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LEAVING CERTIFICATE
to LEAVING SCHOOL

A Longitudinal Study of Sixth Year Students

*Emer Smyth, Joanne Banks* and *Emma Calvert*

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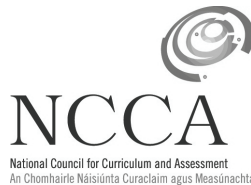
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Current debates about senior cycle education in Ireland have raised a number of crucial questions: What effect does the Leaving Certificate exam have on young people's learning experiences? What helps students to do well in the Leaving Certificate exam? How do young people make decisions about their future life after school? What kinds of skills and competencies do young people develop in the course of their second-level education? This book provides an important evidence base for answering these and other questions by examining the experiences of young people in sixth year as they prepare for the Leaving Certificate exam and life after school. It is the latest book in a series of publications stemming from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study, which has followed a cohort of over 900 students in twelve case-study schools, selected to capture key dimensions of school policy and practice. This is the first such longitudinal study in the Irish context and it yields rich insights into the factors shaping young people's experiences as they move through second-level education, thus providing important evidence for future policy development. This particular book focuses on providing an overview of the experiences of sixth year students and is published with a companion volume (Smyth and Calvert, 2011) which looks at the transition from junior cycle (lower secondary) to senior cycle (upper secondary) education. This executive summary outlines the main findings regarding sixth year students and the implications for policy development.

Main Findings

Curriculum in Sixth Year

This report shows that young people's experiences of sixth year depend on the Leaving Certificate programme they take, the subjects they select and the levels at which they study these subjects. Students were broadly satisfied with the Leaving Certificate programmes that they take, with higher satisfaction levels among those taking the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. Satisfaction was, however, linked to how well students were doing academically, with many students critical of the increased workload during sixth year and the almost complete reliance on a terminal exam. Students were generally positive about the subjects they were taking. However, many students expressed regret about taking certain subjects while others indicated subjects they would have preferred to have taken. Significant variation was found across schools in the proportion of students taking higher level subjects, a variation which largely reflected the between-school differences in level take-up at junior cycle.

Student Perceptions of Teaching

The kinds of teaching methods used were found to differ across the Leaving Certificate programmes. LCA students reported a greater use of active learning methods such as group-work and project work as well as greater interaction with teachers and classmates. In contrast, the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and Leaving Certificate Vocational (LCVP) programmes were characterised by greater use of teacher-led instruction, with an emphasis on 'practising exam papers' and doing homework. Students saw 'good teachers' as those who came to class prepared, were patient and willing to explain things, and recognised the importance of treating students with respect and care. In keeping with their comments in previous years, students generally favoured the use of more active learning approaches as well as lessons which were 'fun' and relevant to their lives. What is distinctive about the Leaving Certificate year is that some students, particularly those from more middle-class and academically-oriented schools, became highly instrumental in how they approached the impending exam, focusing only on what was required to do well. These students were impatient with teachers who did not con-

centrate on 'what was on the course' and were critical of teachers who did not focus on exam preparation.

Workload and Exam Stress

Although students reported more challenging schoolwork and an increasingly demanding workload during the transition to fifth year (Smyth and Calvert, 2011), levels of stress appeared to further escalate in sixth year with students finding their schoolwork even more difficult. To cope with this escalation in workload, many students increased the time they spent on homework and study; a significant minority, 40 per cent of female students and 30 per cent of male students, were spending four or more hours on homework/study every night. In response to the impending exam, many students took private tuition, with just under half of sixth year students taking 'grinds' outside school, although take-up is sharply differentiated by social class background.

The Leaving Certificate is seen as a very 'high stakes' exam, with many students viewing it as the first exam that 'really matters'. As a result, many report significant levels of stress and feel 'constantly under strain' during sixth year, with these stress levels much higher among female than male students. Although students felt that this stress was a result of constant reminders from teachers about the exams and the expectations of their parents, much of the stress appears to relate to their own desire to do well and fear of not securing the course or college they prefer. In response to these fears, many increased their hours of study and curtailed extracurricular and social activities, further fuelling their sense of strain. Schools made some difference to student stress levels since they were lowered where there were positive interactions with their teachers and where students were happier about the subjects they had chosen.

Student Performance in the Leaving Certificate

The case-study schools differed in Leaving Certificate performance levels, with students attending working-class schools achieving lower grades than those in mixed or middle-class schools, even taking account of reading and maths performance on entry to first year. Certain aspects of school organisation and process are crucial in influencing exam grades. Junior cycle processes, especially second year experiences, are

key influences on later outcomes. The analysis shows that those who had difficulty coping with schoolwork in second year achieved lower Leaving Certificate grades, all else being equal. In addition, the use of streaming, whereby students were allocated to 'higher' or 'lower' ability classes for all of their junior cycle subjects, resulted in significantly lower Leaving Certificate grades for students in lower stream classes, without any corresponding achievement gain for those in higher stream classes. Our findings show that Junior and Leaving Certificate exam grades are highly correlated, so many students who achieve lower grades in the Junior Certificate exam do not regain ground when they reach senior cycle. Students' social and work lives outside school can also operate as an impediment to later achievement. Not surprisingly, given the focus on 'learning for the exam', students who spend more time on homework and study in sixth year achieve higher grades. However, those who spend considerable amounts of time on homework (over four or five hours) do not achieve an advantage over those spending moderate amounts of time on homework.

Guidance and Student Decision-Making

In sixth year, students regard their parents, particularly their mothers, as the most important source of advice in terms of their post-school plans. Siblings and wider family networks also contributed to shaping decisions around post-school education or employment. In terms of formal school guidance, our findings show wide variation in the nature and amount of guidance provided to students. Although students were generally positive about guidance provision, they were often critical of the lack of time made available for guidance classes or individual guidance sessions. An important issue that emerged was the timing of guidance provision, with many students feeling that it had been provided too late and at a time when they had already chosen their subjects and subject levels. Other students criticised the way in which guidance provision over-emphasised higher education as a post-school pathway, with less information provided on Post-Leaving Certificate courses, apprenticeships and employment.

    While higher education was the intended route for the majority of students, working-class students were much less likely to plan to go on

to higher education than their middle-class peers. The social mix of the school further shaped student pathways, with higher education seen as the 'natural' pathway for young people in middle-class schools and in some of the socially mixed schools. In contrast, guidance in working-class schools often focused on PLC courses and apprenticeships, with some students feeling that staff held lower expectations for them and encouraged them to take these more 'suitable' courses.

Implications for Policy Development

The detailed findings of this report and the companion volume by Smyth and Calvert (2011) provide a strong evidence base to inform ongoing discussion on the possible reform of senior cycle. This section outlines the main policy issues identified in this study which include: the importance of junior cycle experiences; the role of guidance; and the impact of the Leaving Certificate on teaching and learning.

1. The Importance of Junior Cycle Experiences

- This study highlights the importance of junior cycle school experiences in shaping student engagement with learning in fifth and sixth year. Thus, it is evident that reform at senior cycle must be considered in tandem with changes at junior cycle level.

- Being placed in lower stream classes in junior cycle has significant negative consequences for student retention and for performance in the Leaving Certificate exam. Moving towards more flexible forms of ability grouping is therefore likely to improve student outcomes.

- Our findings highlight the importance of second year in shaping later student engagement. This is often regarded as an 'in-between' year by school personnel but many second year students are found to struggle with their schoolwork and these difficulties have longer term consequences. Additional help or targeted support for students during this period may help to prevent later problems.

- Disengagement from school at senior cycle can be influenced by a negative cycle of teacher-student interaction developed at junior cycle. Promoting a positive school climate of respect between teachers

and students, including a more positive disciplinary policy, should therefore enhance student outcomes.

2. *The Role of Guidance*

- The findings of this study show that subjects and subject levels selected at junior cycle have longer term consequences for the options open to young people on leaving school. This points to the need for targeting guidance at an earlier stage, that of junior cycle, and providing a whole-school approach to guidance, which incorporates the specialist knowledge of subject teachers.

- The findings also indicate the importance of the provision of information and advice on a broad range of options to all young people so that their expected pathways are not limited by their social background.

- Given the important role of parents in student decision-making in sixth year, the targeting of user-friendly information towards, and school contact with, parents would enhance the ability of parents to support their children's pathways and potentially help to reduce social class variations in expectations.

3. *The Impact of the Leaving Certificate Exam on Teaching and Learning*

- The presence of the Leaving Certificate exam has a significant impact on the nature of teaching and learning in sixth year, and even in earlier years. LCE and LCVP students report teacher-centred classes, which focus on practising previous exam papers, and a very heavy workload. Many students contrast this approach with the kinds of active learning which engage them and are critical of the excessive reliance on the terminal exam as the main form of assessment. Others, especially those with high aspirations, become more instrumental, focusing on what is likely to 'come up' on the exam paper, and expressing frustration with teachers who deviate from the curriculum and try to provide broader educational experiences.

- The study clearly indicates that, as currently structured, the Leaving Certificate tends to narrow the range of student learning experiences and to focus both teachers and students on 'covering the course'.

Such a focus would appear to be at odds with the kinds of flexibility and critical thinking skills needed for young people to flourish in a constantly changing world. The findings therefore clearly point to the need to reassess the current Leaving Certificate model, by providing access to a broader range of teaching methods, embedding key skills such as critical thinking in the curriculum, and utilising a broader range of assessment modes, in order to enhance student engagement and equip them with skills and competencies for their future lives.

Chapter one

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Current debates about senior cycle education in Ireland have raised a number of crucial questions: What effect does the Leaving Certificate exam have on young people's learning experiences? What helps young people to do well in the Leaving Certificate exam? How do young people make decisions about their future? What kinds of skills and competencies do young people develop in the course of their second-level education? This study provides an important evidence base for answering these and other questions by examining the experiences of young people in sixth year as they prepare for the Leaving Certificate exam and life after school. International research shows that young people's academic experiences can change significantly during their final year at school. Studies show that students experience increased pressure to attain high grades in their final year exams while at the same time having to make important decisions about their future (Bloom, 2007). In Ireland, attaining a Leaving Certificate is highly predictive of longer term outcomes, even into adult life, and the grades received influence access to education, training and employment (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). Little is known, however, about students' own experiences of the Leaving Certificate and, in particular, how the presence of the exam influences teaching, learning and student decision-making in sixth year.

This book is one of a series of studies based on the broader Post-Primary Longitudinal Study, which has followed a cohort of over 900 young people in twelve case-study schools, selected to capture key dimensions of between-school variation, from the beginning to the end of second-level education. This particular book explores the experiences of

young people in sixth year, placing these in the context of their second-level schooling career. A longitudinal study of this kind allows us to examine the way students change and develop as they move through the schooling system and to explore how later experiences are linked to experiences at junior cycle level.

Earlier books in the series have yielded significant insights into student experiences of junior cycle education. Although first year is often characterised as a time of turbulence and change for young people (Smyth et al., 2004), second year emerged as a crucial year in terms of young people's longer term educational engagement (Smyth et al., 2006, 2007). The findings presented in *Pathways through the Junior Cycle* revealed increased differentiation emerging among students in that year. Girls, middle-class students and those with higher ability levels were more likely to become increasingly engaged academically, while boys, working-class students and those with lower ability levels were more likely to begin to drift. This drift or disengagement had significant effects on subsequent Junior Certificate performance (Smyth et al., 2007) and on the likelihood of dropping out of school before the Leaving Certificate (Byrne and Smyth, 2010).

Gearing Up for the Exam? (Smyth et al., 2007) showed the impact of the Junior Certificate examination on young people's experience of teaching and learning, with classroom teaching becoming more focused on preparation for the exam and with less use of the kinds of active methodologies students found engaging. How schools organise student learning as well as day-to-day processes in the classroom were found to have significant influences on Junior Certificate achievement, over and above the effects of social background and prior ability. Students allocated to lower stream (lower ability) classes achieved lower grades than other students, even controlling for prior ability. The nature of relations between teachers and students was found to be crucial, with lower grades achieved by those who had experienced negative interaction with teachers and shown higher levels of misbehaviour. In addition, students' perceived capacity to cope with schoolwork was predictive of exam performance, with this pattern established as early as second year. This capacity was, in turn, influenced by the extent to which students had received positive reinforcement or negative feedback from their teachers.

