all the subjects in first year. So they try … something like nineteen subjects in first year and what they do is once a fortnight then they have option subjects, so some of them have, would have, Woodwork, Metalwork once a fortnight just to give them a taste for it which I thought was a good idea and then they could choose for second year the subjects that they wanted to keep on. (Mother-daughter, post-secondary education, mixed intake school, taster programme)

I felt subjects fell into blocks and you were tied to picking what was within the blocks, so it limited his choice … I would prefer if he had … had a chance to … do a few months at all subjects and then choose what he wanted to do. (Mother-son, post-secondary education, mixed intake school, subjects selected before entry)

The taster approach in itself may encourage communication between students and their parents regarding subject choice.

She sat down and she discussed what she felt happy with taking after doing all the subjects. … She decided the ones that she wanted to do and we were happy with the decisions that she made. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, mixed intake school, taster programme for all of first year)

Parents also offered their views on the amount of information they received from the school when choices were being made and whether they would have liked more information. While parents were gener-
ally satisfied with the information they received about subject options, several parents emphasized the lack of formal guidance during the process of subject choice:

The parent-teacher meetings are in January … but I personally think that maybe when the students are making their choices, that’s the time the parents need to be informed that the choices they make [at junior cycle] may affect what they may take in fifth year. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school, taster programme)

[The school was] informative to the extent that he [my son] would have brought home a letter, saying what the options were … and that was all. … It would have been nice if we could have gone in and spoken to, say, a guidance teacher even at that early stage and perhaps try and push him in the direction that he might best be able to perform at. (Father-son, post-secondary education, mixed intake school, taster programme)

The lack of guidance was perceived as a particular issue where their son or daughter was undecided about what subject areas to pursue:

[The school was] informative but I know my [son] hadn’t a clue what he wanted to do, he was basically going by what I told him or his friends told him or something like that. … There wouldn’t of been probably enough guidance there in my view. (Father-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

The implications of lack of guidance early in junior cycle for later options only became evident as young people moved through the schooling system:

The Department [of Education and Skills] plus the schools should have some kind of a booklet, because it’s only when they come to Leaving Cert that they’re looking at points. … I think as a parent, we may not be aware of how valuable a subject may be and may not be [in terms of points]. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)
While broadly satisfied with the amount of information received, a number of parents commented on the relative inflexibility of the choice process:

I found that the school was quite dogmatic, they [put] forward their point of view but there’s no recourse or doesn’t seem to be much flexibility in that type of system. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, middle-class school, taster programme)

I think we just got option lines. … There was Spanish or German in an option line and they did tell us that you take what you get really, depending on the numbers. … [She] ended up with German, but it didn’t work out for [my daughter] because she didn’t like it but we were kind of told ‘that was it’, we didn’t get our choice of Spanish. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school, taster programme)

The way in which subjects were packaged could also serve to restrict student choice since subjects that students enjoyed were sometimes timetabled against each other:

Some subjects he could take but then he couldn’t do others because of the way the teachers were and the classes were so that was a bit of an issue at the start … this time as well because my son wants to do Metalwork and Woodwork and if he does that then he has to drop a couple of other subjects. (Father-son, third-level education, mixed intake school, pick before entry)

He would have liked to do Woodwork, but it would have been blocked against something else that he needed, perhaps a language or a science or something that he would have needed to be doing. (Mother-son, post-secondary education, mixed intake school)

So what role do parents actually play in subject choice? How does subject choice occur? The majority of parents were quite vague about the actual process, making it difficult to obtain a comprehensive picture of how the process actually occurred. However, it was clear that
subject choice was in part constrained by timetabling schedules. Typical responses went as follows:

When he was in sixth class, we were brought down [to the school] and they were given the different subjects, you know, for them to choose. We just brought home the list and he picked what he wanted to do … and he just picked what he wanted and … he was lucky enough to get what he wanted. (Mother-son, educational background unknown, working-class school, pre-entry subject selection)

Other parents were somewhat more explicit in terms of how they guided their child through this decision-making process. The approaches taken by parents varied significantly in terms of the autonomy given to their children in selecting subjects. At one end of the spectrum, some parents left the decision up to the student themselves:

We gave both of them free rein in what they wanted to do, because they’re the ones that would have to do the subjects. (Mother-daughter, post-secondary education, mixed intake school)

In other cases, parents offered very general advice to their children so that they would keep their options open regarding later educational and career opportunities:

Well I was advising her to use subjects, the general subjects that she would need if … she intended going to college, the general subjects that she would be needing to do any college course, you know, and to try and have the basic right ones and then when Junior Cert came, then she’d be a little bit more clearer [about] what she wanted to do. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Others described themselves as ‘nudging’ their child towards certain subject areas, often ones they themselves had enjoyed while at school:
There might have been areas that we would have tried to nudge him into. ... He did Mechanical Drawing for three years and found out that he hated it and stopped after third year. But that was probably my fault because I loved Mechanical Drawing when I was doing it but he didn’t so, but then he never done it before so he didn’t know what it was or what it was like. (Father-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

For other parents, the final decision was entirely up to the young person. However, this group of parents varied in the extent to which they discussed the issue with their child. One group left the decision to the child but discussed the decision-making process with them to a significant extent:

She kind of knew what she wanted to do herself, what subjects to take up and what she didn’t like and did like. ... She talked about it but it was nearly her own decision as to what she wanted to do. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Yeah, I think I would of asked her and then she would of discussed them with me like, yeah I think she would of said it to me [about] the choice that they had. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)

In other cases, such discussions did not take place and parents relied on their child to make the ‘right’ choice:

We wouldn’t like telling someone to do something you know against their will so ... we were happy enough she picked what she wanted so we were happy enough. (Father-daughter, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

The first year, she more or less picked the subjects herself, she didn’t speak to us about it that much, she knew more or less what she was going to do and that was it. She told us what she was going to do and what she’d like to do and that was it, so we let her make up her own mind. (Father-daughter, post-primary education, mixed intake school)
Other parents were more involved in their child’s education and were at times proactive about offering advice on subject choices:

I was sort of going from what I was advised when he was in sixth class … by looking at his results and where his strengths were. … So I suppose, yeah, I would have advised and influenced him to a certain degree. (Mother-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school, pick subjects before entry)

Education is top of the priority in the house and I don’t mean we talk about it all the time but it would be a normal topic of conversation. When he’d come home in the evening, I’d say how’d you get on, what’s the story, what’s happening. And they don’t see anything at all wrong with that, where some other kids might say Jesus, she’s intruding on me, you know. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

So how do parents obtain information to help guide their sons and daughters? Many based their advice on their own experiences while at school:

I suppose I was just using the information that I had myself, because I went to the same school and it wasn’t that long ago, so I just used the knowledge that I had, it wasn’t really information as such from the school, it would have been just my own knowledge of the subjects. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Well I was sort of going by me, I was sort of going by what I done, now I didn’t actually finish to do anything in the Junior Cert like, you know I didn’t go on. I did sort of encourage her to pick Home Economics, which I mean I done Home Economics in my school, but I mean I got a lot out of it, where I felt she got nothing out of Home Economics in her school, so that was probably a mistake as well. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)
In other cases, young people were reliant on their older siblings for guidance, especially when their parents felt they did not have enough information about the educational system to provide such help:

I didn’t have any part … at all because the oldest girl was there and she was after doing all that and she gave her a hand [to] do it. I left education when I was 16, I wouldn’t have a clue. … I didn’t know how the points system worked at the time. You know the older girl helped her and was telling her to choose what subjects she wanted. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

While for other students, the peer influence appeared to be primary:

Well you see, I suppose they’re at the [stage] where their peers are more important really nearly than the parents advising. Though you would advise them, but I would say that you will find, ‘well you know my friend is going there, so I think I’ll go there too’. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Basically he hadn’t a clue to be quite honest, what he wanted to do or what subjects that he wanted to do, there was a fair bit of, I wouldn’t say peer pressure, but he wanted to do what the friends were doing more than anything else. (Father-son, third-level education, mixed intake school, pick subjects before entry)

### 3.5 Parental perceptions of the junior cycle curriculum

In relation to the junior cycle curriculum, parents were asked ‘Thinking back, what do you think of the junior cycle curriculum?’ in terms of the number of subjects on offer (too many, about right, too few), the difficulty of the subjects (too difficult, about right, too easy) and the usefulness of subjects (useful, not useful). The majority (61 per cent) of parents surveyed indicated that the number of subjects taken as part of the junior cycle curriculum was about right. However, over a third of parents felt that their child had taken too many subjects at junior cycle level. As illustrated by Figure 3.7 below, there was significant variation across schools in terms of parental perceptions of the
number of subjects taken at junior cycle, although those in mixed or middle-class schools were more likely to see this as an issue as were those whose children had attended schools with taster programmes.

*Figure 3.7: Proportion of parents who felt their child was taking too many junior cycle subjects, by school*

![Bar chart showing proportion of parents who felt their child was taking too many junior cycle subjects, by school.](chart)


Furthermore, the majority (84 per cent) of parents surveyed indicated that the difficulty level of junior cycle subjects was ‘about right’, with less variation across schools than was the case with number of subjects. On the whole, the majority (81 per cent) of parents in each of the case-study schools felt that the subjects on offer were useful.

Parents were asked whether, in retrospect, there were subjects that their son or daughter should have taken at junior cycle. One in six parents felt there were such subjects, and responses centred on Business Studies, Home Economics, Technical Graphics and Art. Parents with third-level education and those with children in middle-class schools were more likely than other parents to mention subjects their child should have taken.
In the in-depth interviews, parents were asked whether they felt that anything was missing from the junior cycle curriculum. While most parents agreed that the curriculum was fine the way it is, others argued for the inclusion of specific subject areas. In keeping with perceptions of the benefits of post-primary education (see section 3.1), computer studies was seen as a gap in the junior cycle curriculum:

I thought the mix of subjects were good … but I would of liked to see her doing some computer work. They didn’t have a choice of … working with computers. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)

I would have liked him to have had more of a choice, I think he would have done very well, they had no computer classes there, it would have been lovely for him because he loves computers. (Mother-son, educational background unknown, working-class school)

Parents differed in whether they would like to see more of a focus on practical or academic subjects:

I think more practical subjects are probably more important, I know the system is more based on academics but I think for instance there’s no harm in doing … stuff like Woodwork and so on, you know stuff that people could develop a talent for or not realise that they’ve a talent for. … And the same with Maths, I think the way Maths is taught, it’s very academic, whereas a lot of students don’t realise why they are studying this theorem or what does this equation mean. … If they actually knew that you can apply it practically and that this how engineers use them or whatever, then they’d realise why they’re actually doing it. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school)

Lack of preparation for adult life was mentioned by some parents, who would like to see life skills embedded within the curriculum:

There’s ones leaving the school now doing their Leaving Cert, they know nothing about tax, about how to tax a car, about the
basic stuff, how to open a bank account, deal with interest rates and things, they still have no idea about that kind of stuff. I know my fella does Accountancy but he does very little of the basic things of you know going out into the real world, that still isn’t covered. (Father-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

I see he’s dying to start driving and everything, and I know it’s not really an educational thing but it does affect a lot of them now, because a lot of them are driving to school. I think they should have done a little bit more in that line, educating them to that side of life as well as the academic side. (Mother-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

As well as being questioned about the curriculum, parents were asked about how they felt their son/daughter got on in the Junior Certificate. Forty per cent of parents felt that their son/daughter got on better than expected, about half as well as expected and just 7 per cent felt that they did not get on as well as expected. What was particularly evident was that parents of students in schools with working-class intakes generally felt that their son/daughter got on better than expected, with the exception of parents in Dawes Point who felt their sons got on as well as expected (Figure 3.8).

In two of the schools, Dawson Street and Dixon Street, a higher proportion of parents of girls indicated that they got on better than was the case for parents of boys; but in Fig Lane, a higher proportion of parents of boys indicated that they got on better than was the case of parents of girls. Overall, parents who felt that their son/daughter did not get on as well as expected in the Junior Certificate tended to have more negative perceptions of the junior cycle curriculum.
Figure 3.8: Overview of parental perceptions of how their son/daughter got on in the Junior Certificate exam

3.6 Conclusions

In general, parents in our sample are positive about their child’s school and their experiences of post-primary education. Parents tended to be positive about the personal and social supports on offer in schools. Parents with children in working-class schools were somewhat less likely to see post-primary education as being a lot of help in their child forming new friendships, although this pattern may be related to the proportion of working-class children who followed on with their peers from primary school and thus retained their existing social networks.

Concerns have been expressed by a significant minority of parents regarding the lack of career guidance, preparation for the world of work and computer studies provision, and this was particularly evident among higher educated parents and parents of children in middle-class schools. These findings replicate accounts from young people’s own experiences of post-primary education. In assessing post-primary educational experiences and the contribution of their schooling to a range of skills, Byrne et al. (2009) found that school leavers are least positive about preparation for the world of work, preparation for adult life and the provision of computer skills.

The Post-Primary Longitudinal Study has indicated that student experiences in the early stages of post-primary education have an impact on later academic performance and student engagement (Smyth et al., 2007; Byrne and Smyth 2010). In terms of making the transition from primary to post-primary, only a minority of parents report sustained difficulties in their child settling into post-primary education. Any such difficulties are generally attributed to the personality of the child and their access to social networks (such as having friends or siblings in the school). However, the school is seen as having an important role to play in easing the transition process through the support systems they have in place for students (such as student mentoring and specific school personnel). Furthermore, some parents felt that the use of streaming practices in first year contributed to a delayed settling-in process.
On average, parents indicated that they are satisfied with the range of subjects on offer. Concern was expressed when it was perceived that their child had ‘no choice’ or ‘restricted choice’ in relation to subjects in junior cycle. Most parents have at least some involvement in their child’s choice of subjects at junior cycle. However, they differ in whether they are directive concerning these choices or allow greater autonomy to their son or daughter. While parents are broadly happy with the information they receive on subject choices, concern was expressed about the lack of formal guidance and the difficulty in anticipating the relevance of junior cycle subjects for later pathways. Indeed, one fifth of parents feel that in retrospect their son or daughter should have taken different subjects at junior cycle.

The junior cycle curriculum is generally seen as ‘about right’ in terms of difficulty and usefulness. On the whole, parents are happy with the number of subjects taken at junior cycle. However, over a third of parents felt that young people take too many subjects at this level. This pattern was more evident in relation to schools with taster programmes, although in other respects parents were generally more favourable to students having the chance to try out subjects before making their final decision. The extent to which parents have similar views on the senior cycle curriculum is explored in the following chapter.
Chapter Four

Parental Perceptions of the Senior Cycle

4.1 Introduction

This chapter draws on the postal survey of parents and the qualitative interviews with parents to explore perceptions of the schooling process at senior cycle. The chapter begins by exploring perceptions of the transition from junior cycle to senior cycle. Despite the existence of different types of programmes at senior cycle (Transition Year, the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme), there has been little exploration of parental awareness of, and views on, these programmes. Section three is concerned with perceptions of Transition Year among parents of students who have and have not participated in this extra year at senior cycle, while section four examines perceptions of curriculum differentiation. Section five considers variation in subject choice practices across schools while section six provides an overview of parental perceptions of the overall senior cycle curriculum.

4.2 Parental perceptions of the transition from junior cycle into senior cycle

In general, the majority of parents who took part in the survey indicated that their son or daughter settled into senior cycle either straight away or within the first month. In general, those who had settled into junior cycle in a short period of time were also more likely to settle into senior cycle straight away or within the first month. As was the
case with settling into first year, parents of students in mixed or middle-class schools reported that they took longer to settle in than those in working-class schools. Variation was also evident across individual schools, with greater transition difficulties reported by parents in Harris Street, a middle-class girls’ school, and Argyle Street, a mixed intake coeducational school.

Insights from the qualitative interviews revealed that parents of children who did well in the Junior Certificate reported that they settled into senior cycle well, as did those who were ‘relaxed’ about their schoolwork and environment but also those who were ‘focused’:

Yeah, she settled in quite well, she was focused after doing the Junior Cert, got good results, and was focused to keep up with it, to continue on and to give it her best, so she was very focused. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Yeah, he settled in very well, yeah, he was happy to go back and wanted to go back to do the Leaving Cert and his transition [to senior cycle] went smoothly. (Mother-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school, no TY)

The personality of the young person was also seen as a factor in making a smooth transition:

Oh he settled in fine, yeah, he did all right yeah at the time, he’s kind of easy going anyway you know, he just goes with the flow. (Mother-son, third-level education, working-class school)

Some parents mentioned that, while their son/daughter settled into senior cycle well, the work load was perceived as being more challenging both initially and as they progressed through senior cycle:

She’s found that there was more work now than in the junior cycle, there's more study and more written work to be done, more essays. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)
He’s doing fine actually, he did say that the work was an awful lot harder, there was some jump from third year to fifth year, that’s the only comment he made - the work was a lot harder. (Mother-son, post-secondary education, working-class school)

It took her a wee while, now in the beginning, she found the Maths very hard for a while, but once she got into [it] for a month or so, she was flying, no bother. (Father-daughter, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

In the context of higher levels of early school leaving among males nationally (Byrne and Smyth, 2010), it was particularly interesting that some parents reported that their sons had wanted to leave school after the Junior Certificate. This was particularly the case in schools where other students left full-time education at this stage. In these circumstances, the parents actively encouraged their sons to remain in school.

Now if he got his way after the Junior Cert he would have left school but I wouldn’t hear of it, I think they should finish no matter how good or bad they get on. ... At that stage there was a few of them that got out of it, left at Junior Cert and the parents had no choice, they weren’t doing it and they were missing school and all that but he didn’t, he was doing pretty good and he was quite happy, he was ok. (Mother-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

He didn’t want to do the Leaving Cert, he wanted to leave school and I said there's no way you’re leaving school and you’re not getting a job at sixteen. ... He didn’t do a tap for fifth and sixth year, he wasn’t really interested. For the last year, he was like ‘Mum, could I leave and get a job?’ and I was like ‘No you can’t because you need to get your Leaving Cert’. (Mother-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

Into the senior cycle he wanted to leave the school, we’d a terrible problem, the whole year he wanted to leave. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)
For others, the settling-in period may have taken longer, but was not particularly problematic, and parents could not identify any specific reason as to why it took longer to settle in. This was particularly evident for males:

It probably took him ‘til Christmas in his fifth year, but then he became quite focused and he got very stuck into subjects that he knew he really wanted, because he had decided what he wanted to do. (Mother-son, third-level education, middle-class school)

He still had no problem but he didn’t settle into senior cycle at all as good as he did in the junior cycle. (Mother-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

However, one parent did mention that there was a communication problem with teachers that made the adjustment process more difficult.

Survey findings indicated that parents whose sons/daughters did not participate in Transition Year were also more likely to report that they settled in either straight away or within the first month (see Figure 4.1 below).

*Figure 4.1: Time taken to settle into senior cycle, Transition Year participants and non-participants*

![Bar Chart]

However, when we interviewed parents, the picture was more mixed. In one school that offered Transition Year, parents were advised that a settling-in period was inevitable, and so they were prepared for their sons/daughters to take longer to settle into fifth year.

They did tell us … those that have come straight from third year into fifth year, you know, they’ll settle down because they’re still in the run of it but it will take the ones that did Transition Year longer to do it. And they did tell us don’t be pressurising them to study, you know don’t be at them, just give them time to settle in. (Mother-daughter, post-secondary education, working-class school, did TY)

Many parents outlined that Transition Year is very good for personal development, but could make it harder for young people to settle into fifth year:

It’s [Transition Year is] kind of time out for them in one way and they have work experience and all that, which I think is very good and they can look again at subjects. Right but I think they find it difficult to get back into the study mode in fifth year. But I do think that they mature and boys in particular, and they’re better able to handle the Leaving Cert. (Mother-son, education level unknown, mixed intake school, did TY)

I’d say … she has found it hard to get back down to study after Transition Year but then having said that, she really wasn’t ready to put in quite an effort for the Junior Cert, I think she wanted a break. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, middle-class school, did TY)

It’s hard when they go into fifth year and try to settle back in again. (Mother-son, education level not stated, working-class school, did TY)

On the other hand, some parents of students who had completed Transition Year felt that it had been beneficial to their settling into senior
cycle. This was particularly evident among parents of ‘high achieving’ daughters.

She settled in very, very well, she had done her year, she was happy with that. She had had a good time and she was ready to settle. She had set herself very high points for the Leaving Cert and she knew that she’d have to do the work you know. (Mother-daughter, post-secondary education, working-class school, did TY)

It took a month or two kind of, you know but once they settled in and realised, … they have two years of graft ahead of them, I think they settled in fairly well. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, working-class school, did TY)

It wasn’t that it [Transition Year] was a year out … the students were still made look forward, so the ground work she did in Transition Year, she moved quite well into the next year. (Mother-daughter, education level unknown, working-class school, did TY)

The issue of settling in and Transition Year will be revisited in a later section.

4.3 Parental perceptions of Transition Year

Transition Year was provided in seven of the case-study schools either on a compulsory or optional basis. Parents from these schools were asked about how decisions relating to Transition Year participation were taken and about their general perceptions of the programme.

In relation to decisions about participating in Transition Year, parents reported that there was generally a meeting in the school with the Transition Year coordinator regarding the programme. For some parents, the initial meeting matched their expectations and later perceptions of the programme. This was particularly evident when parents and young people had spoken about the decision to take Transition Year at home before having contact with the school.
We were very impressed with it, we were also impressed with the information we got beforehand, we had two open evenings in the school. ... We would have discussed it with herself at first anyway, so we would have had an idea going to the school what her plans would have been. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school, TY optional)

However, for the majority of parents, the information meeting in the school was very informative and often determined whether their son/daughter went on to take the programme.

Well before the year ended I think we all went to a meeting and she didn't have to [do] Transition Year, she could have went on but she wanted to do it and the teachers recommended it that you should do it. (Father-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school, TY optional)

Yeah, we would have had a night with the Transition Year coordinator in the school and he would have outlined, you know, before the final decision was made, what was involved and what they would be doing and it certainly seemed good. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, middle-class school, TY optional)

I was at one or two meetings for it, but I wouldn't say I knew that much about it. In my opinion at the time it was kind of a waste of time, it was kind of you weren't going to be doing much at all. ... As I say my opinion changed when I saw what they were doing and the experience that they got out of it. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, working-class school, TY optional)

When exploring reasons as to why some participate in Transition Year while others do not, it was evident that a specific rationale for participating in Transition Year was because their son/daughter was still very young.
It was just that he was young, that’s why we decided he should do Transition Year and then he was happy to do it himself. (Father-son, third-level education, middle-class school, TY optional)

In situations where Transition Year was not on offer, parents often mentioned age as a reason for preferring that their son/daughter would have had the opportunity to participate in the programme.

I would have preferred had she done a Transition Year, well I just feel that now like she’s too young now for to be going on to college and she doesn’t even really know what she wants to do. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, TY not offered)

I think he would have benefited from it [Transition Year], it’s hard to judge now but you know I’d say he might have had a year more maturity. He’s very young really for university, I think it’s better when they’re older. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school, TY not offered)

He’s [my son] still going to college now and he’s 17 next month, which I think is too young to be going to college but anyway Transition Year wouldn’t of been any harm. (Father-son, education level unknown, mixed intake school, TY not offered)

4.3.1 Outcomes of Transition Year

In the survey, parents largely agreed with the statements that TY helps students become more mature, that TY makes students more confident, that TY helps students make new friends, and that TY helps students become more involved in student life. However, parents were somewhat more undecided or in disagreement with statements such as: TY helps students decide what to do when they leave school and students find it easier to choose Leaving Certificate subjects (see Figure 4.2 below).
Figure 4.2: Parental responses to items relating to Transition Year participation (% ‘agree’)

The findings indicate that while parents recognise the positive influence of Transition Year on general personal development, the academic benefits are less clear to parents. Differences were also evident according to the nature of Transition Year provision, that is, whether it was offered on an optional or compulsory basis. Parents whose sons/daughters were attending an optional TY programme were somewhat more likely to agree with positive statements relating to personal development and making choices than those pursuing a compulsory programme. Parents commented further on these ‘outcomes’ throughout the interviews. Many reported Transition Year participation as being a positive experience for their son/daughter, particularly in relation to personal development.

Well I think it was the making of her. … She was very quiet up to that, but you know going off meeting other classes and going on trips and that … she got a lot of confidence out of all that, I thought that done her the world of good, Transition Year. (Father-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school, TY optional)

This was also reflected in how parents described the programmes taken by their son/daughter. Parents were generally more positive about the year when the core academic subjects continued to be a central part of the programme, alongside other specific Transition Year modules.

All her core subjects still had to be done … had to be handed in. She grew in the sense that she was able to go out and do community work under the guidance of the school, meeting children that [were] mentally ill, physically challenged. She joined a lot of sporting groups, she joined An Gaisce, so she certainly grew and that, and at the end of the year then [she] got a certificate for her interaction. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school, TY optional)

During Transition Year she had quite a lot of homework to do like she did French, English, Maths and … there was quite a bit of
homework to do at different times, so I mean it wasn’t that she took a whole year out and didn’t do anything. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, mixed intake school, TY optional)

As Figure 4.2 shows, parents were generally divided on the statements that ‘students find it easier to choose their Leaving Certificate subjects after TY’ and ‘TY helps students decide what to do after leaving school’. However, in the interviews, parents were generally positive about the role of Transition Year in making subject choices in senior cycle, and gave insights into how elements of Transition Year contributed to this process.

Yeah, she did Transition Year which gave her fantastic confidence you know, getting involved in things, debating and all. … She got a fantastic amount out of it and it gave her great confidence then to pick her subjects for Leaving Cert. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, mixed intake school, TY optional)

She did Transition Year and found that very worthwhile because she was very young. She enjoyed it, she matured a lot and during that year kind of had an idea of what she wanted to do and what subjects she’d like to do. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school, TY optional)

Well my opinion, I think it is a good programme because … if the child is willing to do it and wants to do it, it gives them the chance to decide what they want to do further on rather than going straight from Junior Cert into fifth year, they don’t get much chance. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, mixed intake school, TY optional)

For a number of parents, Transition Year work experience was viewed as a particularly useful way of helping students decide what to do after leaving school in terms of career orientations.
I mean she found out really what she wanted to do when going on work experience. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, working-class school, TY optional)

The work experience is a very good idea, because it gives them a taste of what work is like and they can try different careers and … they may rule out certain careers that they definitely don’t want to get involved in, or else they might decide that they come across something that they never thought of, that they might be interested in. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school, TY compulsory)

Well it was for the work experience, because they realised, you know they do go to work, I thought that part of it was good, you know, to teach them a bit of responsibility. And, you know, they loved that. (Mother-son, education level not stated, working-class school, TY quasi-compulsory)

However, it was evident from the interviews that variation occurred across schools in the ‘outcomes’ of Transition Year. For example, in some schools, some aspects of the programme were more successful than in others and, at times, the perceptions of parents differed within schools. Some parents felt that the programme could be improved by being standardised in order to get the best out of the programme.

The idea is good, the content could be more refined alright, or it should be more standardised. In other local schools it is totally different than the way it was done down in my daughter’s school. It appears to be too left open to the school. (Father-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school, TY optional)

I’m sure some people did benefit from it but I thought it was terribly badly organised and it’s very much dependent on the resources and the enthusiasm of the school as to whether Transition Year is effective or not. I didn’t think it was particularly effective [in her school], they really had a doss year. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, middle-class school, TY compulsory)
For some parents, the programme did not live up to its expectations and the costs involved were greater than anticipated.

With the work experience, I just felt much more could have been done within it. (Father-son, third-level education, middle-class school, TY optional)

It was expensive … there were three trips on offer, non-curricular activities, which was fine, fashion shows and horse riding, Tae Kwondo, driving lessons, etc., etc., so all those were money, it was a huge expense for that year, it was a bigger expense than anything. (Father-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school, TY optional)

In line with findings from the survey, a major concern for parents was whether students got out of the habit of studying after Transition Year. This was particularly the case in two of the schools. Typical comments from parents in these two schools that provided a compulsory Transition Year included the following:

I didn’t think it was particularly effective, they really had a doss year … and that was reflected particularly in subjects like Maths where she had done very, very well in the Inter Cert, they didn’t keep up the Maths … and in fact she’s now dropping out of doing honours Maths and reverting to pass Maths. I thought it was terribly badly organised. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, middle-class school, TY compulsory)

I think they’re inclined to lapse during that year and then it’s very hard to get them back into study mode for fifth year. … It’s not until then that they’re into their Leaving Cert that they actually get into it again and I blame Transition Year on that, I think. (Mother-Son, post-primary education, mixed intake school, TY compulsory)

Her report came in and it was abysmal. So I would say that she dropped down a notch in Transition Year, and stayed at that level
right through fifth year. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, middle-class school, TY compulsory)

In other schools, a perceived decline in academic standards was mentioned, a sentiment that was more evident in middle-class schools, and particularly in relation to girls.

It’s very good from that [the personal development] point of view, but then on the other side, they do wind down an awful lot and they kind of tend to forget about the Leaving Cert and they get a bit [of a] shock then when they go into fifth year. … So maybe there should have been a bit more emphasis on the academic side, because at the end of the day that’s what’s going to get you through the Leaving Cert. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school, TY optional)

Other parents were somewhat more balanced in their view of Transition Year, outlining both the positives and negatives:

I think I would be about 60 per cent in favour, now I could see the disadvantages. I think it honestly depends on the child, Transition Year suits some kids, but doesn’t suit others and it’s usually the ones who you know are not necessarily academic. It could mean that they totally wind down and then find it extremely hard in fifth year or else it can mean that kids then realise that they’re having such a good time, that you know, they forget … that they have to concentrate on the Leaving Cert. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, middle-class school, TY compulsory)

4.3.2 Perspectives of parents of students who did not participate in TY

Among parents of students who did not take Transition Year, 22 per cent felt, in retrospect, that they would have liked their son/daughter to have taken TY, 57 per cent felt they would not and the remainder were undecided. For many parents, difficulty in settling into fifth year was reason enough not to opt for Transition Year. A typical comment was as follows:
Most of her friends didn’t do Transition Year either and she didn’t have a year out to mess around and she continued on with her studies. Speaking to other students that she had been in class with, prior to Transition Year, they’re going to find it very hard to adjust and they’re very disappointed that they gave up their year and have done Transition Year. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school, TY optional)

Despite negative reports of TY by parents, a considerable proportion felt that they would have liked their child to have taken TY, and this was the case both in settings where there was no Transition Year and where TY was optional. These parents perceived Transition Year to be beneficial in helping young people decide what to do after leaving school, and in promoting personal development and maturity.

I do think it would have helped him, he would have been more mature doing the Leaving Cert. (Father-son, third-level education, working-class school, TY not offered)

It was very hard for her to decide what to do, like, coming up to her Leaving Cert, what college to apply for, what to go for, you know like. I think it [TY] would of just helped them, give them a bit more outlook on life. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, TY not offered)

I think for my son I would have liked it, because he’s very quiet, very, very shy and very withdrawn since he started in secondary school, and I thought it would have done him good. It would have gotten him more involved in activities, I think. (Mother-son, educational background unknown, working-class school, TY not offered)

However, parents of students attending the same school did not always share these positive sentiments about Transition Year, fearing that it may encourage young people to drop out of school. For other parents, an extra year at school was unlikely to be attractive to a young person who had wanted to drop out of school.
I know too many children who don’t want to go back to school after Transition Year. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school, TY not offered)

I wouldn’t have pushed him into it with the way he was, he wanted to get out after doing the Junior Cert so I think to have got the next two years out of him, I’d be doing very well you know. (Mother-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

These statements indicate that parents see Transition Year as unlikely to be successful for those who do not want to stay in school. In the next section, we consider parental perceptions of curriculum differentiation at senior cycle, that is, the existence of three Leaving Certificate programmes – the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA).

4.4 Curriculum differentiation at senior cycle

A key aim of this study is to examine how informed parents are about school life and how parents help their son/daughter to make educational and career decisions at senior cycle. However, little is currently known about parental knowledge of the senior cycle curriculum. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the different Leaving Certificate programmes on offer across the twelve case-study schools. All three programmes were offered in three of the schools, LCE and LCVP in four of the schools, LCA and LCE in two schools, and the remaining schools provided either the established Leaving Certificate or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.
Table 4.1: Overview of Leaving Certificate programmes on offer across the case-study schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Leaving Certificate Programmes</th>
<th>Social Mix</th>
<th>School Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argyle Street</td>
<td>LCA, LCVP, LCE</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belmore Street</td>
<td>LCA, LCVP, LCE</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawson Street</td>
<td>LCA, LCVP, LCE</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lang Street</td>
<td>LCA, LCE</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park Street</td>
<td>LCVP, LCE</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wattle Street</td>
<td>LCVP, LCE</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawes Point</td>
<td>LCVP, LCE</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixon Street</td>
<td>LCA, LCE</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig Lane</td>
<td>LCVP, LCE</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris Street</td>
<td>LCE</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hay Street</td>
<td>LCVP</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrack Street</td>
<td>LCE</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the survey, parents were asked ‘What Leaving Certificate programme is your son/daughter taking at the moment?’. Concern has been expressed in international curriculum differentiation research about using student self-identification to classify a student’s curricular programme or track (see, for example, Rosenbaum, 1980). While some would argue that using the student’s self-placement is important because of its meaning to the student (see Gamoran, 1987; Gamoran and Mare, 1989), in this study we examined whether the programme reported by the student was the actual programme being pursued, as in other studies (Vanfossen, Jones and Spade, 1987; Lucas and Gamoran, 1993; Arum and Shavit, 1995). Some discrepancies were evident in student accounts in relation to participation in the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (see Smyth et al., 2007). When parental reports of the curricular track that students were pursuing were compared with the actual school record, the majority of parents had cor-
rectly identified the programme their son/daughter was pursuing. Figure 4.3 illustrates that, while parents of young people pursuing the established Leaving Certificate were generally correct in what they reported, inconsistencies were evident for those pursuing the Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational programmes. This was particularly the case with LCVP. Because LCVP and LCE students follow a similar (but different) syllabus, it is likely that some parents may perceive their son/daughter to be pursuing the established Leaving Certificate.