Choices and Challenges (Smyth and Calvert, 2011) followed the cohort of students upon entry to senior cycle education, a transition that is often neglected in existing research. Entry to senior cycle involved a series of choices on the part of young people about what programme to take, which subjects to select and which subject levels to choose. The degree of choice open to students was found to vary across schools as was the provision of guidance to support these choices. The study pointed to very different learning experiences for those taking the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, with greater use of more active teaching methods, which helped to re-engage many students with schoolwork. In contrast, students taking the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) or Leaving Certificate Vocational (LCVP) programmes reported a significant gap in the standards expected of them over the transition to senior cycle, finding the course materials and modes of assessment much more complex than previously. Many students reported particular difficulties with higher level subjects, with some dropping down from higher to ordinary level because of course demands.

This book continues the story of these students, focusing in particular on two interrelated strands: the first examines how the presence of the Leaving Certificate exam influences student experiences of teaching, learning and assessment in sixth year. Using survey data and in-depth focus group interviews, this report provides an insight into how a nationally standardised test such as the Leaving Certificate may have the unintended effect of focusing teaching and learning on the test rather than broader educational development. We explore the extent to which the 'high stakes' nature of the Leaving Certificate impacts on the experiences and future plans of students. This report thus raises important questions about the purpose and consequences of the current Leaving Certificate model.

A second major focus of this book relates to the factors influencing student decision-making in sixth year and the ways in which expectations about the future are formed. By comparing student experiences across all twelve case-study schools, this report provides new insights into the kinds of information and advice which shape students' post-school planning. Drawing on qualitative interviews with students and key personnel (including principals, guidance counsellors and year

heads) in each school, we examine the level and nature of formal guidance provision and whether guidance structures and school values reinforce or counter student expectations of progressing to higher/further education, training and employment. Moreover, we examine the role of family influences and individual agency in student decision-making and explore how these vary across schools.

The primary objective of this part of the longitudinal study is to gain insight into the experiences of sixth year students as they prepare for the Leaving Certificate examination and life after school. The following research questions are addressed in the remainder of this book:

- How does the presence of a nationally standardised examination impact on teaching and learning in sixth year?

- How do students prepare for the Leaving Certificate exam in terms of homework and study?

- What factors influence student performance in the Leaving Certificate exam?

- What role does formal career guidance play in student decision-making in sixth year? Does informal advice from family or friends play a part in young people's decisions?

- How do students view their second-level education in hindsight?

In the following section, we place this study in the context of previous international research on student experiences in their final year of school. Section three outlines the methodology adopted in the study, focusing in particular on providing a profile of the case-study schools.

1.2 Research on Student Experiences in Upper Secondary Education

This section provides an overview of insights from international research on student experiences within upper secondary education (senior cycle). In keeping with the main focus of the study, we concentrate on two main themes: firstly, research on high stakes testing and its impact on students' school experiences and post-school outcomes, and secondly, research which focuses on student decision-making and transitions from school.

1.2.1 High Stakes Testing

High stakes tests are standardised examinations, the results of which have significant consequences for schools and/or students. The effect of high stakes tests on teaching, learning and student outcomes has been the centre of much recent debate in educational research. In 'high stakes for school' systems, how students within a school fare in national tests or other assessments has consequences for school funding and even the prospect of intervention in the running of the school (Ryan and Weinstein, 2009). In England, the Education Reform Act of 1988 led to regular testing with target levels of attainment set for the end of each key stage of the national curriculum. Since 1992, national school league tables have been published, ranking schools on the basis of student performance in tests taken at age 11 and public exams taken at 16 and 18 (West, 2010). With the advent of formal accountability systems in the United States in the 1990s, policy makers embraced a new, more potent vision for the role of assessment. Test programmes began providing incentives and/or sanctions for individual students (e.g. in terms of allowing graduation) and for schools (e.g. cash rewards) on the basis of test scores (Stecher, 2002; Perna and Thomas, 2008). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) put the use of accountability systems based on student test performance into US federal law. Originally NCLB mandated that all students be tested in grades 3 to 8 and once in high school in reading and maths, with future provisions that students be tested at least once in elementary, middle, and high school levels in science. If student test scores do not meet the 'Adequate Yearly Progress' (AYP) in subgroups related to race, economic class, special education, and English language proficiency, among others, schools face sanctions such as the loss of federal funding or the diversion of federal monies to pay for private tutoring, transportation costs and other 'supplementary services'. Under NCLB, students in all subgroups are also expected to be testing at 100 per cent proficiency by the year 2014 or face the above mentioned sanctions (US Department of Education, 2002). Thus, high stakes testing has become the policy tool for enforcing educational reform in the United States (Au, 2010).

Exams may also have high stakes for students, even where they are not linked to formal accountability for schools. The courses taken and grades received in national tests can often have important consequences

for later access to education, training and employment (Eurydice, 2009). In the Irish context, young people with a Leaving Certificate qualification have better access to post-school education and training as well as to high-quality, better paid employment than those with Junior Certificate or no qualifications (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). Even among those taking the Leaving Certificate exam, higher grades are associated with entry to third-level education, particularly to courses associated with the élite professions, a smoother transition to employment, and greater access to white-collar jobs (Byrne et al., 2008).

The consequences of high stakes testing have been the subject of considerable debate. Some researchers argue that national tests based on centrally set procedures are necessary to ensure that the performance of individual students (and schools) are readily comparable (Grodsky et al., 2008). Others maintain that tests can lead to positive individual learning experiences and educational outcomes (Braun, 2004; Williamson, Bondy, Langley and Maine, 2005). Tests are seen as providing students with information about their own acquired knowledge which can be compared to that of their peers and the national average.

In contrast, a large body of research has emerged, especially in the US, which points to the unintended consequences of high stakes testing on student performance, engagement in school, and teaching and learning (Airasian and Madaus, 1983; Madaus, 1988), access to college (Perna and Thomas, 2008; Hill 2008), and the reproduction of gender and social class inequalities (Grodsky, Warren and Felts, 2008; Diamond and Spillane, 2004). One of the main areas of research in relation to high stakes testing is on the extent to which these tests influence what knowledge is taught, the form in which it is taught, and how it is taught (Au, 2010). Many studies have shown that in a high stakes environment extensive time is given by teachers to exam preparation, which results in a narrowing of the curriculum and fragmentation of subject knowledge through the neglect of subject content not included in exams (Shephard and Dougherty, 1991; Au, 2007). A decline in instructional time for non-tested subjects has also been demonstrated in other studies (Stecher, 2002) with an increasing amount of time devoted to practice tests (Jones et al., 1999). Critics argue that high stakes examinations reduce the breadth of the curriculum by emphasising only subjects and dimensions

of learning that are tested, encourage teachers to 'teach to test', and motivate students to learn test-taking skills rather than content and higher order cognitive skills (Gordon and Reese, 1997; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey and Stecher, 2000). Teaching to the test is seen to negate the test's ability to serve as a valid indicator of the knowledge or skill it was originally intended to measure (Madaus, 1988; Looney, 2009).

High stakes testing is also seen as having consequences for social differentiation. Concerns have been expressed about the extent to which high stakes examinations increase gaps between groups by rewarding high-achieving students and schools and sanctioning low-achieving students and schools (Perna and Thomas, 2008). Some sociologists argue that standardised tests limit access to resources and play a role in sorting students into their prospective social positions where the school is viewed 'primarily [as] a testing, selecting, and distributing agency' (Sorokin, 1959, p. 188, in Grodsky et al., 2008). Research has examined inequalities in test score distributions by race/ethnicity, social origins and gender over time, and found that test scores consistently vary by socio-economic status as measured by parental education and family income (Grodsky, 2008, p. 387). The presence of high stakes tests may also result in a skewing of resources towards the year groups being tested and to particular groups of students (West, 2010). In England, for example, school principals have reported targeting interventions towards 'borderline' students in order to improve the ranking of their school in the league tables (Wilson et al., 2006).

The unintended consequences of high stakes testing do not only derive from school accountability practices since there is some evidence that similar practices can emerge within 'high stakes for students' systems. In Northern Ireland, Johnston and McClune (2000) found that teachers tended to use transmission teaching, with an emphasis on factual knowledge, in the final year of primary education in response to presence of the transfer test, which determined student access to more selective grammar schools. There was a reduction in the emphasis on conceptual understanding and on the experiential learning favoured by students. Similarly, Madaus and Greaney (2005) analyse the effects of the Irish Primary School Certificate, abolished in 1967. They found that sixth class teachers emphasised subjects covered in the exam and ne-

glected other subjects in such a way that 'previous test content came to define the curriculum' (p. 276). They found an increased rate of grade retention of students in fifth class to reduce student failure in the certificate exams.

In spite of a large body of research on the impact of high stakes testing on teaching, much less attention has been paid to the impact on student experiences. Two US studies used student drawings to analyse their perceptions of high stakes testing (Wheelock et al., 2000; Triplett and Barksdale, 2005). They found that the depictions generally reflected anxiety, anger, boredom and withdrawal, with disaffection greater among older students. In another US study (Noguera, 2007), students were critical of high stakes testing, feeling it was unfair to judge them on the basis of a single test. However, research in one American school found that students had variable knowledge of the potential impact of high stakes tests for them or their school (Weiss, 2009). Research in England (Putwain, 2009) points to the pressure and stress associated with high stakes assessments, both exams and coursework. Pressure was seen as coming from students themselves, from teachers and from parents. Students saw exam preparation, particularly practising previous exam papers in class, as an explicit strategy for managing their sense of confidence and fear of failure. Most students favoured coursework over exams as a basis for assessment but deadlines for coursework were also seen as a source of stress. Research in Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s also revealed higher stress levels among exam year groups, especially among female students (Hannan and Shortall, 1991; Smyth, 1999). Although individual factors were the main source of variation in stress levels, the school context, particularly the nature of relations with teachers and peers, was found to exacerbate or reduce stress levels.

1.2.2 Decision-making in the Final Year of School

International research into educational decision-making has been extensive. Studies have tended to focus on the way in which factors such as social class and gender shape post-school expectations and choices (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Shavit et al., 2007). In spite of higher education expansion, middle-class young people remain much more likely to attend university than their working-class peers (Shavit et al.,

2007). Recent decades have also seen female participation in higher education surpass that of males in most OECD countries (OECD, 2010). Explanations for the persistent social class differentiation found can broadly be divided into frameworks which emphasise rational choice and those which emphasise social (or socio-cultural) reproduction. Social reproduction theorists focus on the way in which different economic, cultural and social capitals are possessed by different social classes and the resulting formation of different dispositions to learning (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1984). These theorists suggest that schools legitimise the cultures of the dominant classes and thus act as a means to sort and select students for adult roles in the polity and the economy. Young people who are members of the dominant groups enjoy advantages through their prior knowledge of, and easy access to, various forms of capital that are privileged by the formal school curriculum and pedagogy. Therefore, educational institutions reproduce social hierarchies of class (and also race) through official school knowledge, which either advantages those who have access to cultural capital, or alienates those who do not have access to it (Ghosh, Mickelson, Anyon, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

In contrast, from a rational choice perspective, post-school choices are seen as reflecting an assessment of the relative costs and benefits attached to different options, costs and benefits which differ by social class (Erikson and Jonsson 1996). Middle-class young people are seen as having more to lose by not going on to higher education while for working-class young people university may be a more costly and risky option. Empirical research (Mickelson, 1990; Bloom, 2007) finds that young people make extremely accurate assessments of the choices open to them and the risks that they face in their transition to adulthood, but these choices and risks are very different for different groups of students based on their social class location. Most strikingly, poor and working-class students face significant economic, social, and psychological risks that middle- and upper-class students do not (Bloom, 2007).

Both sets of theories could be seen as devoting comparatively little attention to the impact of school organisation and process. However, research has highlighted the importance of formal guidance (at school) and informal guidance (particularly from family and peers) in shaping

student decisions about what to do when they leave school (Bloom, 2007). The social mix of students in the school is associated with differential rates of entry to higher education (McDonough, 1997; Reay et al., 2001, 2005; Foskett et al., 2008). More middle-class schools are found to facilitate greater access to college-relevant courses and to place a greater emphasis on the provision of formal guidance (McDonough, 1997). In these schools, going on to higher education assumes a 'taken for granted' quality, although the nature of career guidance provided is found to have an effect over and above that of the social class mix (Foskett et al., 2008).

A significant body of research has emerged on the processes shaping young people's decisions and pathways in the Irish context. Over a twenty-five period, the School Leavers' Survey has documented the way in which entry to post-school education and training and the types of jobs held are strongly influenced by young people's educational attainment (see, for example, Byrne et al., 2008). Research has pointed to the persistence of social class differences in entry to higher education (O'Connell et al., 2006), even in the context of the removal of tuition fees and the expansion of places (McCoy and Smyth, 2011). School-level factors are found to play a role in influencing these outcomes, with higher application rates to third-level education in schools which facilitate the take-up of higher level subjects, postpone subject choice and devote more time to career guidance (Smyth and Hannan, 2007). A mixed methods study (McCoy et al., 2010) of young people from non-manual backgrounds, the only group not to experience an increase in higher education participation in recent years, points to the complex interplay of school experiences, access to guidance and family socio-cultural resources in shaping the decision to apply for, and enter, higher education.