**Figure 4.3: Comparison of parental report and actual curricular track being pursued**

Unlike post-primary education in some other countries, senior cycle students in Ireland cannot move between programmes or mix and match elements of each of the programmes. The exception to this is the LCVP, where students take a (particular) subset of LCE subjects in additional to specific modules:
As a result, it is arguable that while we have retained the appearance of a unified Leaving Certificate, the reality experienced at the level of the school or education provider is that we have a senior cycle with a number of tracks with all the difficulties this can give rise to in terms of parity of esteem between programmes and consistency and coherence across programmes. On the other hand, the benefits of this approach include clarity of provision and options for providers and learners and the concerted focus that individualised programmes provide for implementation support. (NCCA, 2003, p.12)

On the whole, the survey indicated that the majority of parents (81 per cent) were either satisfied or very satisfied with the information they received from the school on the different types of Leaving Certificate. The vast majority of parents were either very satisfied or satisfied with the programme that their son/daughter was taking. However, parents of young people taking the Leaving Certificate Applied displayed the highest level of dissatisfaction (Figure 4.4). Among the LCA group, there was some evidence that more educated parents and parents of students attending mixed schools are more likely to be dissatisfied than others. The dissatisfied group of LCA parents also give lower ratings to the benefits of post-primary education and to the school overall, indicating that they may not see LCA as promoting skills and competencies. It should be noted, however, that the number of parents in this group is quite small and so these findings should be interpreted with some caution.

Parents were also asked whether their son/daughter had a choice over which programme they would take. Interestingly, among the schools offering all three programmes, parents of students attending Lang Street, where Transition Year was quasi-compulsory, perceived that they had little choice. Among those offering two programmes, Fig Lane and Wattle Street, a high proportion of parents felt that their son/daughter did not have a choice between senior cycle programmes, reflecting findings from the student interviews on the complexity of how ‘choice’ is seen (Smyth et al., 2007). The majority of students who had a choice had discussed the choice of programme with their
parents either a lot or a little before making a decision. However, almost a third of parents whose son/daughter attended Fig Lane or Dixon Street and one fifth of students in Belmore Street did not discuss this choice at all with their parents.

Figure 4.4: Levels of satisfaction with the Leaving Certificate programme being taken

Based on the parental interviews, we can examine how decisions are made in relation to the programme to be pursued at senior cycle. For the most part, in schools where more than one Leaving Certificate programme was on offer, parents reported an information meeting held by the school:

We had an open night to discuss the different types of Leaving Certs, whether it was LCA or LCVP or … the general Leaving Cert, but it was kind of vague enough. (Mother-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school, all three programmes on offer)
[My daughter] did the LCVP and there was a meeting for parents in the school, a general meeting for all the parents together around the LCVP and the LCA and given information about what they were and that. I didn’t do it myself, so it was the first time I had heard about it. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school, all three programmes on offer)

We had one meeting and they discussed the options at a parents’ meeting. They just described which programme [was] involved so … my son had made up his mind anyway so I went ahead with him. (Mother-son, educational background unknown, working-class school, LCVP and LCE on offer)

For others, letters or other written information would have been the main form of communication from the school:

   Interviewer: Did you know much about the different types of programmes on offer for the Leaving Cert?

   Oh you mean like the Leaving Cert Applied? Just from letters that would come home from the school and from my daughter talking about them as well. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school, LCA and LCE on offer)

   I think it was an LCVP course, I think, we got our leaflet home about that. (Mother-son, post-secondary education, working-class school, LCVP and LCE on offer)

From the interviews, it was evident that some parents were unclear about what curricular provision was on offer in the school:

   They just had the Leaving Cert right, the regular Leaving Cert, they didn’t have anything else. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school, LCVP and LCE on offer)

   Interviewer: Do you know which Leaving Cert she did?
Oh I wouldn’t have a clue. (Mother-daughter, education level unknown, working-class school)

Further insights from parents indicated that it was the student themselves and the school who were more involved in decision making of this type than the parents.

Yeah, well she was happy enough to do the LCVP, I think it was kind of expected, but I didn’t have problem with it, so it wasn’t an issue. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school, all three programmes on offer)

No, he didn’t want to do the LCVP, they have it but he didn’t want to do it. (Mother-son, post-primary education, working-class school, LCVP and LCE on offer)

4.5 Subject choice at senior cycle

In the survey, parents were asked ‘How satisfied are you with the information you have received from the school on subject choice?’.

What was evident was that the majority of parents in each of the schools were either satisfied or very satisfied with the information they had received (Figure 4.5). Levels of satisfaction tended to vary across the individual schools. Highly educated parents were somewhat less satisfied with the information they had received from the school.

Findings from the survey indicate that a high degree of communication exists in relation to educational matters between students and their parents, that is, the majority of parents in most of the schools indicated that these matters were discussed a lot, rather than a little or not at all (see Figure 4.6 below). Discussion of subject choice and levels was somewhat less frequent in working-class schools, but there is significant variation among this group with high levels of communication in Dawes Point and Lang Street.
Figure 4.5: Levels of satisfaction regarding information received from the school regarding subject choice

Figure 4.6: Variation across schools in the percentage of parents who reported that their son/daughter discussed subject choice and subject levels a lot.

In the survey, parents were asked to think back to how helpful different kinds of information were in learning about senior cycle choices. Figure 4.7 illustrates that the vast majority of parents felt that information from their son/daughter, information sessions for parents, and talking to a teacher in the school were very or fairly helpful. About a fifth of parents found that information leaflets from the school and information from informal sources, such as friends or family, were not particularly helpful. The parent’s own time at school and information from the internet were perceived as the least helpful sources of information on senior cycle choices. More highly educated parents and those with children in middle-class schools were somewhat less likely to see school-provided information (such as meetings and written leaflets) as helpful sources of information. Parents of children in working-class schools were more likely to find their own child, informally talking to a teacher in the school and their own time at school as very helpful sources of information than those with children in mixed or middle-class schools. Less educated, working-class parents were also somewhat more positive about the value of the internet as a source of information than other parents.

The interviews with parents allowed further insights into subject choice processes on the part of parents and young people. In many cases, subject choice was often determined by the student themselves, and this was evident across parents with different levels of education. The impression from these parents was that subject choice was based on the student’s own interests and future plans, rather than being guided by the parent.

When he done his Junior Cert, he done well in it, and he was kind of that much more mature himself and he knew what he wanted to do so I mean he’d choose all his own subjects. There was no point in me choosing subjects and telling him what to do. At that stage he kind of knew where he was going himself and what he wanted to do and it’s a trade he wanted from there on in. (Mother-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school)
When I asked what subjects were there, what was she going to do, she came back, and said Dad I'm going to do x, y and z, these are the ones that I want to do, you know that ok? I said yeah fine, if that's what you want. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, working-class school)

Figure 4.7: Perceived helpfulness of different sources of information in advising son/daughter on educational choices

Other parents indicated that while their son/daughter had made the decision themselves, this took place after discussions had taken place at home:

There doesn’t seem to be any guidance in the school, it’s what we and [my son] feel might be his, again with the subjects that he’s comfortable doing … subjects that he’s happy to do himself. (Father-son, post-secondary education, mixed intake school)

I had a discussion with him, and he picked which he thought that he would be good at higher or lower, we left it up to him. He
knew what he was good at and what he could, we didn’t push him into higher level subjects or anything like that even though he’s done most of them are higher level. But no, he decided that himself after a bit of discussion, we left it basically up to him.

(Father-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Sometimes, young people’s decisions were influenced by the choices of their friends:

Maybe a friend would have been doing the same subject and they kind of all went in together on it. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, working-class school)

Parents were also likely to outline their ‘guidance role’ in subject (and other educational) choices at senior cycle. For some of these parents, information offered by teachers and other school staff was key in terms of making the decision:

I wasn’t very involved in making [choices], I was just an overall guide as such. As I said, the teachers gave the information, she pretty well tried to choose her best, you know, for what she wanted and, no, she pretty well knew herself the subjects that she was good at and the ones that she didn’t like so she more or less chose herself.

(Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

I would have spoke with career guidance teachers on the open night because … you know he had decided to do either science or physiotherapy or something like that and we would have spoke with the career guidance teacher to see what subjects he would need for that. So in the end he did, he chose two science subjects then. (Mother-son, mixed intake school)

In terms of decisions relating to level of subjects, some parents and students, particularly those in working-class schools, took the teachers’ word in deciding which level to choose:

Well she went on her teachers’ advice what to do, what she should be doing, whether it’s higher level or lower level. … I thought it
was ok, I'd go by what the teachers [said] and she'd know herself in anyway whether she'd be either lower or higher level. (Father-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)

A smaller number of parents indicated that they had tried to influence the subject level to which their son/daughter was allocated, not always successfully:

After his Pre, he had decided to drop back to ordinary level because he just felt there was too much work in it. But he didn’t get a choice of going back into an ordinary level class, he had to stay in the honours class, which I think was a big [problem], he really should have got back into [the ordinary class], he didn’t have the choice. I actually had a meeting with the principal and she could do nothing for me you know. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

I had the discussions in Junior Cert because she wanted to drop from higher level down and I didn’t want her to do that at all. But then in senior cycle gradually she kept dropping one after the other to pass and she was telling me that the school were encouraging her to do that. But the school never once contacted me to talk about it and at this stage I was getting quite disillusioned with the school about it, so I didn’t bother going back into them. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Parents were also asked about the information flow in the form of written reports from the school regarding their son’s/daughter’s educational progress. The survey included a question: ‘Since September of this school year, have you received any written report on your teenager’s progress at school?’ Just 4 per cent of parents reported that they have never received a written report while 38 per cent had received one report and 58 per cent had received two or more. There was considerable variation in the frequency of reports across the individual schools, being most frequent in Hay Street and Dawson Street and least frequent in Harris Street and Barrack Street (Figure 4.8).
Figure 4.8: Number of written reports received by parents in the last academic year

Parents of sixth year students received reports more frequently than those with children in fifth year. The majority of parents described these written reports as ‘very helpful’. Parents with lower levels of education and those with children in working-class schools were most positive about the helpfulness of written reports.

4.6 Parental perceptions of the senior cycle curriculum in general

As with the junior cycle, parents were asked ‘What did you think of the senior cycle curriculum?’ in terms of the number of subjects on offer (too many, about right, too few), the difficulty of the subjects (too difficult, about right, too easy), and the usefulness of the subjects (useful, not useful). The majority (84 per cent) of parents surveyed indicated that the number of subjects on offer in senior cycle was about right, with just 15 per cent indicating that there are too many subjects, much fewer than at Junior Certificate level. In all, the majority of parents also felt that the subjects on offer were useful and about right in terms of difficulty. When asked to reflect generally on the curriculum, the vast majority (92 per cent) of the parents surveyed were happy with the Leaving Certificate subjects taken by their son or daughter, with over a third being ‘very satisfied’. Overall dissatisfaction with the subjects taken tended to reflect the subjects not being seen as useful and, to a lesser extent, their perceived difficulty.

Parents of students in working-class schools were somewhat more likely to express dissatisfaction with the subjects than those in mixed or middle-class schools (15 per cent did so compared with 7 per cent in the other schools). Satisfaction levels also varied somewhat across the individual case-study schools, with Fig Lane and Belmore Street having the highest proportion ‘very satisfied’. Parents of those taking LCE or LCVP were more likely to see subjects as difficult, one in five doing so, than parents of those taking LCA. In addition, parents of students in working-class schools were less likely to see the subjects taken as useful than those in mixed or middle-class schools. In contrast to the situation at junior cycle, only one in six parents felt that their children were taking too many subjects at senior cycle level.
However, variation was evident across senior cycle programmes, with LCVP parents more likely to say their children were taking too many subjects and LCA parents least likely to do so. The pattern for LCVP is likely to reflect the fact that the modules are offered as an ‘extra subject’ in some schools (see Smyth et al., 2007).

In the in-depth interviews, parents were asked about their perceptions of the mix of subjects on offer in senior cycle. The most frequently cited issue relating to the mix of subjects on offer concerned constraints on subject choice:

I mean there’s a good … range of subjects available but they group them, so if you’re doing certain things you can’t do certain subjects with them, if you know what I mean? So that was a bit difficult because she wanted to do, I forget what it was she wanted to do, she ended up having to do Business and she doesn’t want to do Business, it wouldn’t have been her priority and she ended up doing that just because of the mix so it wasn’t great. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

The absence of detailed guidance on the content and related pathways for certain subjects was raised as an issue by some parents:

I felt they weren’t advised … it was when he was in the second half of fifth year that he kind of discovered well that subject is not a good one to get points on. … And certainly they weren’t advised on that end of it. (Mother-son, post-secondary education, mixed intake school)

Other parents discussed the absence of certain skills from the current curriculum, in keeping with the responses presented in Chapter Three:

The mix is fairly good, there's a fair selection of stuff there now, like I said the only problem I have there now is that he’s still not street wise, he’s still couldn’t walk down the street and open a bank account or he couldn’t do things like that, if he gets a job he has no idea about tax and things like that, there should be a subject there in fifth [year]. (Father-son, third-level education, mixed social intake)
4.7 Conclusions

Most parents perceived that their son/daughter settled into senior cycle without any major problems. However, there was some concern among parents about the threat of early school leaving, particularly among boys, at this stage in their schooling career. This was more common where a culture of early leaving was evident among the cohort. Parental perceptions of the influence of Transition Year on settling into senior cycle were mixed. Some parents found Transition Year to be a highly successful programme, facilitating the transition into senior cycle, while others found that there was a delay in settling into senior cycle and a structured curriculum after Transition Year participation. However, when the school had alerted parents to this possibility in advance, it was seen as less of a problem among parents.

Parental perceptions of the Transition Year programme differed according to the nature of provision, whether it is optional or compulsory, but also the organisation and content of the programmes, which differed across schools. In relation to student outcomes, the vast majority of parents were positive about the effects of TY on young people’s personal and social development. However, the academic benefits of Transition Year are less clear to parents.

This chapter has explored parental perceptions of the senior cycle curriculum, particularly in relation to the different programmes on offer at senior cycle. What emerged from the parental survey and interviews was that parents of students pursuing the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme were not always aware that it was a different programme to the established Leaving Certificate. This pattern is consistent with the lack of identification of LCVP as a distinct ‘programme’ on the part of students and even teachers (see Smyth et al., 2007).

In relation to levels of satisfaction with the programme that their child(ren) are pursuing, it would seem that parents of students pursuing the LCA were more likely to express dissatisfaction with the programme being pursued. Even in schools where a number of programmes were on offer, parents did not always feel that their
son/daughter had a choice of which track to pursue. There was some evidence to suggest that there is variation across schools in how participants are selected for different programmes (see Smyth et al., 2007).

The majority of parents expressed satisfaction with the information that the school offered on subject choice at senior cycle. Parents were generally more likely to view the information received from their son/daughter or from the school (either informally or formally) as helpful. In contrast, they were less likely to regard information based on their own educational experiences or information from the internet as having the same level of usefulness in relation to the educational choices being made at senior cycle. In keeping with student reports (Smyth et al., 2007), a high degree of communication between young people and their parents is evident in relation to educational matters, with frequent discussion of choice of subjects and subject levels. Reflecting their age and maturity, many young people are afforded a considerable degree of autonomy by their parents in making their subject choices. However, it was also evident that some parents play more of a directive, or at least a watchful, role than others.

Finally, as was the case in junior cycle, the majority of parents surveyed indicated that the number, usefulness and difficulty of the subjects on offer in senior cycle were appropriate. Any difficulties encountered by parents in senior cycle tended to centre on the issue of constrained subject choice.
Chapter Five

THE SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE ON HOME–SCHOOL CONTACT

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the formal structures put in place by schools to communicate with and involve parents. The first section describes contact between the school and parents of first year students while provision in the remainder of the junior cycle is discussed in section two. Section three indicates the personnel responsible for dealing with parents in the case-study schools. Section four explores the formal and informal involvement of parents in the school from the perspective of school personnel. The chapter draws on in-depth interviews conducted for the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study with key personnel in the case-study schools, including principals, guidance counsellors, year heads, class tutors and home-school-community liaison co-ordinators. These data are supplemented with information from a survey of first year teachers in the case-study schools.

5.2 Home-school contact for first year students and parents

All of the case-study schools have an information day or evening for parents of in-coming first year students, which usually occurs around the time of the open day for students:

We would invite the teachers of primary schools to come with their classes of students and see the school and, at the same time, in the evening we would invite the parents to come and see the
Behind the Scenes?

school and to meet with us. (Principal, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

These information sessions tend to be used to outline the school ethos, and explain school rules and other aspects of school practice:

On that night we would go down through items like their uniform requirements, their book lists, explain to parents about getting books and the school journal and the purpose of the school journal. We would put a lot of emphasis on that as being the real, the big, link between the parents and the school; like it’s the students’ bible and they are expected to have it every day without exception. (Principal, Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

We just give information and we tell them about the rules and the running of the school and the ethos and all that sort of stuff and what help and assistance that is there for them if they have any problems. (Deputy Principal, Barrack Street, girls’ school, working-class intake)

In two of the schools, Lang Street and Fig Lane, information sessions were held during a regular school day in order to provide parents and students with a more accurate picture of what to expect from the new school:

Interestingly enough, we find it very effective to do that on an ordinary school working day. So effectively, when the children come and when the parents come and they see teachers teaching classes and they see our existing pupils wandering around and going through the normal phase of a normal day and that is quite effective because it shows more or less what the school does. No surprises. (Principal, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

We have open days every year and in the three years prior to somebody coming to the school they are invited to the open day with their parents and we use our existing students’ body to show them around and talk to them. It is not a matter of standing up the
front or giving them brochures. It is a matter of just letting them walk around the school, chat to the kids - that is the way it works.