The current study builds upon existing research in two main respects. Firstly, viewing the Leaving Certificate as a 'high stakes exam' can yield insights into the way in which it colours young people's experiences of teaching and learning, highlighting significant issues for policy development. Secondly, many of the Irish studies of young people's decision-making have been retrospective in nature, examining their perspectives on choices which have already been made. Exploring young people's

views in the course of sixth year helps to understand the processes shaping their decisions about post-school pathways, placing these in the context of key personnel accounts of guidance provision in the case-study schools. The longitudinal nature of the study means that we can locate decisions in sixth year within the series of choices young people make, concerning programmes, subjects and subject levels, as they move through the school system.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 A Mixed Methods Approach

The Post-Primary Longitudinal Study focuses on a 'theoretical sample' of twelve case-study schools drawn from a national survey of second-level principals (see Smyth et al., 2004). The twelve schools[1] were selected to capture variation in key aspects of school organisation (that is, how schools organise learning) and process (in the form of day-to-day interaction in classrooms), thus providing insights into the way in which school factors shape student experiences. In order to provide context for this report, information on the profile of the case-study schools is provided in section 1.3.2. The study has involved following a cohort of approximately 900 students from their entry into first year to their completion of second-level education (see Smyth et al., 2004, 2006, 2007; Byrne and Smyth, 2010, 2011). This report draws on the survey of sixth year students, as well as in-depth interviews with students and school personnel, in order to provide a holistic account of the processes involved. These students entered second-level education in 2002 and took the Leaving Certificate examination in 2007 or 2008, depending on whether or not they had taken Transition Year. Using both student and staff perspectives allows for a more comprehensive investigation of student experiences where commonalities and differences within the same school context could be investigated.

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[1] Two of the twelve schools initially selected discontinued their involvement in the study between first and second year. In order to capture diversity across different school contexts, two additional schools were asked to participate in the second year of the study. These schools were chosen on the basis of the dimensions originally used to select the schools for the study of first year students.

The presence of the Transition Year (TY) programme means that students in the cohort enter sixth year at different time-points and thus the fieldwork for this phase of the study took place over a two-year period. In January 2007, all sixth year[2] students were surveyed in schools without Transition Year; in schools where Transition Year was optional, all sixth year students were surveyed to capture those who had chosen not to take TY. In January 2008, all sixth year students were surveyed in schools with compulsory or optional Transition Year. In order to obtain a 'snap-shot' of the experiences of Leaving Certificate students, information from the two years (2007 and 2008) was merged in order to provide a complete picture. In total, 748 students completed questionnaires, covering their experiences of teaching and learning in sixth year, the amount of homework and study they did, the degree of stress they experienced and their plans for the future.

In order to explore the factors influencing Leaving Certificate performance, students surveyed in sixth year were asked to give permission to access their subsequent exam results. In total, 565 students granted such permission, making up 81 per cent of all students in the cohort who took LCE or LCVP.

Recent research has highlighted the importance of taking account of the 'student voice' and the potential contribution of the student perspective to school improvement and policy development more generally (Macbeath et al., 2001; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Sammons et al., 1994). Student involvement can facilitate schools taking account of the perspective of young people and can improve our understanding of students' experiences of teaching and learning: 'it is important to know what pupils think will make a difference to their commitment to learning and, in turn, to their progress and achievement' (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004, p. 2). Within education research, some studies have emphasised the benefits of using focus group interviews over individual interviews as the greater anonymity of the group environment can help individuals disclose their opinions more freely. Moreover, there is no

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[2] Some of the schools differ in the nomenclature used for different year groups. For purposes of consistency, we refer to students in the final year of a Leaving Certificate programme as 'sixth years'.

pressure for an individual to answer every question so responses made are likely to be more genuine and substantial (Vaughan et al., 1996; Fredrickson et al., 2004). For this study, students were interviewed in groups of approximately six classmates in February-March of sixth year; a total of 53 group interviews were conducted. Within the student focus group interviews, the key objective was to elicit from each group of participants a comprehensive range of views, perceptions and reflections about their experiences in sixth year (and, to some extent, their overall school experiences more generally).The interviews were semi-structured in nature and involved questions about teaching and learning in sixth year, preparation for the Leaving Certificate exam, and plans for the future.

Although it is argued that students are likely to feel more supported, relaxed and confident in a group than in an individual interview, the potential advantages of this approach for school personnel appeared less clear-cut. Individual face-to-face interviews were held with principals, guidance counsellors and year heads at each of the twelve case-study schools. Questions to these key personnel sought information about the perceived effect of the impending exams on students, their views on the senior cycle curriculum and the nature of guidance provided to sixth year students. The individual and group interviews were recorded and transcribed; the transcripts were analysed using the NVivo software package to identify the main themes emerging from the interviews and to compare and contrast the views of different groups of students.

1.3.2 Characteristics of the Case-study Schools

The twelve case-study schools were identified on the basis of a national survey of second-level school principals and were selected on the basis of three dimensions: their approach to ability grouping (whether mixed ability or streamed base classes), the timing of subject choice (whether pre- or post-entry, and whether a taster programme was provided) and the degree of emphasis on student integration structures for first years (see Table 1.1). Having focused on identifying a mix of schools along these dimensions, every effort was made to select schools to encompass a range of sectors, sizes, locations and student characteristics (see Table 1.2). A particular focus in school selection was capturing variation in the

social class profile of student intake as previous research had pointed to the effects of a school's social mix on a range of student outcomes (see Smyth, 1999). Two of the schools were middle-class in profile, with one of these being a fee-paying school; five of the schools had a mix of students from different social class backgrounds while five of the schools served a working-class population. Of the five working-class schools, four reported some degree of 'cream-off', whereby competition with local schools resulted in their school receiving a concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds; in the fifth case, there were no other schools in the immediate area but the school was located in a disadvantaged neighbourhood.

Table 1.1: Dimensions of school organisation among the case-study schools

		Student Integration Structures[3] in First Year	
Subject choice		**Less emphasis**	**Stronger emphasis**
Early	Mixed ability	Barrack Street Wattle Street	Dawson Street
	Streamed/banded	Park Street Hay Street	Dawes Point
Later (taster)	Mixed ability	Harris Street	Fig Lane Belmore Street
	Streamed/banded	Dixon Street	Lang Street Argyle Street

Note: Pseudonyms are used for the case-study schools.

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[3] Student integration structures refer primarily to the ways in which schools helped first years to adapt to the new school setting but also encompass broader personal and supports put in place for students.

Table 1.2: Profile of the case-study schools

School	Size	Sector	Social Mix
Argyle Street	Large	Community/comprehensive	Mixed
Barrack Street	Small	Girls' secondary	Working-class
Belmore Street	Large	Girls' secondary	Mixed
Dawes Point	Small	Boys' secondary	Working-class
Dawson Street	Medium	Community/comprehensive	Mixed
Dixon Street	Large	Vocational	Working-class
Fig Lane	Large	Coeducational secondary (fee-paying)	Middle-class
Harris Street	Large	Girls' secondary	Middle-class
Hay Street	Small	Vocational	Working-class
Lang Street	Small	Vocational	Working-class
Park Street	Large	Boys' secondary	Mixed
Wattle Street	Small	Boys' secondary	Mixed

The case-study schools varied in ways other than ability grouping, subject choice and student integration. The number and type of subjects offered to students at junior cycle differed between schools as did the approach to deciding on the subject levels selected (Smyth et al., 2004). An important aspect of variation in student experiences relates to the senior cycle programmes on offer to them. Table 1.3 indicates the type of Leaving Certificate programme offered as well as the provision of Transition Year (TY) in the case-study schools. The Transition Year (TY) programme was introduced on a pilot basis in the mid-1970s with a significant expansion of provision post-dating its restructuring in 1994. The programme was introduced to provide students with exposure to a range of subjects, skills and activities that they would not otherwise encounter in the schooling system. It places an emphasis on developing personal and social skills, self-directed learning and providing young people with experience of adult and working life. Until the early 1990s, only a single academically-oriented Leaving Certificate programme was available to young people who stayed in school until the senior cycle. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) was introduced to foster in

students a spirit of enterprise and initiative and to develop their interpersonal, vocational and technological skills. Students take (a specified set of) Leaving Certificate subjects along with two link modules – enterprise education and preparation for the world of work. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme was introduced as part of an array of interventions to address educational disadvantage and counter early school leaving. It is targeted at young people who may not otherwise complete post-primary education and has a greater focus on activity-based learning and continuous assessment than the Established Leaving Certificate. Unlike those taking the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and LCVP programmes, LCA students may not transfer directly to higher education.

In keeping with national patterns for Transition Year provision (see Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004), schools in our sample serving more disadvantaged populations are less likely to provide the programme than other schools. School size also operates as a potential constraint on provision; two of the three small schools providing TY do so on a compulsory or quasi-compulsory basis, reflecting the greater difficulty in offering multiple pathways to a small student cohort. In terms of Leaving Certificate programmes, eight of the schools provide the Leaving Certificate Vocational (LCVP) programme while five of the schools offer the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. In keeping with the national pattern (see Banks et al., 2010), LCA provision is more prevalent in fairly large schools, which are in a position to provide access to all three Leaving Certificate programmes, and/or in working-class schools. The pattern for working-class schools reflects the perceived suitability of the LCA programme for the student intake (see Smyth et al., 2007). However, school policy also plays a role since two[4] of the working-class schools chose to include all students in LCE/LCVP rather than providing a separate pathway for students who were experiencing difficulties with schoolwork.

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[4] The third working-class school introduced the LCA programme during the course of our study. However, LCA was not available to the students who formed part of our cohort.

Table 1.3: Senior cycle programme options in the case-study schools

School Name	Transition Year	Leaving Certificate programmes	Social Mix	School Size
Argyle Street	Offered as an option	LCA, LCVP, LCE	Mixed	Large
Barrack Street	Offered as an option	LCE	Working-class	Small
Belmore Street	Offered as an option	LCA, LCVP, LCE	Mixed	Large
Dawes Point	Not offered	LCVP, LCE	Working-class	Small
Dawson Street	Not offered	LCA, LCVP, LCE	Mixed	Medium
Dixon Street	Not offered	LCA, LCE	Working-class	Large
Fig Lane	Offered as an option	LCVP, LCE	Middle-class	Large
Harris Street	Compulsory	LCE	Middle-class	Large
Hay Street	Not offered	LCVP	Working-class	Small
Lang Street	'Quasi-compulsory'	LCA, LCE	Working-class	Small
Park Street	Not offered	LCVP, LCE	Mixed	Large
Wattle Street	Compulsory	LCVP, LCE	Mixed	Small

The case-study schools have also been found to vary in student retention and performance (Smyth et al., 2007; Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Figure 1.1 shows variation in the rates of early (pre-Leaving Certificate) school leaving and in Junior Certificate grade point average across the case-study schools. In general, the working-class schools tend to have higher rates of early school leaving and lower rates of achievement than the mixed or middle-class schools. However, it is worth noting the evidence of variation in outcomes among schools serving similar student popula-

tions. Later in this report, we explore the extent to which schools vary in Leaving Certificate exam performance and what factors account for any such variation.

Figure 1.1: Junior Certificate grade point average (GPAV) and proportion of students leaving before the Leaving Certificate in the case-study schools
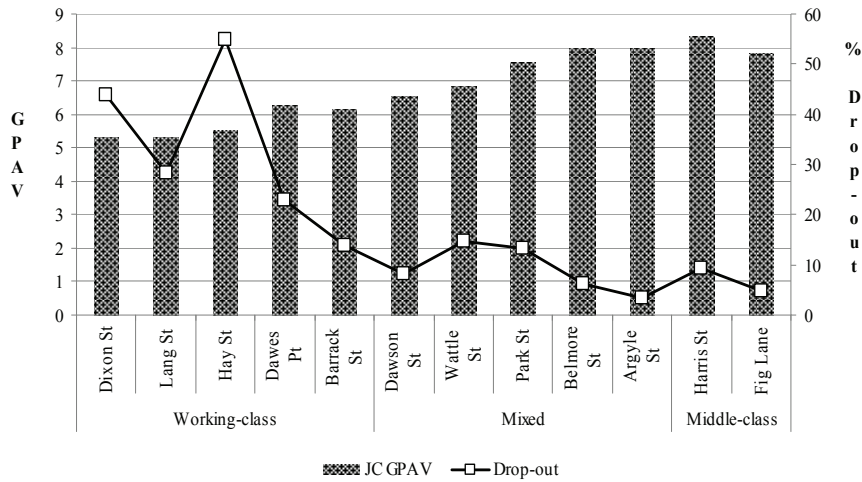
1.4 Chapter Outline

The remainder of the report is outlined as follows. Chapters Two, Three and Four examine student experiences of teaching and learning in their final year of school, providing crucial insights into the impact of the current Leaving Certificate model. Chapter Two explores student views on the curriculum in sixth year, their perceptions of the teaching methods used and the nature of their interaction with teachers. Chapter Three considers how students prepare for the Leaving Certificate exam, focusing on how they balance homework, studying and schoolwork; it also investigates the prevalence of exam-related stress among sixth years. Chapter Four focuses on student performance in the Leaving Certificate exam and investigates the individual and school influences on student outcomes. Chapters Five and Six look at how young people make decisions about life after school. Chapter Five considers the nature of career guidance received with a view to understanding how students develop their

educational and occupational aspirations. Chapter Six looks at student plans for the future in terms of post-school education and employment and explores student perceptions of the benefits of their schooling. Finally, Chapter Seven provides an overview of the findings and discusses the implications of the study for policy development.

Chapter Two

CURRICULUM, TEACHING AND LEARNING

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores young people's experiences of curriculum, teaching and learning in sixth year. The second section examines the extent to which sixth year students are satisfied with the Leaving Certificate programme they are taking and with the subjects selected. Section three looks at the processes underlying the selection of (higher, ordinary or foundation) subject levels; we focus in particular on Mathematics because of on-going concerns about the relatively low proportion of young people who take Maths at higher level. Section four examines the teaching methods students are exposed to in sixth year and explores student views of what constitutes good teaching. This section also explores the use of 'Mock' Leaving Certificate exams and student participation in private tuition. In section five, we analyse the nature of student-teacher relations in sixth year, placing trends in the context of patterns throughout the schooling career.

2.2 Perceptions of Leaving Certificate Programmes and Subjects

In this section, we explore student attitudes to the programmes they are taking and to the subjects they have selected, exploring attitudes to specific subjects along a range of dimensions, including interest, utility and difficulty. The levels at which subjects are studied is discussed in section 2.3.

2.2.1 Views on the Leaving Certificate Programmes

Chapter One outlined how the twelve case-study schools vary in the types of senior cycle programmes they provide. Among the cohort in the study, two-thirds were taking the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programme, over a quarter (27 per cent) were taking the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) while 7 per cent were taking the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. Clear differences were evident among this cohort between students taking LCA and those taking LCE or LCVP. Those entering LCA were significantly more likely to be from working-class or non-employed backgrounds, they were more likely to have received learning support or been in a lower stream class, and had lower levels of prior achievement (Smyth and Calvert, 2011). These findings are consistent with previous research which showed that LCA entry was motivated by the desire to take more practically-based subjects and by fear of struggling with the LCE; school personnel were also found to play an important role in influencing LCA entry (Banks et al., 2010). In contrast to the distinction between LCA and other students, both LCE and LCVP students came from a variety of social backgrounds and had a range of experiences of junior cycle (Smyth and Calvert, 2011).

In fifth year, the majority of students were happy with the programme they were taking, with higher levels of satisfaction among LCA students than those taking LCE or LCVP (92 per cent compared with 84 per cent). Figure 2.1 shows that the majority of sixth year students remain satisfied with the programme they are taking, although rates of satisfaction are somewhat lower than they had been a year previously. As in fifth year, levels of satisfaction are found to be higher among those taking the LCA programme; 23 per cent of LCE students report dissatisfaction compared with 15 per cent of their LCA peers. There are also some differences in programme satisfaction by gender. Among LCE/LCVP students, male students have somewhat higher satisfaction levels but are also more polarised than female students, being more likely to report 'very satisfied' or 'very dissatisfied'. Among LCA students, female students report much higher levels of satisfaction than their male peers (91 per cent of females being satisfied compared with 77 per cent of males). Perceived difficulty in coping with schoolwork emerges as a factor in programme satisfaction. Thus, LCE/LCVP students who were in the top

fifth in terms of Junior Certificate grades tend to be more satisfied with the programme they are taking than lower achievement groups. Furthermore, finding schoolwork harder in sixth year than previously is associated with somewhat higher levels of dissatisfaction with the programme taken (23 per cent are dissatisfied compared with 18 per cent of those who find it 'about the same'); the issue of the increased challenge of schoolwork in sixth year is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

Figure 2.1: Satisfaction with current programme among sixth year students
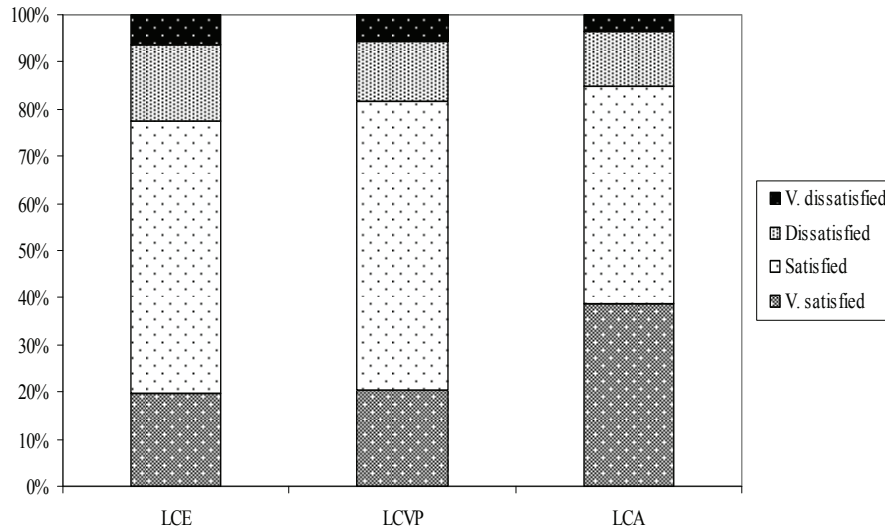
Students were asked to give reasons for their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Among those who reported being satisfied with their programme, the most frequently cited reasons were that they were getting on well academically (24 per cent), that they enjoy the subjects they are taking (17 per cent) and that the programme facilitates access to the post-school education options they seek (16 per cent). However, one-fifth of the students who deemed themselves satisfied or very satisfied with their programme gave answers which indicated their satisfaction was tentative. This group emphasised the pressure and stress associated with preparation for the Leaving Certificate exam, an issue which is explored further in Chapter Three, and many criticised the over-emphasis on a terminal exam:

> Too many subjects, too much in the subjects to cover. Stress follows this and the LC [Leaving Certificate] is made to feel like the end of the world. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

> The Leaving Cert exams are more a test of memory than intelligence. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

This contrasts with the small handful of students who explicitly expressed the view that the Leaving Certificate is a 'fair system':

> It is a very fair system which gives everyone an equal chance to do as well as they can and to achieve their goals. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

The reasons given for satisfaction varied somewhat across programmes. LCA students were more likely to cite doing well academically, work experience and good relations with peers than those taking other programmes. LCVP student responses resembled those of LCE students, though they were more likely to mention that the programme would help them secure higher points.

Reasons for dissatisfaction with the programme centred on the amount of pressure involved (which was mentioned by 31 per cent of the dissatisfied group), the emphasis on the terminal exam (19 per cent) and the programme being irrelevant or boring (15 per cent).

2.2.2 Views on Leaving Certificate Subjects

Students were also asked about their satisfaction with the subjects they were taking in sixth year. Because LCA students are less likely to have a choice of subjects (see Banks et al., 2010), these analyses relate to LCE and LCVP students only. The majority (80 per cent) of students are satisfied with the subjects they are taking. Subject satisfaction levels are broadly similar for male and female students. As with programme satisfaction, students with higher prior achievements levels are more satisfied with the subjects they are taking; the vast majority (93 per cent) of those in the top Junior Certificate quintile (fifth) are satisfied with their subjects compared with 73 per cent of the lowest quintile. No clear differentiation is found by social class background in sixth year students' satisfaction with the subjects they take. Students who had taken Transition

Year were somewhat more likely to be satisfied with the subjects they were taking than those who had not (85 per cent compared with 77 per cent), reflecting the way in which Transition Year can be used to 'sample' subjects before making final choices (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011).

Reasons for being satisfied centred on having been able to select the subjects they wanted and therefore enjoying them (41 per cent of the satisfied group) as well as on doing well academically in the subjects chosen (15 per cent). Almost a third (31 per cent) of students who reported themselves as being satisfied stated that they liked most of their subjects but specified subjects they disliked. Among those who reported dissatisfaction, the main reasons were finding the subjects different from what they had expected (28 per cent of the dissatisfied group), disliking the content or finding it uninteresting (24 per cent), finding the subjects difficult (24 per cent) and having experienced constrained choice of subjects (14 per cent).

Student perceptions of subjects become more complex when we take into account whether there are the subjects they would prefer to have taken or that they regret taking. Over half (58 per cent) of students regret taking one or more of the subjects they are studying. The subjects most commonly mentioned were Biology (14 per cent), French (12 per cent), Geography (11 per cent), History (9 per cent) and Business (9 per cent). Students in the top two Junior Certificate quintiles are less likely to regret taking subjects than other students. The pattern does not vary significantly by gender or social class. Over half of students indicated one or more subjects they would have preferred to have taken for the Leaving Certificate. This was somewhat more prevalent among male than female students (58 per cent compared with 53 per cent). Unlike regret, preferring to have taken another subject does not vary substantially by prior achievement. The subjects mentioned most frequently were Geography (17 per cent), Business (16 per cent), Home Economics (11 per cent), Biology (10 per cent), History (10 per cent) and Art (9 per cent). It is interesting to note that some subjects, including Biology, History, Geography and Business, appear on both lists, reflecting differences between students in their interests and perhaps in the way a subject is taught to them. Students who had taken Transition Year were somewhat less likely to regret having taken any subjects (54 per cent compared with 60 per

cent) or to prefer to have taken another subject (53 per cent compared with 57 per cent). Coupled with findings on subject satisfaction, this appears to suggest that Transition Year facilitates students taking subjects that better match their interests and abilities. However, it is worth noting that a sizeable proportion of TY and non-TY students would select different subjects in hindsight.

In addition to asking students about their overall satisfaction with subjects, students were asked which subjects they liked and disliked most in sixth year. The subjects liked by the greatest proportion of students were Maths (21 per cent), English (20 per cent) and Biology (19 per cent) while the least liked subjects were Irish (36 per cent), Maths (33 per cent) and French (25 per cent). Students were also asked about whether they found a specified set of subjects interesting, difficult and useful. This set was chosen to reflect different subject areas within the Leaving Certificate curriculum. Because students vary in the subjects chosen, we look at the responses only for those taking the relevant subject. Interest levels are generally highest in relation to History and Biology and lowest in relation to the languages, Irish, French and German (Figure 2.2), a ranking of subjects which is identical to that reported a year earlier (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011). Overall, students are more positive about the subjects they have chosen than about the compulsory (or quasi-compulsory) subjects. The exception to this pattern is Physical Education, where a majority of students find the subject interesting. Differences in interest levels are evident by gender and by prior achievement. Female students are more likely to find the languages interesting than their male counterparts; this gender difference is apparent in relation to English and Irish (52 per cent of females find English interesting compared with 44 per cent of males; 37 per cent compared with 25 per cent for Irish) and also in relation to the continental languages (39 per cent v. 30 per cent for French and 42 per cent v. 24 per cent for German). The only subject in which levels of interest are higher among male students is Physical Education, with 74 per cent of males finding it interesting compared with 51 per cent of females. Students in the highest-achieving Junior Certificate group are more likely to find Maths and Irish interesting than other students (58 per cent compared with 43 per cent in the lowest quintile for Maths; 44 per cent compared with 28 per

cent for Irish). The same pattern is evident for Biology (93 per cent v. 53 per cent) and Geography (80 per cent v. 44 per cent), with higher-achieving students expressing greater interest in these subjects.