(Principal, Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

In Belmore Street, an additional information session was targeted on parents of more disadvantaged students in order to help them prepare their daughters for the transition to post-primary education:

Now in about maybe the end of May we invite the parents of the very local schools, … that would be a disadvantaged school, … we invite those parents in for a night. … The aim of that is in a nice simple way, non-threatening way, we try to get them, most of those wouldn’t have been in secondary school themselves, a lot of them, we try to get them to understand about coming to school and about a timetable for the day, what the timetable is and the names of the subjects and how they move around and about the importance of getting them up in the morning and in and things like that, just familiarising them with the way the school is run, we find that helps them. (Principal, Belmore Street, girls’ school, mixed intake)

Six of the case-study schools required students to select their subjects at or on entry to the school. In these schools, subject choice is also addressed in the meetings held for parents:

We have a question and answer session and then we have a tour of the school just to show them the facilities that we have so that it makes it easier for them around subject choices. (Deputy Principal, Barrack Street, girls’ school, working-class intake)

Tomorrow night we meet, the deputy, myself, guidance counsellor and subject teachers will meet parents just to discuss with them the options and just go through a few procedures with them. (Principal, Dawes Point, boys’ school, working-class intake)

In the remaining six case-study schools, taster programmes were in place whereby students could ‘sample’ subjects for part or all of first year, before selecting their Junior Certificate subjects. In these
schools, another meeting with parents was generally held towards the end of the year regarding subject choice:

In March then, or April, depending on the term time, the children are met by the tutor, options are explained and then parents are invited to come in to discuss the option changes and the new curriculum that’s being set up for the children going into second year. (Principal, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

There is a night for parents, where parents are brought in before they have to make their options and are explained. … We also make sure that before the students have to make their options that we have our parent-teacher meeting. Now the students do a huge number of subjects in first year and the parents could not see all those teachers … but what we tell them is, the top four subjects you’re interested in keeping up, get your parents to go to those teachers. (Class Tutor, Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

In six of the case-study schools (Argyle Street, Barrack Street, Dawes Point, Fig Lane, Lang Street and Harris Street), these initial meetings with parents were supplemented with one-to-one meetings with parents before or at entry and/or with additional sessions for parents after the students had been in the school for a certain period of time. These meetings served a number of purposes. Firstly, they allowed for the communication of more confidential information between parents and the school:

The most important one is that we receive information of a confidential nature regarding their background from the parents - which we need to have. It could be anything to do with health, it could be to do with their status, their work and so on like that. We give them information about where we think the child’s position is in terms of their possible achievement which we would have got from our talk with the primary school and also with our assessment which would have been collected and assessed by them. We talk about the regulations and the contracts that are necessary before the child starts with us and we also deal with some administration, book lists and uniform and things like that.
That is what that meeting handles. (Principal, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

Such information on students’ background was seen as vital in catering for the needs of in-coming students:

We take the parent on their own and we discuss if they have any problems that they want to talk about that might help us in knowing more about this child which quite a lot of times they will want to talk about, and again that is something that we do minimum recording on, just vague details on it, but it does help us sometimes in dealing with these children later on. (Guidance Counsellor, Barrack Street, girls’ school, working-class intake)

Secondly, they allowed parents and students to discuss issues around subject choice in greater depth with school staff.

We start interviewing the parent with the child. We discuss their subject choices at that point. … We discuss that with them and how they would feel about it, we try to explain to them what would be involved in those subjects and … looking at their assessment alongside that, and say well, if a child wants Science, well saying … well is this the wisest thing, around that we work. (Guidance Counsellor, Barrack Street, girls’ school, working-class intake)

Thirdly, these one-to-one meetings were seen as giving parents more insight into school practice and providing reassurance concerning certain aspects of the transfer process, such as potential bullying:

I’d meet the first year student with his mother or father or both or guardian and just go through procedures with them. They’d be given a copy of our good behaviour and so on at the open night, so I’d just go through aspects of that, emphasise especially the bullying or the anti-bullying thing. That’s the big thing and it kind of puts their mind at rest and I found that very successful. It takes about ten minutes and I don’t meet them here because the principal’s office has kind of connotations with kids, so I
Meetings held after students had been in the school for a period of time were also seen as providing support for parents and students in integrating into the new school:

After two to three weeks we invite the parents in because you know with little ones they go home running with the stories of my locker room and my this and my that and so when the parents come in then and we bring them in for a night and I kind of try and remind them about things like that children find, they really do, the first term in the first year exhausting because it’s very different, the transfer. ... Then we invite them to go around the school with the [student] councillor of their class and the form teacher so that they can kind of identify with whatever it is that their daughter’s been talking about. And then in their first year in about a month or two later we invite any parent who wants to come in and meet with the form teacher in a pastoral way so that if they want to tell us if there’s any problems with the child or they just want to make sure they’re settling in but it’s not an academic report. (Principal, Harris Street, girls’ school, middle-class intake)

5.3 Home-school contact in second and third year

For second year students, the main point of home-school contact was the regular parent-teacher meeting, which is discussed in section three. The majority of the case-study schools held information evenings for parents of third year students to discuss programme and subject options for senior cycle:

We would bring the parents of third years in every year to talk about the options for Leaving Cert and for Leaving Cert Applied,
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LCVP. ... All us as teachers go down and explain ... you know whatever our subject is for fourth year, or what’s involved and what the books are like and what are their job opportunities and, you know, the students are informed about the subjects they can choose as well. (Class Tutor, Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Last night, for example, we talked to the parents and the career guidance teacher would have gone through all the subjects They’re told ... by the teachers first of all what the subjects are, for example if you’re doing Science you can do Physics, Chemistry, Biology and it’s important that they know ... Business is broken up into Accountancy and Business Studies and Economics and then you have the History, Geography and so on. (Principal, Park Street, boys’ school, mixed intake)

In Dixon Street and Barrack Street, both working-class schools, information evenings were held regarding programme choice but, in terms of subject choice, students brought a form home to be signed by their parents:

Well it’s up to the student to a certain extent but when the student has made their choice, a form goes to the parent and the parent has to sign it so the parent is aware of the student’s choice. They get a form to bring home and to discuss with their parents the choices they are going to make. (Principal, Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

In Hay Street and Wattle Street, schools with contrasting social intakes, communication with parents regarding senior cycle options operated on a written basis by sending a letter and form home to parents to be signed:

I give classes to the fourth years on the subject choices and a hand-out on what subjects are necessary for some careers and what are useful for some careers and they are told to go home and to have a discussion with the parents about it and all the information is sent home with regard to, you know, what the lines
are and what the choices are and so on. And then if any parent wants to have a chat about it they’re welcome. … I haven’t in a formal way had a meeting with parents about it. (Guidance Counsellor, Wattle Street, boys’ school, mixed intake)

Aside from parent-teacher meetings, usually held on an annual basis, formal contact between the school and parents tends to be greater at key transition points, namely, first year and third year. The following section discusses the main people involved in dealing with parents in the case-study schools.

5.4 Personnel involved in dealing with parents

Principals represented the main point of contact with parents in most of the case-study schools.

The principal tends to take over, so if he knows that somebody is absent he will be on the phone himself and in a sense he does everybody’s job, so parents call the school if they want to take their child away on holidays and I would see them on occasion like, but usually it would be the principal that would deal with everything. (Year Head, Dawes Point, boys’ school, working-class intake)

In several schools, however, a wider group of teachers and school personnel were involved in contact with parents, providing a more integrated approach to addressing issues that might arise:

We’ll have the team of teachers there on the [parents’] night who will be working with first years in September, we’ll have the year head, the tutors, the chaplain, the guidance counsellor, the learning support teacher and each of them will give a brief overview of what they will be doing. … Parents can see from the list who their child’s tutor is going to be and they can put a face on that person. (Principal, Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)
We have a very much developed system now of invitation to bring the parents in where we spot things not going right. So we have the pastoral team, guidance team, learning support team or the administrator in the year head system will invite parents in on a regular basis. (Principal, Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

As in many other schools, the principal, year heads and class tutors in Lang Street, a working-class boys’ school, had specific roles in dealing with the parents of students:

In general things the tutor would pick up the role and in more specific things, especially to do with discipline or with large-scale things like option choices and so on, the year head would pick up the role. And then I would have an overall leadership role with the parents as well. (Principal, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

However, personnel in this school emphasised very strongly that dealing with parents was seen as an intrinsic part of the job of all teachers in the school:

It is the responsibility of every teacher to deal with every parent of the children that they teach. In other words, if you are teaching French and you are unhappy about a child’s progress in French, it is part and parcel of the school’s thinking here that you as a teacher will go down, pick up the phone and ring home and say ... rather than it going to somebody else to do that. Because that’s your business. (Principal, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

Seven of the case-study schools, five with working-class intakes and two with a mixed intake, had home-school-community liaison coordinators, who played an important role in developing contact between the school and parents. They were generally proactive about contact with parents, with some meeting with all first year parents in the school and/or on home visits:
Prior to the students coming, starting on the first of September I would meet all the parents. I meet them all formally for a formal interview, which we are doing at the moment. The parent comes in with the student and I am one of the people that meets the parent and student. That is a formal interview. And when those are completed I will follow that up by inviting the incoming parents in groups just to an informal get to know you gathering, where we talk about any of their worries or concerns or hopes or fears, just in an informal and friendly way. Then some of those parents who might be working and don’t come, I would visit them, in their home. And if that didn’t work, if they were still not available, we have a little team of experienced parents under my direction who would visit them in the evening. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

I would meet all those parents in September, I would start immediately in September to meet them all. So I would have practically all new first year parents met by the end of September, mid-October. And we discuss any issues then that arise. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Dawes Point, boys’ school, working-class intake)

I would probably have more contact in first year. I would make a point of visiting all parents in first year whether they would be disadvantaged or not, at the very beginning. You know, at the start of the year say between September and Christmas, I would visit every home. Now after that, it depends on the circumstances. If there is a need for me to go back and if I can help out in certain situations, then I will do that. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Wattle Street, boys’ school, mixed intake)

Meeting with all parents of first year students was seen as providing parents with a ‘friendly face’ in the school so that they would be inclined to contact the school.

We look for where something isn’t quite right maybe or where a child is doing well so that they can give that news, but mainly that
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meeting is to find out from the parents how they think the child has settled in and it’s a good opportunity for us to meet the parents at an early stage when everything is very positive to pick up on anything that’s bothering them at that stage and that happens at that point and then that question comes up. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

In contrast, in other schools, the emphasis was on specifically promoting contact with more disadvantaged groups of parents:

With first year parents I wouldn’t have any contact, only with the disadvantaged parents. … I would visit them all, and maybe at least twice, say before Christmas, the whole lot of them and some of them many more times than that, if there was particular problems, or if I feel I am needed. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Belmore Street, girls’ school, mixed intake)

In four of the schools, the HSCL Co-ordinator was involved in running courses and activities for parents:

She has all these programmes going now. Parenting skills and computer classes, cookery classes and all kinds of things going on at different stages … She has little clubs going. She works with the community then and she has little study clubs going on, a lot of stuff going on really. (Deputy Principal, Barrack Street, girls’ school, working-class intake)

There are also courses available for parents, which are helpful to them supporting their children. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

The HSCL scheme was seen as facilitating more positive relations between parents and schools, and helping parents counter their own negative experiences of the educational system:

Now the parents who participate say they are wonderful and wonder how we managed without them. And they say that they
had negative feelings about school and they were afraid to talk to a teacher and their heart would be pounding as they were coming in the door. They never thought they would enjoy coming to a school, or never thought they would choose to come. And a lot of the parents who participate say that. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

5.5 Parental involvement in the school

This section explores a number of aspects of parental involvement in the school, including attendance at parent-teacher meetings, other informal involvement, perceived relations between teachers and parents, and the role of the parents’ council.

5.5.1 Attendance at parent-teacher meetings

Teachers of first year students in the case-study schools were surveyed in order to explore their approach to integrating first years into the school. The questionnaire included items on teachers’ perceptions of parental involvement in the school in relation to attendance at parent-teacher meetings, involvement in the parents’ association, providing help and support to their child with schoolwork, and approaching the school if their child has difficulties. Teachers were also asked whether they felt that teachers in their school were open to contact with parents.

In general, teachers in mixed or middle-class schools tended to report higher levels of attendance among parents at parent-teacher meetings (Figure 5.1). There was some variation among these schools, however, with Fig Lane and Belmore Street reporting higher attendance. Among the working-class schools, Lang Street has a distinctively high level of parental attendance, in keeping with the accounts of key personnel (see below).

1 These data do not include Harris Street and Argyle Street, as they joined the study in its second year.
Figure 5.1: Perceived attendance at parent-teacher meetings (% of first year teachers reporting ‘nearly all’ parents attend)

Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study.
A similar pattern emerged from more detailed interviews with key personnel in the case-study schools, with attendance at parent-teacher or other formal meetings generally regarded as higher in the more middle-class or mixed schools.

Interviewer: And what proportion of parents would normally attend?

Oh, a very high proportion, in fact I would say as near to being 100 per cent attendance as makes no difference. (Deputy Principal, Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

We have a very high attendance, 96 per cent of our parents attend the meeting. (Principal, Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

In contrast, personnel in the working-class schools reported difficulties in getting parents to attend formal meetings:

Very few parents would turn up and even when you have talks - we’ve had talks here in school on issues relating to students that we feel would be of concern to parents but the turnout has been very disappointing. No matter what night you organise it, it is never a good night. There is either Coronation Street, a soccer match, always something on TV. You do your best, but the turnout can be very disappointing and it is mostly women who come. You would get very few men, an odd man here and there. (Deputy Principal, Barrack Street, girls’ school, working-class intake)

We put on an awful lot of stuff for the parents here really but they don’t participate, a lot of them don’t participate. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)

The exception to this latter pattern was Lang Street, where the school had linked receiving reports on students to parental attendance at meetings in first year:
We have a system whereby the report isn’t accessible until the parent comes in. So we don’t put the report in the post, or if the parent isn’t free to come at the time of the appointment, then another appointment is made before the report is passed. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

Furthermore, this school made quite active efforts to involve parents, holding three parent-teacher meetings in first year and having a good deal of contact between the HSCL co-ordinator and parents.

There was variation reported within schools, with parents of students in higher stream classes seen as being more likely to attend meetings than those of lower stream classes:

On a sliding scale, we have a streamed system here for the classes and it would be on a sliding scale as you go from the A stream down, the attendance will tend to drop. It could go from say 70% say at the top stream down. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

The trend would be almost 100% in the higher classes and that would fall off in the lower streams, strangely enough. (Principal, Park Street, boys’ school, mixed intake)

Personnel also distinguished between somewhat higher attendance at parent-teacher meetings but much lower levels of participation in general meetings:

Large meetings like that tend to be very poorly attended here, we could have a meeting for instance to discuss, if it was something like drugs you would get a large crowd of people along but … if we called a meeting and said there was going to be changes in the Leaving Cert programme or the Junior Cert programme we would get a very poor turnout. …Yeah, parents coming in for a parent teacher meeting, they’ll turn up but for a general meeting, no. (Principal, Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)
Although there were perceived differences between middle-class/mixed and working-class schools, many of the schools, regardless of intake, felt that it was the parents ‘they wanted to see’ who tended not to attend these meetings:

You will see the parents that you really don’t need to see and in many cases you don’t see the parents that you want to see, unless it happens that they are requested to come in. If a boy is doing badly or isn’t in attendance or whatever, you would need to meet the parents and that’s a common complaint but I don’t think it is unique to here. The parents that you see are the parents who are very interested and the parents that you want to see are those who aren’t interested and maybe that is part of the reason why they are not doing so well - because the guidance is not coming from the home or the overall supervision is not coming from the home. (Deputy Principal, Park Street, boys’ school, mixed intake)

Often the parent you want to come doesn’t, the one that is having problems academically or who is a bad attender, or has discipline problems. It’s almost impossible to get that parent to come, unless you go to the house to see her. (Deputy Principal, Belmore Street, girls’ school, mixed intake)

The parents that you want to see never turn up. The good parents will make it their business to be there. But I think that would be true of all schools. (Deputy Principal, Barrack Street, girls’ school, working-class intake)

Attendance was also seen as better among parents of first year students, with some tail-off as students grew older:

You get a lot of first years. It’s their first year and they want to see how they are doing. Most parents would come in most years, particularly first years, Junior Cert year and Leaving Cert year. They would come at second year and fifth year but not in as high a proportion. (Deputy Principal, Belmore Street, girls’ school, mixed intake)
5.5.2 Informal involvement and teacher-parent relations

It is important to distinguish between formal parental involvement and parents’ informal involvement in providing help and support to their children as they move through the schooling system. Teachers of first year students in the case-study schools were asked about the extent to which parents of students in their school provided help and support to their children with schoolwork. Differences are evident between working-class and mixed/middle-class schools, although there is some overlap between the two groups (see Figure 5.2). Although Dawes Point, a working-class school, has low levels of formal parental involvement, parents are seen as being very supportive of their child’s education. Levels of parental support for schoolwork are seen as somewhat lower in Barrack Street and Dixon Street, both working-class schools. Overall, Dawes Point, Belmore Street and Fig Lane emerge as schools with the highest perceived levels of informal involvement among parents.