Figure 2.2: Proportion of sixth year students who find the selected subjects interesting (those taking the subjects only)
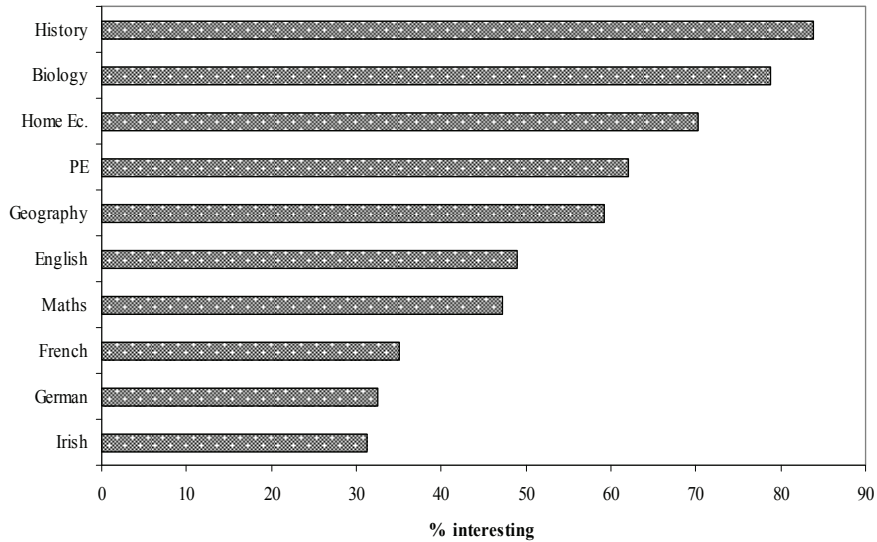
Among sixth years, Biology, Home Economics and Maths are seen as the most useful subjects (Figure 2.3), which is consistent with findings for students in fifth year. In general, the majority of sixth year students find the specified subjects useful, with the exception of Irish which is deemed useful by only four in ten students. For five of the ten specified subjects, clear gender differences are evident in the perceived utility of subjects. Female students are more likely to consider Irish, Biology, Home Economics, French and Irish useful than male students (42 per cent compared with 35 per cent for Irish; 84 per cent v. 71 per cent for Biology; 85 per cent v. 61 per cent for Home Economics; 71 per cent v. 57 per cent for French; 44 per cent v. 37 per cent for Irish). As with sub-ject interest, PE is the only subject which males are more likely to find useful than female students (72 per cent v. 64 per cent). Finding Biology useful is closely related to prior achievement, with 97 per cent of the top Junior Certificate quintile finding it useful compared with 59 per cent of

the lowest quintile. A similar pattern is evident for Geography (74 per cent compared with 42 per cent), French (74 per cent v. 48 per cent), and German (83 per cent v. 39 per cent).

Figure 2.3: Proportion of sixth year students who find the selected subjects useful (those taking the subjects only)
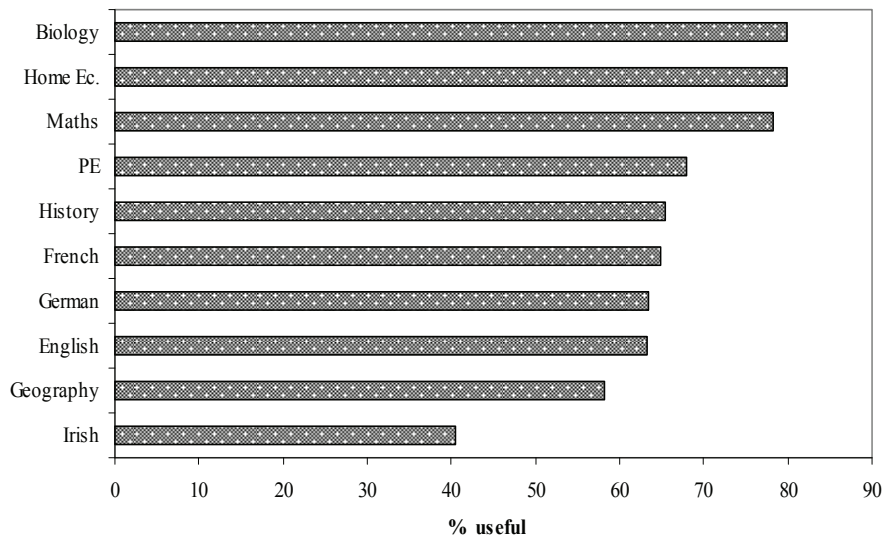
Continental languages are seen as the most difficult subjects, as in fifth year, with over half of students also viewing Biology, Maths and Irish as difficult (Figure 2.4). Difficulty levels are lower for English than for many other subjects, and only a handful of sixth year students find PE difficult. Difficulty levels are found to relate to the level at which students are studying subjects. For Irish, perceived difficulty is found to be greatest among those taking higher level (64 per cent) or foundation level (60 per cent), and lowest among those taking ordinary level (45 per cent). Forty-six per cent of students taking higher level English find it difficult compared with 25 per cent of those studying ordinary level. For Maths, perceived difficulty is greatest at higher level (64 per cent) and lowest at foundation (56 per cent) and ordinary (52 per cent) levels. Female students are more likely to find English difficult than their male counterparts (45 per cent compared with 34 per cent); a similar pattern is evident in relation to Biology (62 per cent v. 45 per cent), History (55

per cent v. 42 per cent), and Geography (47 per cent v. 36 per cent).
Male students find Irish more difficult than female students (57 per cent
compared with 49 per cent); on closer investigation, this applies only to
ordinary level students with no apparent gender difference in perceived
difficulty at higher level.

*Figure 2.4: Proportion of sixth year students who find the selected
subjects difficult (those taking the subjects only)*
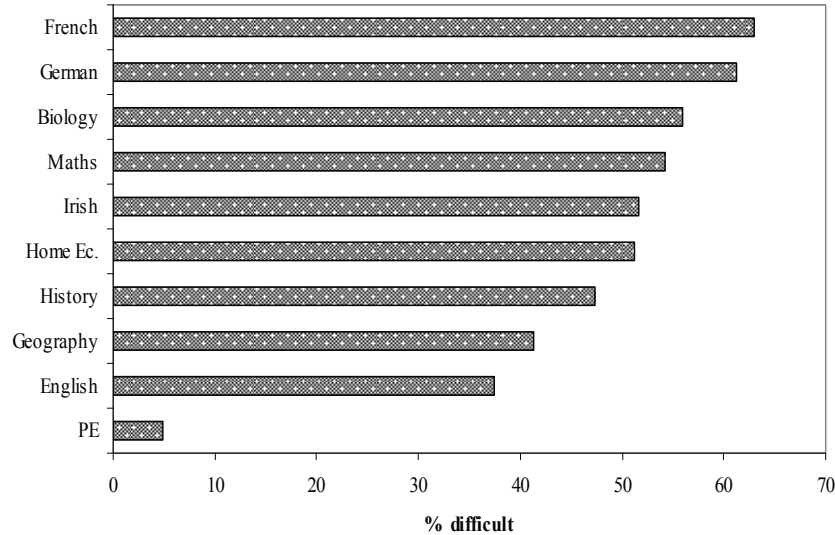
As would be expected, perceived difficulty is also related to prior Junior
Certificate achievement. Students who achieved lower Junior Certificate
grades are more likely to find Maths difficult than other students; two-
thirds of the lowest two quintiles find Maths difficult compared with 48
per cent of the highest quintile. More detailed analysis indicates a com-
plex interaction between perceived difficulty and level take-up. Among
those taking ordinary level Maths, the greatest difficulty is reported by
those in the lowest-achieving quintile. In contrast, among those taking
higher level Maths, perceived difficulty is greatest among those in the
highest-achieving groups. The pattern is somewhat different for English,
where the lowest two quintiles find the subject less difficult than other
students because they are more likely to study the subject at ordinary
level. The perceived difficulty of Biology and Geography is structured

by prior achievement, with the highest difficulty levels reported among the lowest Junior Certificate quintile.

2.3 Take-up of Subject Levels

In looking at student experiences of sixth year, it is important not only to look at the programme and subjects they are taking but also at the levels they are taking in the subjects studied. *Choices and Challenges* (Smyth and Calvert, 2011) showed how the case-study schools differ in the degree, timing and flexibility of subject levels available to senior cycle students. Subject level take-up in fifth year was strongly influenced by the levels taken in, and experience of, relevant subjects at junior cycle as well as by the grades received in the Junior Certificate exam. In this section, we look at take-up of levels in Irish, English and Maths at the time of the survey (mid-way through the exam year), as reported by students. In Chapter Four, further analyses are conducted to look at the take-up of higher level across all subjects in the Leaving Certificate examination based on data from the State Examinations Commission. These data allow us to look at level take-up across a broader range of subjects and to explore the extent to which students 'drop' a level in the months running up to the exam.

Figure 2.5 shows clear variation between Irish, English and Maths in the take-up of different subject levels. At the time of the survey, two-thirds of the students in the case-study schools were taking higher level English. Under a third of the students were taking higher level Irish while around a fifth were taking higher level Maths. Marked gender differences were apparent in relation to Irish and English, with female students much more likely to take higher level than their male counterparts. No such gender differences were evident in relation to Maths. Take-up of higher level subjects is also found to vary by social class background. For English, the vast majority (88 per cent) of the higher professional group take higher level compared with 42 per cent of the semi/unskilled manual group. For Irish, students from farm households are the most likely to take higher level (with 56 per cent doing so) with the lowest take-up among semi/unskilled manual and non-employed groups (at 15 per cent). Only a minority of any social class group takes higher level

Maths, with 32 per cent of the higher professional group doing so compared with 11 per cent among semi/unskilled manual groups.

Figure 2.5: Take-up of subject levels in Irish, English and Maths by gender
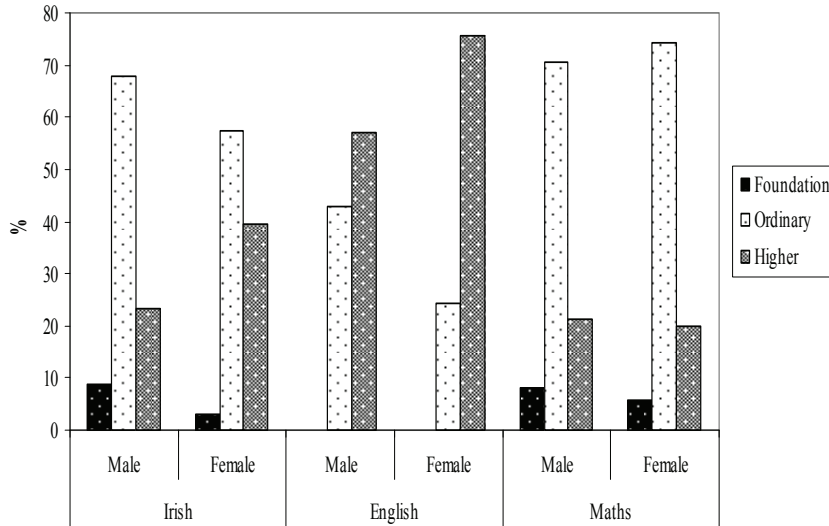
Not surprisingly, prior achievement was strongly predictive of level take-up across all three subjects, with higher-performing students (in terms of overall Junior Certificate grades) much more likely to go on to take higher level. Take-up of higher level English is less strongly structured by prior achievement than the other subjects; a significant proportion of low- to moderate-achieving students take higher level English while almost all of the top quintile take the subject at higher level (Figure 2.6). In contrast, even among the highest-achieving group, take-up of higher level Maths is only 60 per cent. Overall, students in the top quintile are 17 times more likely than those in the lowest quintile to take higher level Maths; the relevant ratios are 24 for Irish and 5.6 for English. Students who had taken Transition Year were more likely to take higher level subjects than those who had not (35 per cent v. 27 per cent for Irish, 76 per cent v. 56 per cent for English and 24 per cent v. 17 per cent for Maths). This pattern may, however, reflect differences between TY participants

and non-participants in motivation and prior performance (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011).