It should be noted that several key personnel stressed the diversity of parental behaviour and attitudes in their school. In one working-class school, a staff member contrasted a number of groups of parents:

The main body of parents here would be interested, there would be a few who maybe because of very turbulent or chaotic lives that it’s a low priority for them, it would be there but it wouldn’t be a priority issue. … Then there would be another group, we’ll say the other end of the spectrum, you’ve parents who would have perhaps experienced second-level school either themselves and want their children to do really well and want them to go on to college and are quite realistic about it and are very supportive and come to the parent-teacher meetings and the children always have their books and whatever equipment they should have, sacrifices will be made to do this. And then there are other groups of parents in between the two, there are parents who would want the child to do well but don’t have any understanding, as I said, of the process or what’s involved for the child. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)
Figure 5.2: Perceived help and support with schoolwork from parents (% of teachers reporting 'nearly all' or 'more than half')

Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study.
Differences between schools were much less clear-cut in relation to the perceived willingness of parents to approach teachers if their child was having difficulties (Figure 5.3). Levels were seen as highest in Hay Street and Fig Lane, schools with very contrasting intakes, and lowest in Barrack Street, a working-class girls’ school.

Across the case-study schools, the vast majority of teachers reported that teachers in their school were generally open to contact with parents (Figure 5.4). Curiously, the level was somewhat lower in Belmore Street, where the involvement of parents is at quite a high level. It was also lower in Barrack Street, which has low levels of parental involvement in the school.

In interviews with key personnel, those in the two middle-class schools, Fig Lane and Harris Street, tended to feel that parents had very high expectations of the school:

You probably hear it in other schools as well, parents are getting more and more demanding, you know, I mean silly things even like parents yesterday, two parents ringing up about the two of them had a fight over a boyfriend. Now it all happened outside of school but they want us to solve it because they’re fighting with one another in school. And that’s happening more and more and the parents say, well we want you to do something, what are you going to do about it? (Principal, Harris Street, girls’ school, middle-class intake)

Staff in Fig Lane felt that parents held higher expectations because they were paying school fees:

When parents pay fees to schools, they feel that they know best, they feel that they have a louder voice than they’re really entitled to, every parent is an expert when it comes to education. (Deputy Principal, Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

In other schools, some personnel felt that some distance was evident between teachers and parents, and that teachers might be reluctant for parents to become more actively involved in the school:
Figure 5.3: Perceived willingness of parents to approach teachers in relation to difficulties (% reporting ‘nearly all’ or ‘more than half’)

Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study.
Figure 5.4: Perceived openness of teachers to contact with parents (% reporting ‘nearly all’)

Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study.
I’m not so sure about that, you know parents have come in in the past to do painting and do things like that and teachers would always treat it with a certain amount of suspicion, someone’d see the chairperson on the corridor, ‘what’s [name] doing here in around the running of the school?’, that kind of thing. So I don’t know I imagine there would be a little bit of suspicion in letting them come in too far inside the door, but I think that’s a progressive thing that comes with time. (Principal, Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

I think the vast majority [of teachers] probably would not [like to see more parental involvement]. There would be a couple but they would be very much in the minority that would like to see more parental involvement, but I would think, in all honesty, the vast majority probably wouldn’t. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Wattle Street, boys’ school, mixed intake)

In contrast, in two working-class schools (Lang Street and Dixon Street), teachers were seen as very open to contact with parents:

I think from a teacher’s perspective they would be very happy to see parents taking more responsibility, they would be very happy to see parents supporting the school more. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

In general, personnel favoured parents making appointments to see the relevant personnel rather than ‘dropping in’ to the school:

Well, they tend to drop in, we don’t like this very much because it’s not fair, for [the principal] especially, I think that some of them would just land in and just say I want to be met now, you know. So we advise them to make an appointment, it’s only fair. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)

Any parent can come, can ring and make an appointment at any time with a teacher or year head. (Principal, Harris Street, girls’ school, middle-class intake)
However, the ‘open door’ policy in Lang Street meant that parents could visit at any time:

There is a policy here in the school for all students and for all parents that the doors of the school are always open and any parent can make an appointment to see any teacher at any time. And that in general, if I can manage it or if the deputy can manage it, they can come to see me anytime. I mean a parent can come to see me now and if I’m free to see them, I will see them. I’ll see them as quickly as possible and I would encourage an open door policy whereby parents would feel very comfortable about coming to the school, as and if they felt like it. (Principal, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

5.5.3 Parents’ councils

At the start of the study, all of the case-study schools had a parents’ council or parents’ association in place, although in some cases this was seen as relatively inactive. In a number of working-class schools, personnel reported difficulties in maintaining an active association over time:

Even our parents’ council isn’t working properly this year, because they just won’t come to meetings, I think partly because parents are working now. It used to be that a lot of the parents would be unemployed but most of them now seem to have jobs. This presents its own difficulties. (Principal, Barrack Street, girls’ school, working-class intake)

Generally speaking it would have been fairly OK, we will say, in previous years. They would have had a couple of meetings per term and they would have been active enough but the meetings would be very poorly attended, extremely poorly attended. Again it reflects the background from which a lot of our students come. (Principal, Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)
While most of the schools reported some difficulties in getting parents involved, the more middle-class/mixed schools tended to report fewer difficulties:

You could have a very vibrant and active chairperson or you could have someone who has a hundred and one other things to do and finds it very difficult to find the time to do things, but there will be a number, the parents will do a standard amount of fundraising, they will support every event, you know they will be on the guest list for anything that’s going on and they will always attend. They present a parents’ award at the end of year graduation ceremony for Leaving Certs, you know, so they would have a very active, positive profile in the school. (Principal, Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

The role of the parents’ council varied somewhat across schools. In general, the focus was seen as fundraising rather than an active input into school policy:

Interviewer: How involved are they [the parents’ council] in shaping the school policy?

I would have to say quite honestly not strongly. Tends to be in the area of fundraising. But to borrow your word shaping school policy I would say not at all. That is being honest. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Dawes Point, boys’ school, working-class intake)

They would do some fundraising, they would bring up issues of interest to themselves or concerns that they might have, they would bring those up at meetings and they would discuss that with the principal but in terms of being on board on policy decisions, not hugely at the moment, I would have to say. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Wattle Street, boys’ school, mixed intake)

However, in other schools, parents were seen as having some involvement in policy decision-making:
I would have what we call a core group of parents that I would meet on a regular basis and they’re, if you like, an advisory group or they would be people that I would give information to about things happening in the school and that brings us to the grapevine which is the best way of communicating in an area like this. … It is part of my role again to involve parents with teachers and students in policy formation within the school and currently [a teacher is] reviewing our drugs policy which was put together I think about ‘96 by parents, teachers and students. It was a whole-school effort and they’re reviewing that at the moment with two parents, two students, some local community people, teachers and the health board … so that would be the main involvement, main structure that’s there, we’ve done code of conduct, we’ve done home-school policy with the parents as well. (Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

Three ways they contribute to the school. First of all, they are responsible for some fundraising whereby they contribute … for activities that the students are involved in. Secondly, they contribute by assisting at some of the functions and things that are held in the school, in providing support for those functions, receptions and so on. And thirdly, and more importantly, they contribute by being sounding boards for some of the policies of the school so that we get some parental responses for things that we want to introduce into the school or things that we feel need to be responded to by the parents. So it gives the opportunity for the parents to have a voice in the policy making of the school. (Principal, Lang Street, boys’ school, working-class intake)

Working-class schools were reported as having lower levels of perceived parental involvement in activities and meetings run by the parents’ council (see Figure 5.5). The high level of attendance at parent-teacher meetings in Lang Street did not appear to translate into very high levels of formal involvement in such activities. Among mixed or middle-class schools, Fig Lane and Belmore Street again stand out as having higher levels of parental involvement.
Figure 5.5: Perceived involvement in the parents’ council (% reporting ‘nearly all’ or ‘more than half’)

Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study.
Some personnel indicated that there were high levels of parental involvement in their child’s education so that parents attended parent-teacher meetings and other sessions providing information on subject options and so on. However, this involvement did not translate into high levels of participation in formal structures:

All parents are very involved in the school in relation to their children. But all parents are not involved in the parents’ association. The formal activities associated with school and fundraising, they don’t get involved. But when it comes to attendance at PTMs or attendance at night meetings, options meetings, we have major attendance. There is quite a strong affinity between the school and parents at that level. When it comes down to the normal parent association-school relationship, I would say we are down nearly at the bottom of the pile. (Principal, Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

It is not easy to get parents involved. When we had elections for parents to the board of management or parents to the parents’ association, very few candidates came forward. Very, very few people came forward and the same people come to everything. Now in this parents’ association, when they organised talks and things and invited guest speakers and so on, quite often the turnout was quite low. Our own organised events would be better all right, certainly the nights for subject choices or for the CAO or for the … Careers Fair … that would be very well attended. Almost all those who were invited would be in for that. (Principal, Park Street, boys’ school, mixed intake)

5.6 Conclusions

The case-study schools vary in the extent to which they involve parents formally and informally in the school. Some schools have more developed structures for involving parents while others rely on communication through parent-teacher meetings and information sessions at key points in young people’s schooling year (such as first and third year). Lang Street, a school serving a working-class population,
emerges as an example of good practice in contact with parents. The Home-School-Community Liaison Co-ordinator is proactive in involving parents in the school; group meetings for first year students and parents are supplemented by one-to-one meetings as well as informal ‘get-togethers’ with small groups of parents. A core group of parents act as mentors to involve other parents and to serve as a sounding-board for school policy. Most importantly, parental involvement is not viewed as the sole domain of the HSCL since all teachers are expected to take responsibility for contact with parents and an open door policy is adopted regarding meeting with parents.

The interaction of school admissions policy and parental choice processes discussed in Chapter Two means that schools vary in their social intake. These differences have clear implications for parental involvement in the school. On the whole, middle-class schools report greater parental involvement while schools with a concentration of working-class students report greater difficulties in involving parents in the school. However, variation is evident among working-class schools, with some schools (such as Lang Street) reporting higher levels of parental attendance at parent-teacher meetings, for example.

Across most schools, however, it is seen as difficult to involve parents in formal structures such as the parents’ council. At present, parents’ councils appear to be mainly confined to a fundraising role, with only limited engagement with, and influence over, school policy. This is in keeping with MacGiolla Phádraig’s previous research (2005) on primary schools, which indicated a consultation rather than partnership approach in home-school relations. The following chapter considers the level of involvement that parents have in their child’s education.
Chapter Six

Parental Contact with the School and Support for Their Child’s Education

6.1 Introduction

Many studies have highlighted a strong relationship between social class and parental involvement in education and others have highlighted the strong association between parents’ educational background and their knowledge of, and integration into, school affairs (see Chapter One). This chapter aims to examine levels of parental involvement in their child’s education. We distinguish between informal and formal involvement on the part of parents. Informal involvement entails providing support for their child as they move through the schooling system, by helping with homework, discussing how they are getting on in school, and giving advice on choices of programmes and subjects. Formal involvement relates to more structured contact with the school, varying in intensity from attending parent-teacher meetings to being an active member of the parents’ association or council. The extent to which parents of senior cycle students are involved in their child’s schooling is considered in the remainder of this chapter.

6.2 Informal parental involvement in education

Chapters Three and Four indicated that parents have a significant involvement in young people’s decision-making in relation to programmes and subjects at junior and senior cycle level. Figure 6.1 indi-
icates that parents are quite involved in checking their child has completed their homework, although they are less actively involved in actually helping with homework at senior cycle level. The latter pattern is likely to reflect the greater autonomy of older students as well as the increasingly specialised nature of the senior cycle curriculum. Parents were more likely to check their son’s homework than that of their daughter; three-quarters of those with sons check their homework at least several times a month compared with six out of ten of those with daughters. This may reflect the greater average amount of time spent by female students on homework and study compared with their male counterparts (Smyth et al., 2007). Furthermore, some interesting patterns emerge in relation in parental education levels. Parents with third-level education are somewhat more likely than those with lower levels of education to help their son or daughter with their homework on a frequent basis as are those with children in mixed or middle-class schools.

**Figure 6.1: Frequency of helping with or checking homework**

![Bar chart showing frequency of helping with or checking homework](image)

In order to consider the extent of communication among parents and students, parents were asked how often they discussed with their child how they were getting on in school, how they did in tests or exams, and whether they should take private tuition (‘grinds’) outside school (Figure 6.2). The majority of parents discuss progress in school and tests/exams at least several times a month with their teenage children. Discussion of the necessity for grinds is less frequent, but is discussed at least occasionally in the majority of cases, reflecting the increase in take-up of private tuition in recent years (Smyth, 2009). In line with previous findings, discussion of grinds was more prevalent among highly educated, middle-class parents with children in their final year of school. Discussion of how the child is getting on in school is somewhat more frequent among highly educated and/or middle-class parents, and those with children in sixth year. However, it is worth noting that variation across the social groups is not marked and that the majority of all parents are frequently involved in discussing these issues with their children. Discussion of educational progress and exam performance is somewhat more frequently reported by parents of daughters.

Figure 6.2: Frequency of school-related discussions

In relation to discussions about post-school plans, almost all of the parents surveyed had discussed what their child would do after school at least once in the current school year with frequent discussions taking place in about half of households (Figure 6.3). Discussion is somewhat less frequent among less educated parents and those with children in working-class schools. Furthermore, frequency is significantly higher among parents of daughters than of sons. As might be expected, it is clearly related to the proximity of leaving school; a quarter of sixth year parents discuss this topic several times a week compared with one in six of fifth year parents.

Figure 6.3: Frequency of discussing post-school plans


As well as being asked about discussing post-school plans, parents were questioned about their educational aspirations for their son or daughter in terms of the highest level of education they hoped to achieve. Possible responses were:

- Before the Leaving Certificate
- Complete the Leaving Certificate
- Apprenticeship
- Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) course
- Third-Level Diploma
- Third-Level Degree.

In all, the majority of parents (69 per cent) indicated that they wanted their son/daughter to go on to do a third-level degree while a further tenth cited a third-level diploma. Less than one tenth of parents wanted their children to finish their education at Leaving Certificate level (Figure 6.4). In considering this pattern, it is worth noting that some young people will already have dropped out of the educational system so their parents will not be included in the sample.\(^1\)

Figure 6.4: Educational aspirations for son or daughter

\(^1\) The topic of early school leaving among the cohort of young people in the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study has formed the basis of a separate study (see Byrne and Smyth, 2010).
Educational aspirations are strongly related to the social mix of the school attended and parents’ own educational level. The vast majority of parents with children in middle-class schools expect their child to attain a third-level degree (Figure 6.5). In contrast, parents of children in working-class schools are less likely to aspire to a third-level qualification for their child, although it should be noted that a significant proportion do so. Figure 6.6 shows educational aspirations by parental education; the highest level of parental education (whether mother’s or father’s) is used. The majority of parents with third-level qualifications themselves aspire to third-level education for their child while this is much less prevalent for parents with post-primary education or lower. Parents who discuss their children’s education and educational plans with them on a frequent basis tend to have higher educational aspirations for them.

Figure 6.5: Educational aspirations by school social mix

6.3 Formal contact with the school

In the survey, parents were asked about the frequency of different types of ‘formal’ contact with the school over the years, including:

- Attendance at parent-teacher meetings
- Attendance at meetings about subject choice
- Attendance at school concerts
- Attendance at school sports events
- Meeting with staff regarding how their child is getting on in school
- Meeting with staff regarding the behaviour of their child at school
- Phoning the principal regarding their child

• Involvement in the parents’ council
• Involvement on the school board of management
• Helping out with fund-raising
• Contact with the Home-School-Community-Liaison Coordinator.

There was a good deal of variation in the nature of parental involvement in the school, indicating the importance of distinguishing between different types of home-school contact. Almost all of the parents surveyed had attended a parent-teacher meeting on at least one occasion (Figure 6.7). Although the level of involvement is high, some parents were critical of the usefulness of parent-teacher meetings. According to some parents, the current model of parent-teacher meetings was too time consuming and not particularly effective.