Figure 2.6: Take-up of higher level Irish, English and Maths by Junior Certificate grades (quintiles)
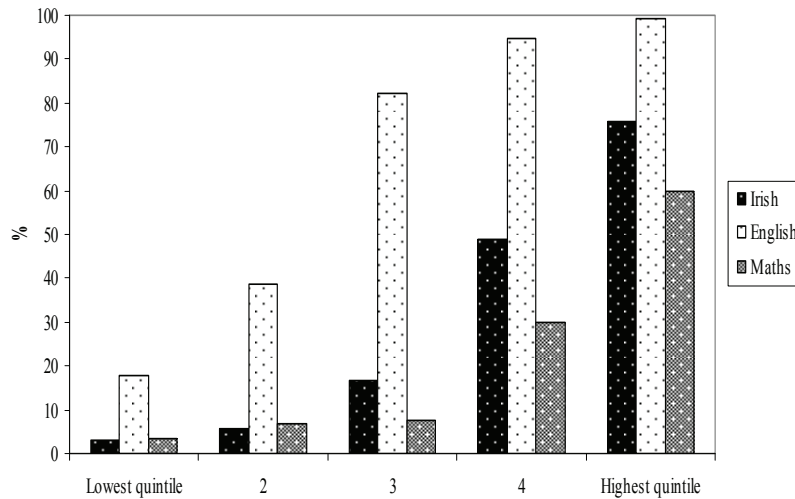
Previous analyses showed that at Junior Certificate level, the average number of higher level subjects taken varied significantly across the twelve case-study schools (Smyth et al., 2007). Figure 2.7 shows the take-up of higher level Irish, English and Maths across the schools. The patterns vary significantly according to the social class mix of the school, with students in working-class schools less likely to take higher level subjects. In fact, in Barrack Street, a girls' school, no students take higher level Irish while in Dixon Street, a coeducational school, no students take higher level Irish or Maths. However, there is also variation in take-up among schools serving similar kinds of students. In particular, it is worth noting that the proportion of students taking higher level subjects is as high, if not higher, in Belmore Street, a mixed intake girls' school, than among students in the two middle-class schools. Level take-up thus appears to reflect the complex interplay of school policy, teacher expectations and practice, student intake and student aspirations.
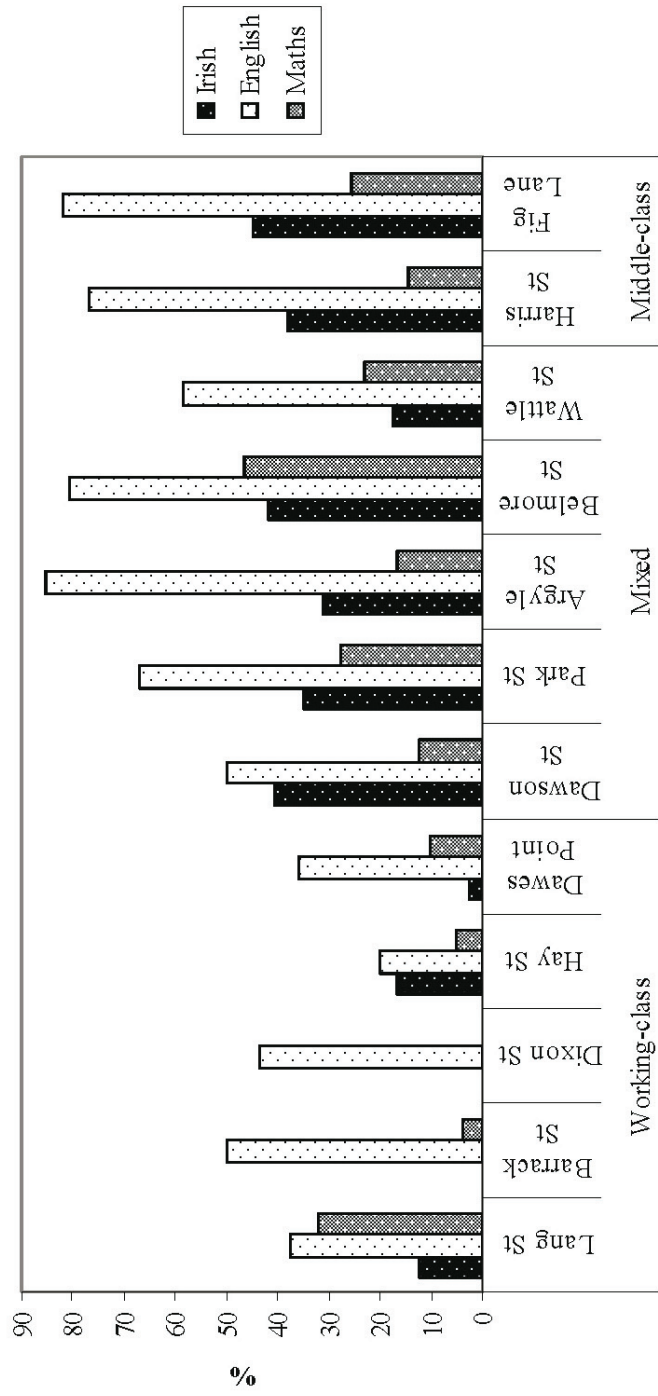
Figure 2.7: Take-up of higher level Irish, English and Maths by school

A stronger relationship between level take-up at junior cycle and that at senior cycle is found for some subjects than others. The first column of Figure 2.8 shows the proportion of young people who had taken higher level in the Junior Certificate exam but took ordinary or foundation level in the Leaving Certificate exam. Of those who had taken higher level English for the Junior Certificate, only a relatively small proportion (15 per cent) dropped to ordinary level in the Leaving Certificate exam. Such movement was much more common in Irish than in English, with 41 per cent of those who had taken higher level Irish in the Junior Certificate transferring to ordinary or foundation level for the Leaving Certificate. The pattern is markedly different for Maths, where the majority (66 per cent) of those who had taken higher level at Junior Certificate level moved to ordinary or foundation level for the Leaving Certificate exam.

Changes in the subject levels taken are possible right up to the day of the Leaving Certificate exam. Survey responses mid-way through sixth year can therefore be compared with the actual levels taken to provide insights into 'last-minute' changes. The second set of columns in Figure 2.8 indicates that very few students (3 per cent) who reported taking higher level English at the time of the survey subsequently took ordinary

Figure 2.8: Proportion of students moving from higher to ordinary/foundation level in Irish, English and Maths
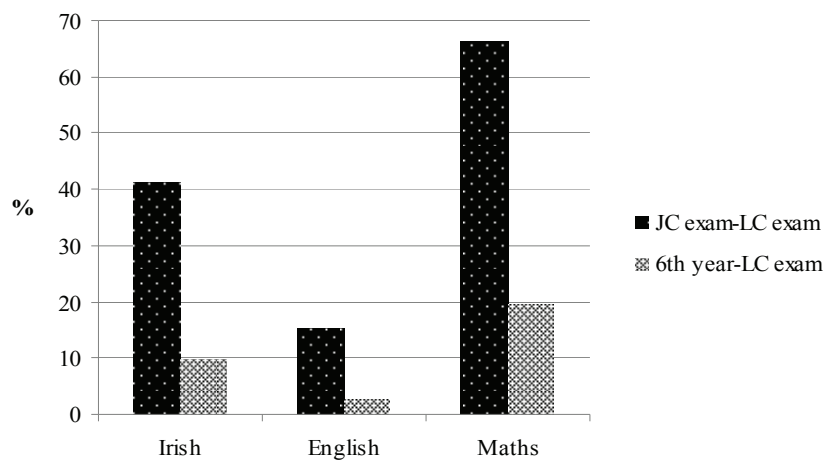
level. Change was somewhat more common in Irish, with a tenth of the higher level group changing levels in the run-up to the exam. Again the pattern for Maths is quite distinctive, with a fifth of higher level students 'dropping down' a level in the course of the few months prior to the examination.

When questioned about choosing subject levels, students were sometimes ambivalent as to whether 'choice' had been involved in the process. In many cases, the levels taken were seen as naturally following on from those taken in junior cycle, with any movement being 'downward' from higher to ordinary level (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011). The level undertaken at Leaving Certificate thus often depended on their Junior Certificate level and the ability groups in which students were placed during junior cycle:

> Depends what you did in your Junior Cert … I came straight from Junior Cert to fifth year so whatever I was doing honours in, in Junior Cert, I stayed doing honours in fifth year. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

> *Interviewer*: When did you choose the level at which to take subjects for Leaving Cert?

> Just in third year.

> You didn't really [choose]. Nobody asked you.

> Yeah you didn't pick, the results [decided it].

> If you done well in honours in Junior Cert you just went on doing it.

> And if you done ordinary for Junior Cert you can't go up when you go to Leaving Cert like. (Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

One group of students reported how taking particular subject levels was part of a cumulative process that started as early as first year:

> Well, I personally have never sat in an honours Maths class in my life. Since the day I came into first year I've never once been in an honours Maths class.

> *Interviewer*: So what about choosing the levels then?

> Like exams.
>
> I don't think we picked, did we?
>
> No, there is an exam, they stream you in first year … and in your Maths and Irish you get put into honours or pass then. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students were unable to take the subject at their preferred level despite having sat that level in their Junior Certificate exams. They felt annoyed by this decision and ignored by their teachers as a result of this:

> In French we were all just put in ordinary French.
>
> … All of us wanted to do higher.
>
> And we all done very well in higher in our Junior Certs and they put us into an ordinary class and we'd no say and like…
>
> *Interviewer*: And how do you feel about that?
>
> I was a bit annoyed because I'd be doing an extra higher subject now.
>
> Yeah, it wasn't fair at all. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

In other schools, students reported greater autonomy regarding the selection of subject levels, with Christmas tests and/or Mock exams in sixth year used as a basis for discussion between teacher and student:

> Because just after the Christmas exams I seen the results and I got good results so I just decided, yeah I'm capable of doing higher for some and then ordinary for the rest.
>
> … The teachers kind of tell you what they think you are able for.
>
> They go higher, yeah.
>
> Or you go down.
>
> Then you have a fight with them.

Interviewer: Would you listen to them, would you listen to their advice?

Yeah.

It depends.

It depends.

But if you know you are not able for something.

Then I wouldn't do it. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Students in Barrack Street also felt that teachers should give greater encouragement to them 'to do like what level you are able for' and give them appropriate advice regarding level selection.

Where students had more of a say in the level taken, moving levels was, as might be expected, often prompted by the perceived difficulty of the subject in question.

At the start of this year I moved down to pass Irish. I just chose myself, I didn't like it.

Interviewer: So did teachers have any say there as well?

Yeah, they tried to convince me but I said no, I want to move down to pass. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Most students felt that their subject levels were important because they related directly to obtaining the CAO 'points' necessary for higher education entry, with some groups describing the Leaving Certificate exams as 'a points race' (Harris Street, middle-class girls' school) and others describing taking ordinary level subjects as 'a bit of a waste' (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake):

A huge difference between higher level and ordinary level points.

It depends what you want to do.

Points for certain things like you need, say for primary teaching or P.E. teaching, you need to have higher Irish and you need to get a C1

at least, you know. So if you are doing pass Irish, that course is out the window.

Yeah, it's gutting that way.

Like a C in honours is like 60 points whereas it's only 15 in ordinary level. A huge difference. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

It matters in the end though because you need the points, if you're going for the points and all, you need to do the high subjects, don't you, so it matters to you but no one else really. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Some students had taken ordinary level subjects without realising the implications of this choice and now regretted having done so:

Like in junior cycle I was put into pass Irish and pass Maths, based on first year. But in first year I didn't care, I thought it was grand. And now thinking about it like I never got a chance really at doing the higher level so I kind of screwed myself over, you know so.

… If you want to do something that needs a lot of points you have to do the honours. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Students differed somewhat in their attitude to taking higher or ordinary level. For some students, they felt that it was better to do 'OK' at ordinary level than 'fail' at higher level:

If you fail honours and you would have passed it at pass, sure you'd probably get more points. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

If you are not able for the honours, you are only going to fail them. You are screwed then anyway. You're better off getting a smaller amount of points than failing higher level. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

However, other students emphasised the importance of at least attempting higher level subjects:

You're better off getting a D3 in an honour than like a B1 in a pass, it's the same points but at least … you tried the honour like and that

goes down on your CV then and people see that at least you tried it. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Some students had not fully realised the implications of taking ordinary or foundation level subjects and regretted the consequences:

You don't realise when you are doing pass subjects because I went down to pass Maths at the start of this year and I didn't realise the difference between getting say a C1 and getting say a good B in pass. There's over 20 points in the difference, it's madness. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

The broader issue of guidance regarding educational decision-making is discussed in much greater detail in Chapter Five.

2.3.1 Choice of Subject Level in Maths

In order to unpack the processes shaping variation in the take-up of higher level subjects, students were asked in the survey specifically about their choice of level in Maths. Maths was selected because fewer students take higher level than is the case for English or Irish, and it would be useful to unpack the reasons underlying this pattern. From a policy perspective, there has been a good deal of concern about the relatively small proportion of young people taking higher level Maths so it is useful to draw on an evidence base to explore this issue.

Three-quarters of the student cohort had chosen their Maths level by the time of the survey, 4 per cent had not yet decided while a fifth indicated that the school or their teacher had decided for them. Lower-achieving students were much more likely to report having no choice than other students; a third of the lowest quintile had no choice compared with 5 per cent of the highest quintile. Male students are more likely to report having no choice than their female peers (25 per cent compared with 17 per cent). Constraints on selecting Maths level vary markedly across schools; over half (59 per cent) of those in Dixon Street and 42 per cent in Dawes Point, both working-class schools which used streaming at junior cycle, reported having had no choice of level compared with 6 per cent of those in Belmore Street, a mixed intake girls' school, where the focus was on encouraging as many students as possible to take higher level. Students who reported having a lack of choice in Maths level were

more likely to be taking foundation or ordinary level than other students. Their lack of choice may thus, at least in part, be attributable to their take-up of subject levels at junior cycle.