You just have to go around from teacher to teacher, pick your subject, and the queues … there could be twenty in a queue and you have to queue up for each teacher and you could just be there for hours. I think the system of parent-teacher meetings is wrong. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

The only time we meet the teachers is at the parent-teacher meeting, so it’s basically ten or five minutes probably [per] subject and she has 13 or 14 subjects at Junior Cert, so we would have to meet … 13 and 14 teachers and there’s [a lot of] kids in the school. So you get the basic information and then it’s next parent up. (Father-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Other forms of parent-teacher interaction such as attending a cultural/social event at the school and going to a subject choice meeting were reported by a majority of parents. A significant minority of parents had attended a sports event or been involved in fund-raising. Not all home-school contact was positive, however, as a quarter of parents had to visit the school regarding their child’s behaviour.
Parental Contact with the School and Support for Child’s Education

Figure 6.7: Formal contact with the school (% ‘ever’)


Highly formalised kinds of contact, such as involvement in the parents’ council or school board of management, were much less prevalent than other forms of home-school contact. Generally, parents felt that they and others were reluctant to get involved formally because of the workload involved:

And like people just do not want to get involved in things in case they get jobs and in case they have to sponsor something or sell something or whatever. Generally they sit back and let other people do it and then complain if they don’t agree with it. (Father-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Those who were formally involved were seen as ‘the same group of people’:
You will get the same few that will come to the meetings and you will get those that will complain that there’s nothing being done but will not … come to a meeting or will not do anything. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

It’s kind of very hard to get a lot of parents to attend meetings, it’s kind of the same core of people that turn up to meetings all the time, it’s very hard to get a lot of people to attend any kind of meetings that the teachers have set up or anything like that. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)

Because of the profile of the typical parent on parent councils or the board of management, other parents felt alienated from joining.

I just found it very alien so you knew that the people that were there because they went to school there were doing all the work and … it was like traditional for them to be in the board of management. It felt very stuffy and upper class to be honest you know, there was a lot of snootiness with the people who were on them. (Mother-son, post-primary education, mixed intake school)

Many parents expressed the view that they had had more formal contact and greater involvement in their child’s primary school than at post-primary level. In this regard, primary schools were perceived as being more open to parental involvement than post-primary schools.

I used to be [involved] in the primary, like when she was in the primary school there used to be a lot of clubs and you know parents’ mornings and all that, I was involved a lot in all that, but in the secondary I wasn’t. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)

I just feel with secondary schools, it’s like a cut-off point for the parents, that’s my view on it, I just feel like it’s like the cut-off point, it’s completely different to primary school. You’re more involved in primary school and they involve the parents more. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)
In general, parents tended to be satisfied with their existing level of contact with the school. Their approach was in many ways reactive rather than proactive; they viewed the school as being open to contact if they had a ‘problem’ but had not had significant levels of interaction with teachers since their children had not experienced any particular difficulties:

We have people there that we can actually ring if there’s a problem with homework or anything like that, you can ring and they’ll talk to you and they’ll call you in or whatever if there's any issues whatsoever and they’re very approachable. We had very little contact because there wasn’t any trouble for the five years. (Father-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

They’re always there, they say and ring them up, but I had never any problems. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

We attend … the parent-teachers meetings … but as far as [our daughter] is concerned, we go to those meetings and we have very little contact with the teachers thereafter unless there's a problem and thus far there hasn’t been. (Father-daughter, post-secondary education, middle-class school)

There was some variation across the school years in the nature of home-school contact. In keeping with the accounts of school personnel (see Chapter Five), attendance at subject choice meetings was most common in third year and, to some extent, first year. Attendance at social/cultural events peaks somewhat in third year. Involvement in the parents’ council, while low across all years, tails off somewhat in senior cycle compared to early in junior cycle.

Variation was also evident among groups of parents. Those with lower levels of education were less likely to attend subject choice meetings; 31 per cent had never done so compared with 22 per cent of those with third-level qualifications. Attendance at subject choice meetings was also less prevalent among parents of children in working-class schools; 44 per cent had never attended such a meeting com-
pared with 30 per cent of those in middle-class schools. Attendance at social, cultural or sports events in the school was more common among highly educated parents and those in middle-class schools. Attendance at cultural events was more common among parents of daughters than sons but no gender differences were evident in relation to sports events. Meeting a staff member in relation to the child’s educational progress or behaviour was more prevalent in working-class schools and in relation to boys than girls. Formal involvement in the parents’ council was much less prevalent among parents with lower levels of education as was being a member of the board of management. Being involved in school fund-raising was more common among highly educated parents and those in middle-class schools. As might be expected, contact with the Home-School-Community-Liaison Coordinator was more common for parents with lower levels of education and around half of those with children in working-class schools had had some such contact. This contact was also more frequently related to sons than daughters.

Different aspects of home-school contact are of course interrelated. Correlations were computed among all parental involvement measures to examine the relationship between these different aspects of parental contact with the school. Table 6.1 presents the correlations between the different forms of contact with the variables distinguishing between none and any such contact. Correlation coefficients take a value between 0 and +1 (or -1). High values indicate that the two variables are strongly related to each other while low values indicate little significant relationship between the two variables. From Table 6.2 we see that the strongest correlation occurs between items relating to parents going to see the principal or another teacher about how their son/daughter is getting on at school and parents phoning the principal or another teacher to discuss their son/daughter. That is, parents who went to the school to see the principal or teacher about how their son/daughter was getting on in school were also likely to have phoned the school regarding their son/daughter. In general, parents who have more contact with the school tend to have contact across a range of
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parent-Teacher Meeting</th>
<th>Subject Meeting</th>
<th>Attend Concert</th>
<th>Sport Event</th>
<th>Discuss Progress</th>
<th>Discuss Behaviour</th>
<th>Phone Call</th>
<th>Parent Council</th>
<th>School Board</th>
<th>Fund Raising</th>
<th>HSCL Contact</th>
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<td>0.100***</td>
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<td>0.034</td>
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*Table 6.1: Spearman Rho Correlations (non-parametric) for measures of home-school contact*
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<th>Subject Meeting</th>
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*Note:* **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.*
dimensions. A number of further relationships are worth noting. Parents involved in the parents’ council tend to have more contact with the school across a number of dimensions as do those involved in the school board of management and fund-raising. In addition, parents who have had contact with the HSCL coordinator tend not to attend subject choice meetings or sports and cultural events, indicating that such provision is targeting ‘hard to reach’ parents (see Chapter Five).

6.4 Potential barriers to parental involvement

Parents were asked how involved they felt in their child’s school life. One third of parents surveyed felt that they were ‘very involved’ in their son or daughter’s education, half were ‘fairly involved’ and 12 per cent were not very involved. These patterns are broadly similar to those found in the British context (see Williams et al., 2002; Moon and Irwin, 2004). Interestingly, no marked differences in perceived involvement were found across different groups of parents in terms of educational level, social class mix of the school, whether they have a son or daughter, and whether their child is in fifth or sixth year. Perceived involvement was related to some aspects of actual involvement. Parents who saw themselves as very involved were more likely to attend subject choice meetings and cultural or sports events at the school. Interestingly, however, there was no relationship with attending meetings at the school regarding their child’s behaviour and, more surprisingly, those involved in the parents’ association did not feel any more involved in their child’s school life than other parents.

Parental perceptions of their involvement in their child’s school life are much more strongly related to the extent to which they discuss decisions and choices with their children. Figure 6.8 indicates that almost half of the parents who discussed the choice of programmes at senior cycle ‘a lot’ with their child felt very involved in their education. Similar patterns were evident in relation to discussion of choice of subjects and subject levels.
Figure 6.8: Percentage of parents ‘very involved’ by discussion of child’s choices

In the survey, parents were asked about the extent to which different factors were a potential barrier to them being more involved in school life. The most frequently cited factor was work commitments, with one in four parents seeing this as making involvement very or a little difficult (Figure 6.9).

I never joined a board of management, that’s basically due to my own work. … I wouldn’t have had the time or the energy for it. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Work commitments were less frequently cited by parents with lower levels of education and those with children attending working-class schools. Childcare commitments also emerged as an issue for a significant minority of parents, with three in ten citing such difficulties. Interestingly, almost a third of parents were unsure as to how they could be more involved in the school. Somewhat surprisingly, this was more frequently reported by parents with higher levels of education.

The child’s own preferences were a factor for some parents, who felt that their son or daughter did not want them to be involved or that their child did not tell them what was going on in school:

We were so involved in the primary school they said ‘Mum, now back off from secondary school you know, leave us to just do things’. So we kind of decided, yeah, we’d done our bit. (Mother-daughter, post-secondary education, mixed intake school)

The students don’t want the parents involved. It’s not cool to have the mammy walking around the school. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)

This issue was more frequently raised by parents with higher levels of education and those with children in mixed or middle-class schools.

School-related reasons were not cited as barriers to the same extent as personal reasons. However, a quarter of parents felt that the teachers not being very approachable was an issue while one in six considered that the school did not want parents to be involved.

Interviewer: And do you feel that the school encourages parents to be more involved?

Not really because if they were going to encourage us, they’d maybe contact us more to deal with the issues, like they have their general meetings around particular things, you know like the LCVP and the LCA and enrolment and stuff like that. But in general with things that come up during the academic year, they’re not encouraging really. (Mother-daughter, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Some parents reported variation between teachers in their openness to contact with parents:

The good teachers are excellent and they will give you a call or you can go into them and they will, they will help you in every single way that they can and the bad teachers that don’t want to see you, you’re disruptive, you’re an annoyance and the same with the child. (Mother-son, third-level education, mixed intake school)

Parents who cited school-related reasons as a barrier tended to have lower levels of actual contact with the school. However, the contact they had tended to be more negative in focus, involving meetings regarding their child’s behaviour or educational progress.

Parents’ own experiences of the educational system also emerged in the in-depth interviews as a potential barrier for some people:

Because I’d a bad experience myself of school when I was young. … I’d get involved to a certain extent, but I wouldn’t get too much into it you know. … I’d probably be barred if I did, no, you know, when you’ve had a bad experience yourself, you just don’t
want to go back. (Mother-son, post-primary education, working-class school)

I don’t know whether I’d get involved or not now, but I mean … I finished school myself at the age 14 and went to work, like most people around my age, do you know what I mean, so maybe I feel a little bit intimidated. (Mother-daughter, post-primary education, working-class school)

Thus, working-class parents may be more reluctant to approach the school about particular issues because school had been a negative experience for them.

Over half of parents felt ‘very confident’ talking to teachers in the school while a further 42 per cent felt ‘fairly confident’. Confidence levels were greater among those with higher levels of education; 61 per cent of those with third-level education felt very confident dealing with teachers while this was the case for under half of those with post-primary education. Less confident parents were more likely to be unaware of how they could be more involved in school and were more likely to cite school-related reasons as being a barrier to their involvement.

6.5 Conclusions

This chapter sought to consider the level of involvement that parents have in their child’s education. Parents of students in the case-study schools generally feel involved in their child’s school life. In this chapter, we distinguish between formal and informal parental involvement. Informal involvement describes activities, such as checking and helping with homework and having school-related discussions, which support their child’s education. All groups of parents are involved in providing such support for their children but more highly educated, middle-class parents tend to be somewhat more involved, most likely because of greater insider knowledge of how the schooling system operates. This group of parents is also more likely to expect their child to attain a third-level degree.
We then define formal parental involvement as relating to actual contact with school staff and/or participation on a parents’ council. Formal home-school contact centres on the parent-teacher meeting, as almost all the parents surveyed had attended a parent-teacher meeting on at least one occasion. However, this is not always seen as a useful channel of communication by parents. The majority of parents also attend subject choice meetings and cultural events at the school. Generally, working-class parents with lower levels of education tend to have less formal contact with the school. Where they have contact, it is more likely to be in response to difficulties with their child’s behaviour or lack of educational progress. Highly formalized involvement, such as being involved in the parents’ council or school board of management, is confined to a small group of parents, usually those with higher levels of educational qualifications.

Parents were also asked about the barriers to parental involvement. Time constraints were seen as the main barrier to greater involvement in their child’s schooling, with many parents feeling that work and childcare responsibilities left them with little time to become actively involved. The perceived lack of openness of the school was a potential barrier for some parents as were their own negative educational experiences. Chapter 7 now considers parental involvement and its possible consequences for student outcomes such as Junior Certificate grades and the senior cycle pathways taken.
Chapter Seven

Parental Involvement and Student Outcomes

7.1 Introduction

A good deal of international research has focused on the relationship between parental involvement and student outcomes, particularly educational achievement (see Chapter One). Sections two and three of this chapter consider parental involvement from the student perspective and its possible consequences for student outcomes, namely, Junior Certificate grades and senior cycle pathways. The final section of the chapter assesses whether the parents of high-achieving students are more likely to be actively involved in their child’s education, by examining the relationship between students’ Junior Certificate grades and different dimensions of parental involvement at senior cycle level.

7.2 The student perspective on parental involvement

Chapters Four and Six examined how parents can influence young people’s education through selecting the post-primary school they attend and through supporting their educational development. This section explores the student perspective on ways in which parents can shape their children’s educational experiences, including informal discussion with their son or daughter, help with homework, and formal contact with the school.
7.2.1 Social interaction between parents and children

First year students were asked about the extent of different kinds of social interaction with their parents. Over three-quarters of students reported having a meal with their parents several times a week while more than half reported generally chatting about things with their parents on a frequent basis (Figure 7.1). Students were less likely to report discussing social/political issues or television programmes with their parents than dining or generally chatting with them, and a significant minority never discussed such issues. Female students were much more likely to report having a general chat with their parents on a frequent basis (65% compared with 48% of male students). There was no social class variation in the frequency of general chatting; however, students from professional backgrounds were more likely to report frequently eating a meal with their parents. There was little systematic variation across groups of students in the frequency of discussing socio-political issues or television programmes.

Figure 7.1: Social interaction between parents and children (first year)

Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study.
In terms of personal and social support, the majority of students were likely to report that they would go to ‘someone at home’ with a problem; this response was given by 65 per cent of students in September of first year and 60 per cent of students in May of first year. Female students were more likely to report that they would seek family help than their male counterparts, while boys were more likely to say they would not tell anyone they needed help. Relying on family help with personal problems was apparent across all social groups. Of those who actually experienced bullying in second year, only 15 per cent told their parents, 15 per cent told someone else (usually a friend) while 70 per cent told no-one about the bullying incident.

7.2.2 Advice on educational choices

Students were asked about the extent to which they relied on different forms of help and advice in making educational decisions throughout the course of post-primary schooling. At all time-points, students were much more likely to rate their parents as very important compared to school-based sources of information and advice, such as guidance counsellors, subject teachers, year heads and class tutors. Figure 7.2 shows the extent to which young people report relying on their parents over the course of their schooling career. In first year, the majority of young people rated their parents as ‘very important’ sources of advice regarding subject choice. Around half of third year students saw their parents as very important influences on their plans for after the Junior Certificate. Within senior cycle, over a third of students rated their parents as very important sources of information and advice regarding choice of programme and subjects. It is clear that young people become somewhat less reliant on their parents for such advice as they move through the schooling system, reflecting their greater independence and knowledge of the school system as they grow older. However, parents remain a more important source of advice to older students than teachers or guidance counsellors.
Reliance on parental advice was prevalent across all social class groups. There is little variation by membership of a minority group, namely, being from the Travelling community or being a newcomer (immigrant) student. However, newcomer students are less reliant on their parents for advice on choice of programmes and subjects within senior cycle, perhaps because their parents are less familiar with the Irish educational system and lack some ‘insider’ knowledge about educational pathways. Traveller students are somewhat more likely than other students to rate their mothers as a very important source of advice regarding their post-Junior Certificate plans.

*Source:* Post-Primary Longitudinal Study.
7.2.3 Family help with homework and study

Figure 7.3 shows the extent of student reliance on family help with homework and study over the course of their schooling career. In first year, the majority of students reported receiving some help, at least occasionally, from their parents and/or siblings. However, the reliance on such help decreased over time, with the majority of fifth year students reporting no such help. This is likely to reflect both greater independence among older students as well as the more specialised nature of the subject syllabus at senior cycle.

Reliance on family assistance varied by social background, gender and initial academic ability levels. Students from unskilled manual or non-employed households were more likely to report relying on frequent help with homework; this difference was evident in first and second year but appeared to disappear over time. Students from the Traveller community were also more likely to rely on frequent help than other students. From second year onwards, female students were more likely to report relying on occasional help than their male counterparts. Within junior cycle, students who entered school with the lowest reading and maths scores are the most reliant on family help with
homework. However, those who receive occasional help and those who receive no help are very similar in terms of prior ability levels. At fifth year, receiving help with homework is not clearly related to prior reading/maths scores or to Junior Certificate grades.

### 7.2.4 Family discussion of educational issues

Students were asked about the extent to which their parents discussed school-related issues with them in terms of checking they had done their homework, discussing how they were getting on in school and how they were getting on in tests or exams. Figure 7.4 shows the proportion of students who reported that their parents discussed these issues with them frequently (‘several times a week’ or ‘several times a month’).

**Figure 7.4: Student perceptions of parental involvement in their education**

![Graph showing student perceptions of parental involvement in education](image)

Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study.

Around half of parents discussed school in general or tests and exams in particular with their children on a frequent basis. This pattern was fairly stable over the course of the junior cycle. However, parents of
fifth year students were less likely to discuss school with their children. This may reflect greater maturity or independence on the part of older students. In first year, around four out of ten parents checked that their children had done their homework; this declined sharply over time and by senior cycle, only a minority were checking that homework had been completed.

There was little consistent variation in parental involvement in these activities by social class. Female students tended to report higher levels of parental involvement in relation to discussing school and exams. However, there was no significant gender difference in the extent to which their parents checked their homework. Parental involvement did not vary significantly between newcomer and other students, but Traveller students reported somewhat lower levels of parental involvement.