Among those who reported having some degree of choice, Maths teachers play a significant role in providing advice on which Maths level to select, with 69 per cent of the cohort deeming them 'very important' or 'important' (Figure 2.9). In keeping with the findings of previous research, informal sources of information, especially parents, are found to be important in educational decision-making, with mothers deemed somewhat more important in the process than fathers (McCoy et al., 2006; Smyth et al., 2007). Formal guidance is seen as playing a less significant role than the advice of the Maths teacher or parents, with 4 per cent deeming the guidance counsellor 'very important', and 20 per cent 'important', in selecting Maths level. The influence of friends in the decision-making process is at a similar level to that of the guidance counsellor.

Figure 2.9: Importance of different sources of advice in deciding Maths level (%'very important'/'important')
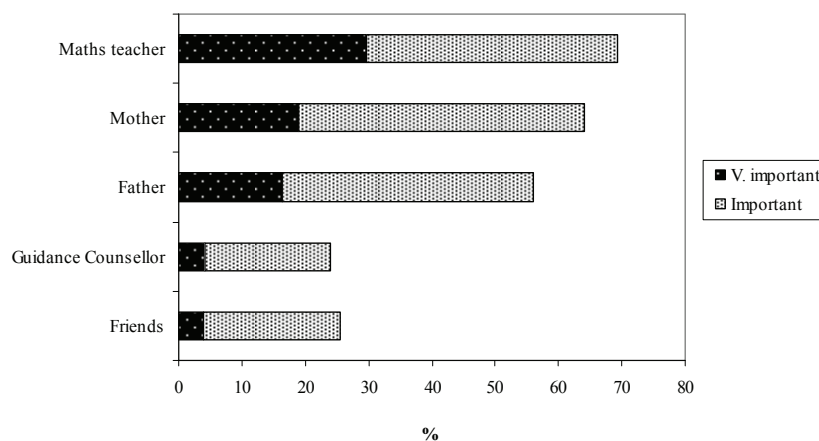
The reliance on different sources of information varies somewhat by student characteristics. Parents are an important source of advice across all groups in terms of gender, social class and prior achievement, a pattern that was also evident at junior cycle (Smyth et al., 2007). The guidance counsellor is seen as somewhat more important by male than female students. Lower-achieving and working-class students were more reliant on

the guidance counsellor in choosing Maths levels; 48 per cent of the lowest Junior Certificate quintile consider them important compared with 10 per cent of the highest quintile. This is consistent with previous research internationally that guidance counsellors are especially important sources of information for young people with no family traditions, or experience, of higher education (McDonough 1997; Foskett et al., 2008). Lower-achieving and working-class students are also more likely to deem their friends an important influence on their decision-making, with young people again substituting for an absence of 'expertise' in their families regarding educational pathways. In contrast, students who had taken Transition Year made decisions more independently, being less reliant on the guidance counsellor or their friends than other students. The role of the guidance counsellor in choosing Maths levels varied across the schools, being deemed more important in Barrack Street, Hay Street and Dawes Point, all working-class schools. The reliance on formal guidance in decision-making about post-school pathways is explored in Chapter Five.

In the focus group interviews, students highlighted how choosing the subject level in Maths was slightly different to choosing subject levels in other subjects. In keeping with the survey responses, teachers played a major role in the decision regarding a student's Maths level. Some of the students referred to being 'told' which level to take and some expressed concern about being placed in the ordinary level Maths class when they felt they could have excelled at higher level:

> They told us all to move down to, like we weren't even allowed, like given the choice to stay in honours … we all dropped to pass…

> Now we're all excelling at pass.

> Yeah, we're all given As.

> We're all getting As so we could have taken honours. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

As in other subjects, movement between subject levels tended to be restricted: 'one or two will drop down but not many people would have come up from pass to honours' (Wattle Street, staff, mixed boys'

school). Moving 'down' a level was not always an effective response to perceived subject difficulty. Some of the students who moved from higher to ordinary Maths found themselves struggling as the two courses are so different. Their time spent taking higher level Maths was now viewed as 'a waste':

> They were told they all had to drop which is basically the waste of a year because honours Maths is tough.

> Yeah, now we're going to pass and now I'm lost in pass like and I would have been a C student in honours like. I've gone to pass and I'm lost and I failed the pass Maths mocks because I've never done it. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Other students were concerned that students changing from higher to ordinary level were moving into their Maths class, thus impacting on their own performance:

> And my pass Maths class is full to the limit because of so many people having dropped down.

> It's a joke, we're all there like.

> Ours is packed.

> Ours is packed and we're all failing. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

The extent to which students made their own decision appeared to vary by school. Some students felt they had no choice at all and the subject level at Leaving Certificate appeared to be directly influenced by their Junior Certificate level:

> You don't have a choice in this school, I swear to god.

> They just look at you.

> The teachers you have in here you don't have a choice.

> … You've done ordinary level for the Junior Cert so you're doing ordinary level for the Leaving Cert. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

In other schools, the selection of subject levels involved consultation with teachers and, in some instances, parents. In Fig Lane, a form was sent out to the family and students 'talked to parents and teachers' (Fig Lane, middle-class coed school). For other students, the Maths teacher played a role in providing advice which students were happy to accept:

> If they didn't think you could do it they'd always advise you not to do it. Even when I was in honours, like the teacher advised me that I should go down to pass but I knew that anyway so I just took the advice and went down to pass … I just realized there wasn't much point myself, it was a weak point, Maths, for me. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Chapter Four will provide further discussion and evidence on the take-up of subject levels in the actual exam and will explore the association between higher level take-up and academic performance.

2.4 Teaching and Learning

In this section, we explore student views on good teaching, the type of teaching methods they experience, the pace of instruction in their classes, their take-up of private tuition, and the potential impact of the Leaving Certificate exam on their experiences of teaching and learning.

2.4.1 Teaching Methods

Sixth year students were asked about the frequency with which a range of teaching methods were used in their class. Figure 2.10 shows significant differences across Leaving Certificate programmes in the use of teaching methods. As in fifth year, LCA students are more likely to report the frequent use of group-work and project-work in class than LCE and LCVP students. LCA students are also more likely to report that their teacher explains things well and that they themselves are allowed to express their opinions. In contrast, LCE and LCVP classes tend to be characterised by teachers doing most of the talking, by teachers reading from the book, by practising previous exam papers and being given homework.

Figure 2.10: Prevalence of different teaching methods by Leaving Certificate programme (% 'every lesson/most lessons')

% every lesson/most lessons
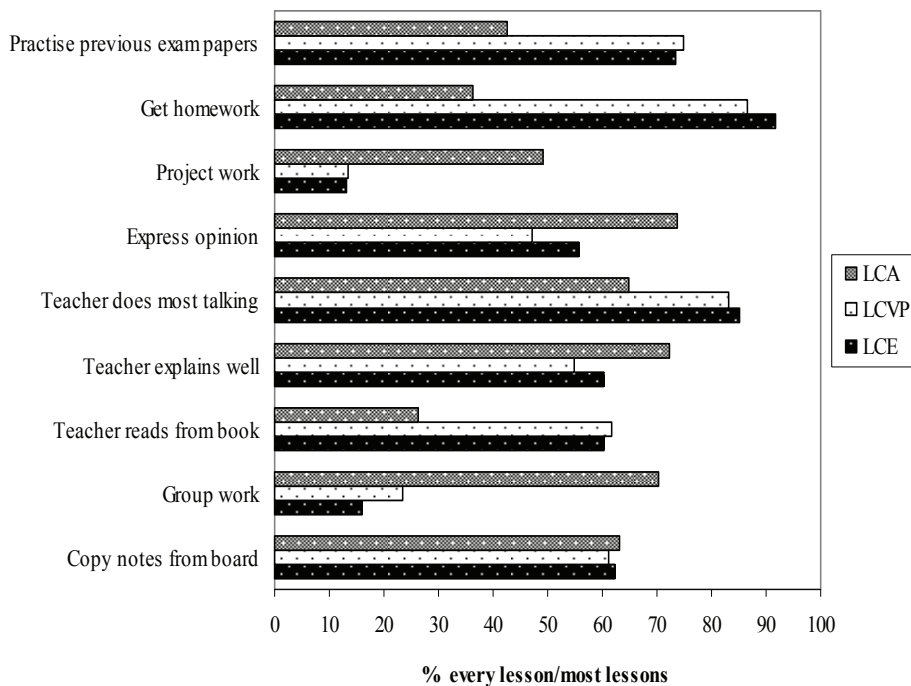
Figure 2.11 shows that the use of different kinds of learning, such as ICT, audio-visual material, and visiting speakers, is more common in LCA classrooms. In particular, the use of ICT is infrequent in sixth year LCE or LCVP classes, with over two-thirds of LCE students and half of LCVP students 'never' using ICT in class. The pattern found is consistent with international research which shows that in systems with high-stakes testing, teachers resort to teaching to the test, providing students with practice tests and coaching them in answering questions 'rather than in using and applying their understanding more widely' (Harlen, 2007, p. 21). Thus, teacher-centred instructional approaches are most commonly used in the LCE and LCVP classes as a way in which to 'cover' the curriculum in the time allowed. This contrasts strongly with the learner-oriented pedagogy associated with the LCA.

Figure 2.11: Use of different forms of learning (% 'never') by Leaving Certificate programme
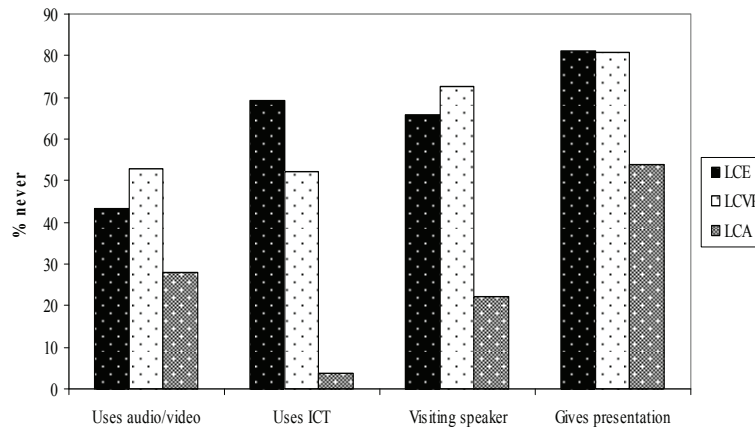
Differences in the teaching methods used reflect not only the programme taken but the composition of the student cohort. Male LCE students are more likely to report more frequent use of group-work and class projects than their female counterparts. Within both the LCE and LCVP programmes, male students are more likely to report the use of ICT (36 per cent report at least some use compared with 26 per cent of females) and less frequently receive homework than female students. Male students are also more likely to report being allowed to express their own opinions and give presentations. There is some variation too in the use of teaching methods according to the social class mix of the school. ICT tends to be used more frequently in working-class schools; 55 per cent of LCE/LCVP students in working-class schools report the use of ICT at least in 'some lessons' compared with 31 per cent of LCE/LCVP students in mixed or middle-class schools. However, some variation among working-class schools is apparent, with girls attending Barrack Street school reporting less frequent ICT use than in other working-class schools. Students attending working-class schools similarly report more frequent use of project work and visiting speakers than those in other schools. In contrast, students in mixed or middle-class schools report more frequent setting of homework in class, a difference that applies within Leaving Certificate programmes. In sum, it appears that teachers

adapt their methods to the student body, using more active teaching methods with boys and with students in working-class schools. In contrast, girls' schools and mixed/middle-class schools are characterised by a strong emphasis on the allocation of homework.