7.2.5 Formal parental contact with the school

Students were asked about the extent to which their parents had had formal contact with the school over the course of first year. The vast majority of students reported that their parents had attended a parent-teacher meeting (Figure 7.5). A third reported that their parents had attended a concert, play or sports event in the school. Around a third of students reported that their parents had met with the principal or other teachers, or had been in phone contact with the school.

Attendance at parent-teacher meetings is somewhat lower among non-employed parents and newcomer parents. It is also positively correlated with informal parental involvement since attendance at meetings is higher among parents who are more actively involved in their child’s education by talking to them about how they are getting on in school and how they do in tests/exams. Female students were more likely to report that their parents had attended a social or cultural event at the school. Attendance at such events is also more prevalent among parents who are more involved in their child’s education.
Working-class parents were significantly more likely to have met with the principal or other teachers and/or spoken to them on the phone. The parents of boys are more likely to have met or been in phone contact with the principal/teachers. These social class and gender patterns appear to be driven by misbehaviour, with meetings and phone contact initiated in relation to disciplinary issues.

Formal contact between parents and the school, as reported by students, varied across the case-study schools. Attendance at parent-teacher meetings was lower in Hay Street, Dixon Street and Dawes Point, all working-class schools. Parental attendance at cultural or social events was highest in Fig Lane (56 per cent), a very middle-class school, but also high in Belmore Street (49 per cent), a school which was very mixed socially. Attendance was lowest in Park Street and Dawes Point (13 per cent), both boys’ schools, albeit with contrasting social intakes.

The pattern for meetings and phone contact between parents and the school was quite different. In the five working-class schools, half of parents had had meetings with the school principal while this was much less common in the mixed or middle-class schools (18-23 per
cent). A similar pattern was evident in relation to phone contact, being highest in the working-class schools.

7.3 Parental involvement and student outcomes

This section explores the relationship between student reports of parental involvement in their education over the course of the junior cycle and two sets of outcomes – achievement in the Junior Certificate exam and the programme taken on entry to senior cycle. The causality involved in these processes is complex. It may be that higher-achieving students attract more parental interest and involvement. It is more likely, however, that parental involvement directly contributes to young people’s educational development. This latter interpretation is supported by a range of international research studies (see Chapter 1) but we should nonetheless be somewhat cautious about interpreting causality.

7.3.1 Parental involvement and Junior Certificate performance

The longitudinal nature of the student data means that we can explore the relationship between parental involvement in young people’s education and their subsequent outcomes, including academic achievement and the pathways pursued upon entry to senior cycle. Table 7.1 shows a multilevel regression model of Junior Certificate performance. Grades are allocated scores ranging from zero to ten depending on the grade and level achieved, and these scores are then averaged over all exam subjects taken; the scores ranged from 0 for ‘E’, ‘F’ and ‘NG’ grades to 10 for a higher level ‘A’ grade (see Smyth et al., 2007).\(^1\) The model explores the relationship between different aspects of parental involvement and grades, controlling for reading test scores at entry to post-primary education.

Persistent social class differences are evident in the grades achieved by young people in Ireland and elsewhere (see Smyth, 1999). This pattern is evident among the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study cohort of young people; those from professional and farming back-

\(^1\) Thus, a higher level A grade is scored as 10 and a B grade as 9; an ordinary level A grade is scored as 7 and a B grade as 6.
grounds achieve the highest Junior Certificate grades while those from working-class and non-employed households achieve the lowest grades. The analyses so far have indicated that there are some differences by social background in the level of parental involvement in their child’s education. The analysis presented in model 2 of Table 7.1 allows us to explore whether parental involvement has a relationship with achievement, when social class is taken into account, and whether the effect of social class is mediated by involvement, that is, whether any advantage evident for middle-class students is related to the fact that their parents are more involved in their education.

Young people whose parents frequently discuss how they have done in tests or exams tend to achieve higher grades than others, all else being equal. Those who frequently discuss how they are getting on in school with their parents tend to achieve higher grades, but the difference is not statistically significant. Furthermore, students whose parents have attended parent-teacher meetings in the school also achieve higher grades. In first and second year, the frequency of parents checking their child’s homework is not significantly associated with subsequent performance. However, by third year, students whose parents regularly check their homework tend to achieve lower grades than others, all else being equal. This is likely to reflect lower engagement in schoolwork among these students, who are only completing their homework because of parental enforcement. In sum, the extent to which parents are involved in their child’s education is found to facilitate student achievement in the Irish context. It is worth noting that social class continues to have a direct effect on student achievement, even taking account of parental involvement. Thus, it appears that those from professional and farming families are able to utilise additional cultural and social resources in promoting their children’s academic progress, and their contacts with the schooling system may therefore yield additional dividends for their children.
Table 7.1: Multilevel regression model of Junior Certificate exam performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>4.336</td>
<td>4.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher professional</td>
<td>1.144***</td>
<td>0.681***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower professional</td>
<td>0.725***</td>
<td>0.389*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other non-manual</td>
<td>0.494*</td>
<td>0.295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled manual</td>
<td>0.412</td>
<td>0.173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>1.086**</td>
<td>0.804**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-employed</td>
<td>0.395</td>
<td>0.358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Contrast: Semi/unskilled manual)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading score at entry to post-primary school</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.064***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of discussing exam/test results with parents (1st year)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.098*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental attendance at parent-teacher meetings (1st year)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.308*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of discussing how getting on in school with parents (2nd year)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of parents checking homework is done (3rd year)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.134***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-level variance</td>
<td>0.571*</td>
<td>0.313*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-level variance</td>
<td>1.802***</td>
<td>1.274***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 766

Note: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, * p<.10.
7.3.1 Parental involvement and senior cycle pathways

Section 7.2 indicated the important role played by parents in the educational choices made by their children. This role may lead young people to take different pathways on entry to senior cycle. The extent to which students report relying on their parents’ advice in making educational decisions does not significantly influence their pathways, since students as a whole tend to be reliant on their parents. However, Table 7.2 shows the relationship between other aspects of parental involvement and the likelihood of entry to the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, as opposed to other senior cycle programmes. Previous research has indicated that LCA students come disproportionately from working-class and unemployed households (see Banks et al., 2010) so social class is not included in the model shown here. Controlling for reading score, students whose parents have a high level of involvement in discussing their education are less likely to enter LCA compared to those who experience lower levels of parental involvement. Students who have had their parents frequently checking their homework in Junior Certificate year are more likely to take the LCA programme than those who complete their homework without parental supervision, reflecting the targeting of provision on young people who are more disengaged from schooling.

Table 7.2: Multilevel logistic regression model of entry to the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (compared with other senior cycle programmes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading score at entry to post-primary school</td>
<td>-0.123***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of discussing how getting on in school with parents (3rd year)</td>
<td>-0.376 ▲</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of parents checking homework is done (3rd year)</td>
<td>0.393*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-level variance</td>
<td>0.163 ▲</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>859</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ▲ p<.10.
7.4 Informal parental involvement at senior cycle level

Parents were asked about the degree of informal involvement in their child’s education in the current school year, that is, fifth or sixth year. This allows us to explore whether the parents of high-achieving students (as measured by their Junior Certificate grades) are more involved in their schooling at senior cycle. Measures of informal parental involvement relate to the frequency of parental involvement in checking homework, helping with homework, discussing how their son/daughter is getting on in school, how they did in tests/exams, post-school plans and the need for grinds in the course of the academic year.

Table 7.3: Relationship between measures of parental involvement at senior cycle level and Junior Certificate grade point average (correlations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informal Parental Involvement (post-Junior Certificate measures)</th>
<th>Correlation with JC Grades</th>
<th>P-value</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Checked homework</td>
<td>-.195***</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped with homework</td>
<td>-.005</td>
<td>.891</td>
<td>915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed how getting on in school</td>
<td>.122***</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed how well did in examinations</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>.409</td>
<td>926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed what to do after leaving school</td>
<td>.118***</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed the need for grinds</td>
<td>.139***</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>934</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A number of formal and informal measures of parental involvement are found to be significantly correlated with Junior Certificate performance (see Table 7.3). Parents of students who did well in the Junior Certificate are more likely to discuss how well they are getting on in school in senior cycle, discuss what to do after leaving school and discuss the need for grinds. A negative correlation was evident between checking homework and Junior Certificate performance, indicating that parents of students who did well in their Junior Certificate were less likely to check their homework in senior cycle. Given that
we know that parental involvement in junior cycle is associated with improved Junior Certificate performance, lack of parental involvement in senior cycle for lower-achieving students is likely to widen the performance gap.

7.5 Conclusions

This chapter sought to examine the relationship between parental involvement and student outcomes, particularly educational achievement. The first section presented the student perspective on their parents’ involvement in supporting their education. Patterns of social interaction between teenagers and their parents indicated some gender and social class differences. Levels of social interaction between teenagers and their parents were high, particularly in relation to sitting down and having a meal together, especially for those from higher professional backgrounds. While a high proportion of female students, and half of students overall, reported chatting frequently with their parents, they were somewhat less likely to report discussing social/political issues. A high proportion of students reported having someone at home to talk to about a problem, however. Females were more likely to report that they would approach a family member while males were less likely to be forthcoming to anyone about a problem.

As has been found in previous studies, students consider their parents a very important source of advice when making educational decisions, and this was evident across all social groups (see, for example, McCoy et al., 2006). However, it was clear that young people become less reliant on their parents for such advice as they move through the educational system, reflecting both greater independence and their own enhanced knowledge of the education system. Reliance on family help with homework and study also decreased over time. Students also perceived a decline in the frequency of parental discussions of educational issues over time, and this was particularly the case with checking homework.

The chapter presented new analyses on the relationship between parental involvement and two dimensions of student outcomes: the
programme taken in senior cycle, and educational performance, measured in terms of Junior Certificate grades. Parental involvement was associated with the pathway being pursued by senior cycle students. Controlling for reading score, students whose parents have a high level of involvement in discussing their education are less likely to enter LCA than either LCVP or the established Leaving Certificate compared to those who experience lower levels of parental involvement. Students who have had their parents frequently checking their homework in Junior Certificate year are more likely to take the LCA programme than those who complete their homework without parental supervision. The extent to which parents are involved in their child’s education is positively associated with student achievement in the Irish context. Students whose parents frequently check they have done their homework tend to achieve lower grades, but this is likely to reflect lower academic engagement among these students rather than the influence of parental involvement per se. Students who frequently discuss how they are getting on in school with their parents and whose parents attend parent-teacher meetings in the school tend to achieve higher Junior Certificate grades than those whose parents are less involved in their school life, highlighting the importance of parental engagement for student outcomes.
Chapter Eight

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Outline of the study

International research has highlighted the important part played by parents in supporting their children’s education and the role of such support in fostering student retention and achievement (see, for example, Desforges, 2003). The importance attached to parents’ views on education in the policy arena has increased significantly throughout the Western world (Dom and Verhoeven, 2006), a trend that is also evident in the Irish context. However, research studies have shown important differences between groups of parents in the resources they can marshal to support their child’s learning. Middle-class parents, for example, are found to possess greater familiarity with the educational system and can better mobilise ‘insider’ knowledge and networks to facilitate their child’s progress through the schooling system (see, for example, Lareau, 2000).

The role of parents as the ‘primary educators’ of their children has a strong Constitutional basis in the Irish context. Policy discourse and legislative developments have at various times described parents as ‘users’ and ‘consumers’ of education. In recent years, this discourse increasingly emphasises ‘parents as partners’ within the educational process alongside other stakeholders. Much of the research on parental involvement in Ireland and elsewhere focuses on primary education. However, little is known about the extent to which parents are actively involved in post-primary education or about the degree of information flow between school and home.
This study addresses this gap in knowledge by exploring the role of parents in the education of their teenage children. The difficulties in measuring parent involvement in education have been noted by a number of studies internationally (see for example, Baker and Soden, 1997). Specifically, this study explores the degree of involvement that parents have in the following aspects of their son’s or daughter’s schooling:

- Making key educational decisions such as choice of post-primary school;
- Providing advice and guidance on the pathways to be taken by young people, including the subjects to be pursued, the levels at which subjects are taken and the type of programme to be taken at senior cycle (TY, LCA, LCVP or LCE);
- Involvement in the school life of their son/daughter by discussing progress in school, monitoring and helping with schoolwork and homework, and providing support for their child’s learning;
- Formal contact with the school in terms of attending meetings, talking to teachers or being actively involved in a parents’ association or school board of management.

In addressing these issues, the study draws on a postal survey of parents of senior cycle students in twelve case-study schools together with in-depth interviews with a subset of these parents. The perspectives of parents are placed within the context of students’ views on parental involvement and the degree of home-school linkage from the viewpoint of school personnel. This chapter summarises the main findings of the study and indicates the implications for policy development within post-primary education.

### 8.2 School choice

There has been a good deal of policy attention internationally given to the issue of school choice, with many countries facilitating increased diversity in the type of schools open to post-primary students (OECD,
A persistently marked degree of active choice of school is evident at post-primary level in Ireland, with around half of the student cohort not attending their nearest or most accessible school. In choosing a school, parents take account of a multiplicity of factors, including the reputation of the school and its proximity to their home. Prior choices regarding the primary school attended along with the choices made for older children are also influential. Young people themselves play a role in the process, with the majority of students reporting at least some input into the choice made.

The study findings highlight a distinction between parents who have exercised more active choice and those for whom the school selected assumed more of a taken-for-granted quality. The first group, ‘active choosers’, often purposely sought out information on a range of schools in the vicinity, using existing social networks and insights gleaned from school open days to assess the suitability of a particular school for their child. For the second group, the school selected was often the nearest and/or reflected the natural follow-on from the primary school their child attended. Active school choice is a prevalent feature across different groups of parents in the Irish context. However, those in higher professional occupations are more likely to send their children to a school outside the immediate area than those in other occupational groups. The result of these choice patterns can be seen among the twelve case-study schools. The majority of those in working-class schools are attending their local school while one of the middle-class schools draws most of its student intake from outside the local area.

School choice processes have consequences at both the individual and the school level. For individual young people, the school they attend will have significant implications for their experiences of the educational process along with the kinds of subjects and programmes to which they will have access. All else being equal, post-primary schools differ in the achievement levels of their students, the take-up of particular subject areas and subject levels, their retention levels, and in the likelihood of young people continuing on to higher education (Smyth, 1999; Smyth and Hannan, 2002; Smyth and Hannan, 2007).
Parental input into school choice will, therefore, have a significant influence on the future life-chances of their children, given the importance of educational qualifications for access to post-school educational opportunities and high quality employment in the Irish context.

Choice processes also have implications at the school level. This study places an analysis of parental strategies of school choice in the context of changes over time. During the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a decline in the size of the post-primary school-going population. As a result, schools sought to attract a shrinking pool of applicants and between-school competition increased. In the face of such competition, some schools experienced a greater concentration of students with literacy, numeracy and behavioural difficulties among their intake, a situation which posed challenges for these schools in catering for student needs. The landscape of post-primary school choice is an ever changing one; a projected increase in the post-primary population projected up to 2025 (DES, 2010) is likely to lead to further changes in patterns of school choice and the composition of schools.

8.3 Parental perceptions of the educational system

Surveys of the adult population in Ireland have indicated a relatively high level of satisfaction with, and trust in, the educational system (Kellaghan et al., 2004; Fahey et al., 2006). In keeping with these findings, the parents we spoke to all believed in, and valued, the benefits yielded by schooling, and the survey findings suggest that parents in our sample are broadly satisfied with their children’s education, with some notable exceptions which will be discussed further below.

The survey data show that parents of senior cycle students are very or somewhat satisfied with their child’s school along a range of dimensions, including personal/social support for students, range of subjects, learning support, career guidance, teaching quality and extracurricular activities. Satisfaction levels were highest in relation to the range of subjects and the provision of personal/social support. However, dissatisfaction levels were highest with career guidance, with a quarter of parents reporting they were ‘not satisfied’ with this aspect
of their child’s school, mainly because they would like to see more provision in place.

Some differences were evident across groups of parents in their satisfaction levels. Parents with lower levels of education and/or with children in working-class schools were more likely to express dissatisfaction with provision for students with learning difficulties and with extra-curricular activities. In contrast, career guidance was more a matter of concern for highly educated and middle-class parents, perhaps reflecting their greater familiarity with the education system.

Interestingly, the survey uncovered how differences between the twelve case-study schools were more marked than variation between groups of parents, reflecting the specific experiences of parents in different school contexts. In particular, marked between-school differences were evident in relation to satisfaction with the subject range, with over a fifth of parents of boys in two schools with a more restricted curriculum expressing dissatisfaction. In general, satisfaction with the range of subjects was greater among parents of young people in schools with a taster programme at junior cycle level. Furthermore, significant between-school differences were evident in relation to learning support provision, again reflecting variation in provision at the school level.

In general, parents saw post-primary education as having benefited their child along a range of dimensions. They were particularly positive about its benefits in relation to social and personal development, such as getting on well with others, making new friends, increasing their self-confidence and being able to think for themselves. However, parents were somewhat less positive about the role of education in preparing their children for the world of work and in providing them with life skills and computer skills. Highly educated parents were the most likely to express dissatisfaction with these aspects of post-primary education. Furthermore, parental dissatisfaction with these particular aspects of schooling matches student accounts of dissatisfaction (see Byrne et al., 2009).
8.4 Parental perceptions of the curriculum

Parents were asked in greater detail about their perceptions of the curriculum at junior and senior cycle levels and the programmes on offer and curriculum at senior cycle.

8.4.1 Junior cycle curriculum

The majority of parents felt that the difficulty level of the junior cycle was appropriate, that the subjects taught were useful and that students took the right number of subjects. However, it should be noted that over a third of the parents surveyed felt that their children took too many subjects at junior cycle level. Parents of children in mixed or middle-class schools were more likely to feel that their child had taken too many subjects, although the pattern varied across individual schools. Furthermore, a fifth of parents, mainly highly educated and middle-class parents, considered that there were subjects that their son or daughter should have taken at junior cycle. This most commonly related to Business Studies, Home Economics, Technical Graphics and Art. Issues around choosing junior cycle subjects are discussed in section 8.5.1 below.

8.4.2 Senior cycle curriculum

The case-study schools differed in whether they provided Transition Year (TY) and, if so, whether it was compulsory or optional. Parents of students who had taken the programme were generally positive about TY (in keeping with the perspectives of students and teachers highlighted in earlier research by Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004). Enhancing confidence, maturity and developing new friendships were perceived as the most positive aspects of the programme. Parents were somewhat less positive about the role of TY in helping students make later choices and a quarter of parents were not satisfied with the range of subjects available in the TY programme. A particular concern emerged on the part of parents that students would lose the habit of studying after taking TY and parents of those who had taken TY reported that their children took somewhat longer to settle into fifth year
than those who had entered directly from their Junior Certificate year. Parents were significantly less positive about Transition Year if their son or daughter had attended a school where the programme was compulsory. However, significant differences were evident among compulsory and optional schools, reflecting the varying nature of Transition Year programmes across the case-study schools.

The case-study schools differ in the type of Leaving Certificate programme they provide and in the degree of choice open to students in selecting programmes. Parents were generally aware of the programme taken by their child; however, a significant minority of parents of those taking Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) were not definite as to which programme their child was taking. The vast majority of parents were ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ satisfied with the programme their child was taking, albeit with some variation across the programmes in parental satisfaction. Parents of those taking the LCA programme were most likely to report being very satisfied but at the same time were most likely to report dissatisfaction, reflecting varying experiences among this group. There were few differences between the LCE and LCVP programme groups in overall satisfaction levels.

The vast majority of the parents surveyed were happy with the Leaving Certificate subjects taken by their son or daughter. Parents of students in working-class schools were somewhat more likely to express dissatisfaction with the subjects than those in mixed or middle-class schools. Satisfaction levels also varied somewhat across the individual case-study schools, reflecting the range of subjects open to students and the way in which choices were packaged. The difficulty level of the Leaving Certificate curriculum was generally seen as appropriate and the subjects taken were seen as useful. Parents of those taking LCE or LCVP were more likely to see subjects as difficult, one in five doing so, than parents of those taking LCA. In addition, parents of students in working-class schools were less likely to see the subjects taken as useful than those in mixed or middle-class schools. In contrast to the situation at junior cycle, only one in six parents felt that their children were taking too many subjects at senior cycle level.
However, variation was evident across senior cycle programmes, with LCVP parents more likely to say their children were taking too many subjects and LCA parents least likely to do so. This pattern is likely to reflect the fact that, in some of the case-study schools, LCVP modules are time-tabled as an ‘extra’ subject with students taking the full complement of other Leaving Certificate subjects (see Smyth et al., 2007). Further perceptions of decision-making in senior cycle are discussed in section 8.5.2 below.

8.5 Information flow between home and school

A central concern of the study is to explore parental satisfaction with the information parents receive from their child’s school and the kinds of information they rely on in giving advice to their son or daughter. Interviews with school personnel indicated significant variation across the case-study schools in the degree of contact with parents as their children moved through the schooling system. With the exception of parent-teacher meetings, information meetings for parents were more prevalent at crucial junctures in the educational process, especially in first and third year. Apart from general meetings, the school principal was generally the main point of contact for parents but the Home-School-Community-Liaison Coordinator played a very important role in schools serving more disadvantaged populations. The interviews tended to focus on the extent to which parents had been informed about the choices that had to be made and less on the ways in which their children have been assisted in making those choices; more information on young people’s own decision-making is presented elsewhere (see Smyth et al., 2007).

8.5.1 Junior cycle subject options

Parents were generally satisfied with the information they had received about junior cycle subject options. However, concerns were expressed about the lack of formal guidance on the implications of taking specific subjects, with parents highlighting the need for greater information from as early as first year on subject content and related
pathways. In the absence of formal guidance, parents often relied on their own school experiences in giving advice to their children, an approach which has potential limitations where parents themselves have left school early and/or where subject syllabuses have changed considerably in the intervening period.

8.5.2 Senior cycle programme and subject options

At senior cycle level, the majority of the parents surveyed were satisfied with the information they had received on programme and subject choices. However, almost a fifth of parents expressed dissatisfaction with the information they had obtained and some of the parents interviewed highlighted the need for more detailed information on the subjects needed to pursue particular post-school pathways. This varied according to parental education, with more highly educated parents indicating lower levels of satisfaction with the information they had received from the school. There was also significant variation across the individual schools in parental satisfaction levels, reflecting the different approaches to formal contact with parents taken by the case-study schools.

Parents were asked about the kinds of information they found helpful in learning more about senior cycle options. Talking to a teacher at the school was seen as the most helpful source of information, followed closely by ‘what my son/daughter tells me’ and formal information sessions for parents in the school. About a fifth of parents found that information leaflets from the school and information from informal sources, such as friends or family, were not particularly helpful. The parent’s own experience of school and information from the internet were perceived as the least helpful sources of information on senior cycle choices. More highly educated parents and those with children in middle-class schools were somewhat less likely to see school-provided information (such as meetings and written leaflets) as helpful sources of information, perhaps because they had access to other sources of information through social networks. Parents of children in working-class schools were more likely to find their own child, informally talking to a teacher in the school and their own time
at school as very helpful sources of information than those in other schools. Less educated, working-class parents were also somewhat more positive about the value of the internet as a source of information than other parents.

8.5.3 The use of written reports on student progress

In terms of information on their child’s progress at school, the vast majority of the parents surveyed received at least one written report in the most recent school year. Over half of the group had received two or more such reports. The number of written reports varied across the case-study schools and parents of sixth year students received reports more frequently than those with children in fifth year. The majority of parents described these written reports as ‘very helpful’. Parents with lower levels of education and those with children in working-class schools were most positive about the helpfulness of written reports. This pattern contrasts with that found at the primary level, where working-class parents reported some difficulty in interpreting the language (e.g. ‘very good’, ‘good’ etc.) used in school reports (Hall et al., 2008). It may be that written reports at post-primary level focus more on summative assessment, giving grades for specific subjects, potentially an easier benchmark for parents to interpret.

8.6 Parental involvement in post-primary education

In this study, we distinguish between formal and informal parental involvement in post-primary education. Informal involvement includes general support for their child’s learning, including helping with homework and study, discussing progress in school and giving advice about programme and subject options. Formal involvement ranges from attending meetings or talking to teachers to being actively involved in the parents’ association or being on the school’s board of management.
8.6.1 Supporting the child’s learning

From the student’s own perspective, parents are a very significant source of help and advice as they move through the school system. In making decisions about programme and subject options, young people are more reliant on their parents than on school-based sources of advice, such as the guidance counsellor. Furthermore, the majority of students report discussing how they are getting on in school with their parents on a regular basis and a significant proportion receive help from their family with homework and study, although this declines as students move into senior cycle.

The majority of senior cycle parents surveyed discuss how their child is getting on in school and how they get on in tests or exams, and check that their child has done his/her homework, at least several times a month. Parents do not generally help with homework on a regular basis at senior cycle level, although the majority do so at least occasionally. Almost all parents have discussed what their son or daughter will do after they leave school, with half of the group discussing this issue on a very regular basis (at least several times a month). Discussion of the need for private tuition (‘grinds’) between parents and children is less frequent, but the majority (over four-fifths) have discussed this issue at least once in the current school year.

In relation to educational choices, the majority of parents reported discussing programme choices, subject choices and selection of subject levels with their children, with almost six in ten discussing choice of subjects and levels ‘a lot’. Parents of young people taking LCA were more likely to have engaged in extensive discussion with their child regarding programme options. Parents of those in middle-class or mixed schools were more likely to be highly involved in discussing subject choices than those in working-class schools, reflecting greater ‘insider’ knowledge of how the school system works. However, the in-depth interviews indicated that the nature of such discussion differed across parents. One group of parents was more directive, actively giving their child advice on which options they should pursue. The other group discussed choices with their children but were happy
to leave the final decision ‘up to the child’, reflecting the child’s interests and abilities.

Research has indicated the gendered nature of parental involvement in education, with mothers providing more of the emotional labour entailed in supporting their children’s schooling (see O’Brien, 2005; David et al., 2003). Research has also indicated that while adolescents generally welcome their parents’ involvement, girls are more likely to do so than boys (Deslandes and Cloutier, 2002). Less attention has been paid in the Irish context, however, to whether parental involvement may differ according to the gender of the child. Our research points to some differences in the level and nature of parental involvement for girls and boys. Parents are somewhat more likely to discuss school life and post-school plans with their daughters than their sons. Furthermore, parents of sons were more likely to have what could be characterised as more negative contact with the school, that is, being required to visit the school to discuss their child’s misbehaviour. It is not entirely clear what accounts for these gender differences: boys may be more reluctant to discuss personal issues with their parents than girls; parents may respond to girls’ educational success at Junior Certificate level by increasing their involvement in their school life; and boys may have a more contentious relationship with the school because of misbehaviour and consequent negative interaction with teachers (see Smyth et al., 2007). However, gender differences in parental involvement are likely to be significant because of the potential consequences for students’ engagement in education and later academic success.

An interesting finding is the high level of educational aspirations held by parents for their children; over three-quarters of the parents surveyed aspire to a third-level qualification for their child. Higher educational aspirations are found among more highly educated parents, those with children in middle-class schools and those with children taking LCE or LCVP programmes. However, high aspirations are apparent across all levels of parental education, a pattern which is consistent with research findings on parental expectations for 9-year-old children (see Williams et al., 2009). Given continuing socio-
economic disparities in access to higher education (see McCoy et al., 2010), it is likely that the issue is not one of differences in what parents wish for their children but in the extent to which they have the cultural, financial and social resources necessary to facilitate college entry for their son or daughter.

8.6.2 Contact with the school

The study clearly indicates that parents are very involved in providing advice and support to their children as they move through the post-primary system. But to what extent is this informal involvement reflected in their formal involvement in school life? The most frequent form of contact between parents and the school was attending a parent-teacher meeting, with the majority of parents attending such a meeting every year. The majority had also attended a meeting regarding subject choices, a concert, play or other school event, and had gone to see a teacher regarding their child’s progress at school. More highly formal modes of involvement were much less common among parents, with relatively small proportions involved in the parents’ association/council or on the school board of management. Not all contact with the school was positive, however. A quarter of the parents surveyed had met the principal or another teacher regarding their child’s behaviour.

The level and nature of involvement varied across different groups of parents. Highly formalised involvement (that is, through the parents’ council) was more common among highly educated parents as was attending a cultural or sports event in the school, being involved in fundraising and phoning the school to discuss their child. Furthermore, parents of children in middle-class schools had higher levels of attendance at cultural or sports events, along with greater involvement in fundraising and the parents’ council. Visiting the school for discipline-related reasons was more common among less educated parents and those with children in working-class schools.

Parents were asked about potential barriers to being involved in their child’s school life. Work commitments were seen as the greatest impediment, being cited by four in ten parents; three in ten parents
also cited childcare commitments. School-related reasons were much less commonly cited by parents as restricting their involvement. However, one in four parents felt the teachers not being very approachable made it difficult to become involved, while one in six considered that the school did not want parents to be involved. Parents who cited school-based factors as a constraint tended to have lower levels of contact with the school, the exception to this pattern being that they were more likely to visit the school for discipline-related reasons. In general, parents felt confident talking to teachers at the school. However, confidence levels were greater among more highly educated parents.

Parental involvement is found to be significantly associated with how young people fare within the schooling system. Young people who discuss their education with their parents and those whose parents attend parent-teacher meetings tend to achieve higher Junior Certificate grades and make greater academic progress relative to their initial ability levels than parents who are less involved in their education, in keeping with international research (see Desforges, 2003).

8.7 Implications for policy development

Parents make a significant contribution to the educational development of their children through the advice and assistance they provide to them as they move through the schooling system. The challenge in policy terms is to support the parental role in such a way as to maximise student choices and outcomes.

8.7.1 Academic and career guidance

While parents of post-primary students are broadly happy with the schooling their children receive, access to academic and career guidance emerges as an area of concern for a significant minority of parents. Many parents would like to see increased guidance available at the early stages of junior cycle education as well as at crucial transition points in order to help young people understand the consequences of their choices. These findings echo those of previous research on guidance provision from the perspective of schools and students
(McCoy et al., 2006). Furthermore, parents are not wholly satisfied with the extent to which post-primary education prepares their children for the world of work and provides them with life skills and computer skills, indicating the necessity of integrating these skills into the broader curriculum.

8.7.2 School-home information flow

The majority of parents are satisfied with the information they receive from the school on the options open to their children. However, the degree of information flow in the form of meetings and written communication varies across post-primary schools and a significant minority of parents, about one in five, indicated that they were not satisfied with the information they received. It is clear, therefore, that there is scope to improve the provision of information to parents of post-primary students on the options open to their children.

This research suggests that such information should be targeted in nature since not all parents find different sources of information equally useful (see Feiler et al., 2008, who report similar findings in the British context). A ‘one size fits all’ approach is therefore unlikely to be effective so schools should be encouraged to use a range of information sources tailored not only to the mix of student intake but also to diversity within the student population. Since more highly educated parents have a greater familiarity with the educational system than those with lower levels of education, they are in a better position to help their children negotiate their way through the multiplicity of choices to be made. Parents with lower levels of education and those with children in working-class schools are more reliant on informal contact through their child or by talking to a teacher in the school. Formal information sessions for parents should, therefore, be supplemented by the opportunity for more informal contact between parents and teachers in order to discuss the potential options available to students. However, the extent to which parents avail of such opportunities will depend on whether they find the school a welcoming environment. The study finds that the child is an important conduit of information between the school and parents, a feature which underlines
the importance of providing students themselves with systematic in-
formation on the choice of programmes, subjects and subject levels
from early on in the post-primary system.

8.7.3 Positive behaviour policy

For some parents, contact with the school is not a positive experience
since their contact with the school arises when they have been called
in to discuss their child’s misbehaviour or lack of progress. Just as
negative interaction between teachers and students leads to disaffec-
tion with school on the part of young people (Smyth et al., 2007;
Byrne and Smyth, 2010), negative interaction between the school and
parents is likely to increase the distance between the two parties. The
research indicates the importance of schools adopting a positive be-
haviour policy in order to better integrate both students and their par-
ents into school life.

8.7.4 Whole-school commitment to communication with parents

Parents have a high level of informal involvement in their child’s edu-
cation. However, this informal involvement does not appear to trans-
late into significant levels of formal involvement in school life, in
spite of a recent policy emphasis on ‘parents as partners’ in the educa-
tional process. The most frequent forms of formal contact between the
home and school involve parents in a more passive or reactive role,
namely, that of receiving information through parent-teacher meet-
ings, information sessions on subject choices and attending cultural or
sports events. In contrast, more active forms of engagement, such as
involvement in the parents’ council, are much less common and gen-
erally limited to more highly educated, middle-class parents.

Research on good practice regarding the promotion of parental in-
volvement, nationally and internationally, highlights the importance of
a whole-school commitment to communication, providing frequent
and flexible opportunities for contact with parents, and offering acces-
sible information on what parents want to know, among other features
(see, for example, Desforges, 2003). This study suggests that each
school should therefore be encouraged to develop a clearly defined
school policy or plan for productive and effective parental involvement. This policy should also take account of young people’s perspectives in order to develop family-school partnerships which promote both parental and student involvement. Such measures would build upon the already considerable levels of parental support for their children’s schooling to facilitate the educational development of young people as well as the integration of the school into the wider community.
REFERENCES


Breen, R. (1986). Subject Availability and Student Performance in the Senior Cycle of Irish Post-Primary Schools. Dublin: ESRI.


References


Parents are the main source of advice as young people make choices about what subjects to take, which programmes to select, and even whether to remain in school or not. Many young people in second-level education still rely on their parents for help with homework and study. But we know very little about parents’ own perspectives. This book looks at how parents choose schools for their children. It examines whether they are happy with their children’s schooling and satisfied with the kind of information they receive on key educational decisions.

This book provides unique insights into parents’ involvement in their children’s education and the information flow between school and home. It highlights important issues for policy, suggesting ways to support the parental role and thus enhance student choices and outcomes.

Behind the Scenes will be of interest to parents themselves, policymakers, teacher educators, school management, teachers and the wider academic community.