2.4.2 Pace of Instruction

Sixth year students were asked about the pace of instruction in their class. Over half (55 per cent) of students felt that the pace was 'about right', a fifth felt it was too slow while a quarter felt their teachers went too quickly. There were no marked differences across Leaving Certificate programmes in the perceived pace of instruction. Female students were more likely to report the pace of instruction was 'about right' than male students, a gender difference that is evident within individual schools. There is a clear relationship between prior achievement levels and perceived pace of instruction (see Figure 2.12). Students who received higher Junior Certificate grades are more likely to consider the

Figure 2.12: Perceived pace of instruction by Junior Certificate performance
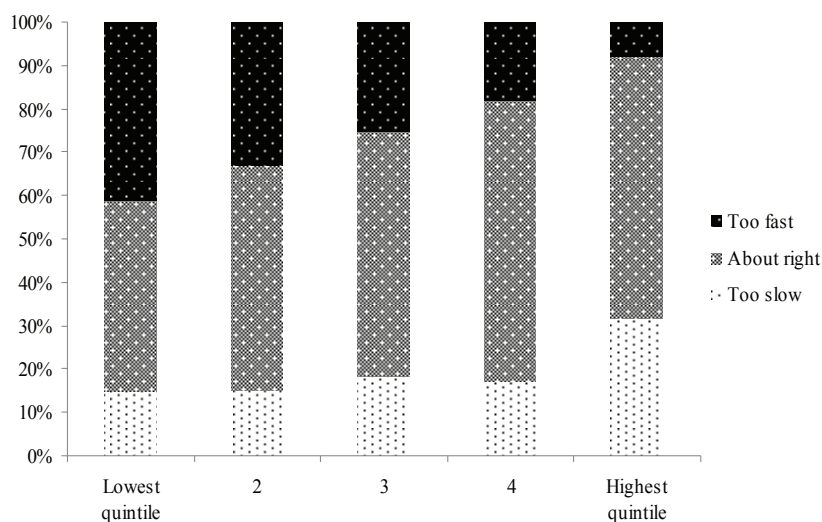
pace 'about right'. However, a significant minority – just under a third – of the highest-performing group feel the pace is too slow. In contrast,

students who had achieved lower Junior Certificate grades are more likely to report the pace of instruction as 'too fast', with 41 per cent of the lowest quintile doing so.

As well as being asked about pace of instruction in general, sixth year students were asked about the pace of instruction in specific subjects. Students were more likely to report the pace as 'about right' in English than in other subjects, with 70 per cent doing so. Over a quarter of those taking Maths and Biology reported the pace of instruction as too fast. In relation to Irish, students taking higher level Irish were less satisfied with the pace of instruction than those taking foundation or ordinary level (53 per cent compared with 67 per cent). Those taking foundation level were most likely to feel the pace was too fast while a quarter of those taking higher level found the pace too slow. In contrast, there is no relationship between level and perceived pace of instruction in English, with the majority of both ordinary and higher level students finding the pace 'about right'. There is no clear-cut relationship for Maths but foundation level students are more likely to find the pace too fast than other students.

2.4.3 The 'Mock' Exams

Normally held during the months of January and February before the Leaving Certificate exam in June, the 'Mock' exams (sometimes called 'Pres') are a crucial event in students' sixth year experience. All but one of the case-study schools held formal Mock exams, the one exception deciding not to do so because it represents an 'erosion of teaching and learning time' (Hay Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake). These exams are used by schools to provide students with an insight into their progress, and the Mock results often shape student opinion on what subject level to take for the Leaving Certificate. Staff in Fig Lane described how the results of the Mocks were not that important in themselves but instead the exams could be used as a practice run for the Leaving Certificate.

> I would see that they would utilize the time as a dress rehearsal for how they are going to utilize their time in the actual exam. (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake)

Having Mock exams was felt to ease the pressure and manage the stress of the impending Leaving Certificate:

> I know some schools don't do Mocks and I think maybe it adds a little bit of a degree of anxiety and extra pressure on them when they do eventually do the exam. (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake)

The Mock exams were also seen as a way of familiarising students with the process and layout of the exams:

> The main purpose from a school's point of view would certainly be to familiarise the student with the whole running of exams in terms of identifying the exam paper, knowing how to work through the exam paper, what types of questions, time management, even the whole formal thing of sitting in the hall, having to do an honours Physics paper or a pass Physics paper with another subject straight after that and the length of exams. … Their normal tests would be 40 minutes in class, this is to sit them down and do a 3 hour and 20 minute test. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

Some school staff suggested that the Mocks were useful in getting students to become more realistic in their expectations:

> Some of them would have expectations beyond their abilities and the Mocks certainly kind of at least make them become perhaps a little bit more realistic, you know. You know it's very difficult to tell a child you're not going to get medicine, you know, if she thinks she's going to since the age of whatever. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

The results of the Mock exams were viewed as providing important feedback to students on how they were getting on in their studies, and motivating some to put in extra effort:

> For those who are studying it's a benchmark of how they are doing vis-à-vis the tests. And in a way, I suppose, it's flagging to those who haven't been doing enough that this is the kind of test that is facing you in the period from now, not too far removed. (Argyle Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

From the student perspective, the Mocks appear to play a role in reducing or exacerbating stress, an effect which varies depending on how they fared in these exams. Some students were happy with their Mock results and therefore were not that worried about the forthcoming exams:

> I was happy with my Mock results so like I, I'm not that worried about it. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

For other students, the Mock exams act as a 'wake-up call', highlighting that they need to work harder in order to get the grades they want in various subjects:

> They kind of wake you up.

> Yeah, big time.

> They let you know where you are at. Like I always thought in certain subjects I could get a B in them but I got a low C. I realised that you can't just get it easy like. You have to do study for it. You have to do an hour a night study, I can barely do an hour a week. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Students appear to appreciate the timing of these exams which allows enough time before the Leaving Certificate to make changes and work harder:

> *Interviewer*: Do you think it was worthwhile doing the Mock exams?

> Yeah.

> It frightened the life out of us. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

> We need to study harder.

> Yeah, some subjects that you think you should pass, you have to study more. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

> But they make you ready … when the [Mock] results came back you definitely think 'wow I can do a lot better' because you didn't, you didn't do well in a certain subject but you didn't study for it as hard as you knew you could so you know you can do a lot better. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

As reported by key personnel, becoming familiar with the layout and timing of exam questions was also seen as an important aspect of the Mocks for students:

> I know from the History, I didn't finish the paper so just the time.

> It teaches you timing, yeah, time management.

> And what it's like to have to sit down for 2, 2½ hours and just write, I'd never, never, I mean absolutely never wrote for 2 hours before in my life. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

One staff member voiced concerns, however, about students who were becoming too stressed about the Mock exams and how this could negatively impact on their time in school afterwards:

> I sometimes felt that they got themselves all fired up and keyed up for the Mocks and then they were exhausted after it. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Doing badly in the Mocks was also seen as sometimes fuelling student stress about the impending exams:

> It can be very upsetting if they don't do as well as they thought they would do. And there is a sense of panic with the ones that don't do very well. (Argyle Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

The issue of exam stress is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

2.4.4 Private Tuition

In January of sixth year, 44 per cent of the students in the study were taking private tuition ('grinds'), compared with 17 per cent of the cohort in fifth year. Among those not taking grinds at the time of the survey, 16 per cent said they would 'definitely', and 32 per cent would 'probably', take private tuition before the Leaving Certificate exam. Private tuition was most commonly taken in Maths (47 per cent of those taking grinds), French (21 per cent) and Irish (20 per cent). Figure 2.13 shows grinds take-up across the twelve case-study schools. Clear differences in take-up are evident by the social class mix of the school. However, variation is evident among schools with a similar social mix; one of the working-class schools, Hay Street, has over 60 per cent of students taking grinds. This rate of take-up is similar to that in the middle-class schools, Fig Lane and Harris Street.

Figure 2.13: Proportion taking private tuition (grinds) by school (LCE/LCVP students only)
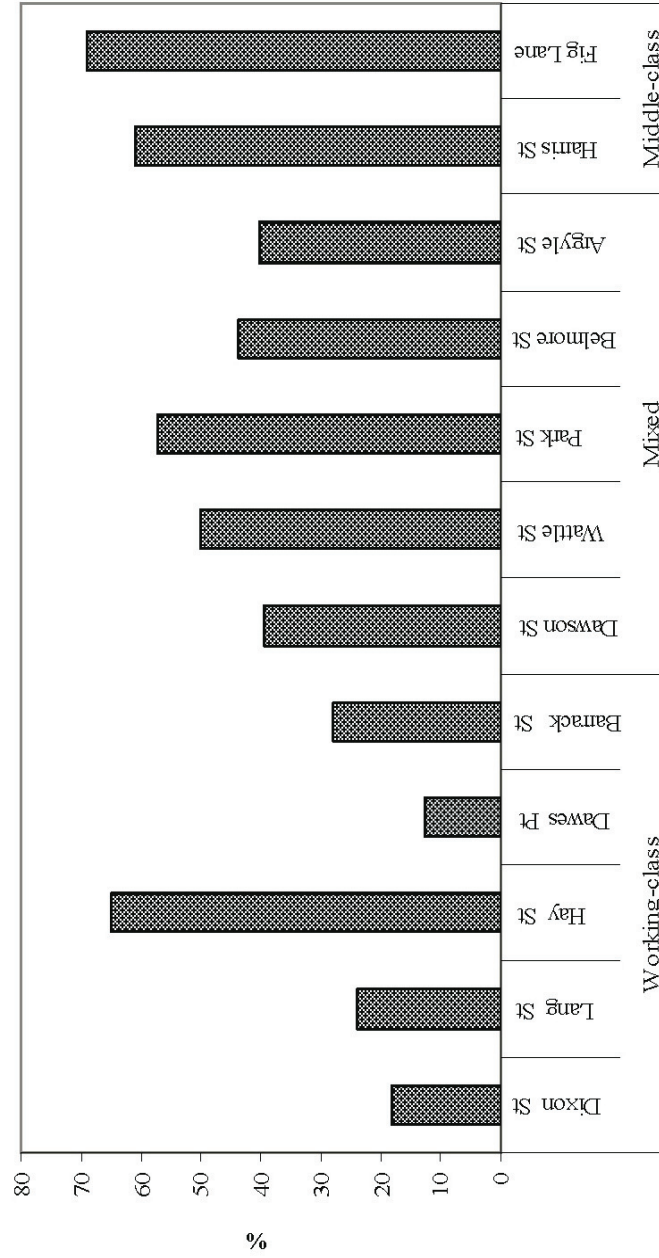
Figure 2.14 highlights the take-up of grinds among LCE/LCVP students only (since rates of take-up among LCA students are very low) and shows a clear social class gradient in grinds take-up, which is much more prevalent among the higher and lower professional groups and farmer groups. Gender differences also emerged, with higher grinds take-up among females than males (54 per cent compared with 40 per cent).

Figure 2.14: Proportion taking private tuition (grinds) by social class background
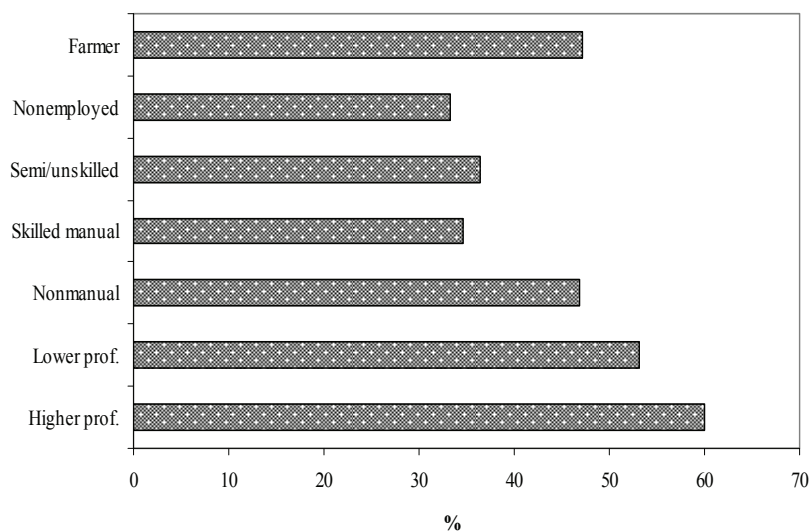
The group interviews further unpacked the motivation for students taking private tuition. The main reasons were fear of doing badly in a subject and the quality of teaching at school. Take-up was also related to 'panic' in the face of the impending exams and in some schools, a 'hot-house' effect emerged with peers influencing each other's decision to take grinds:

> *Interviewer*: And would many people in your class do grinds this year?
>
> Everybody that I know is doing grinds.
>
> Yeah, everybody.
>
> Every single one of my friends is doing grinds.

… *Interviewer*: Why do you think?

Because they're not getting what they need in their class like.

And they're panicking because they're afraid they'll do badly or the teacher is just bad. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Some students spoke about going to grinds schools for certain subjects because their subject teacher at school could not control the class and as a result they did not learn anything:

I go to French grind school, our French teacher, like she's really, I love her, but she just can't teach French and she can't control the class so it's just, I need to go to it or else I won't actually know any French. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

In another school, students attributed the number of students taking grinds to poor teaching on the part of one teacher:

It is like if you're weak in it, they'll give you a hand.

… One of our teachers like he's useless and most of the class are actually doing grinds. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Some students saw the advantage of private tuition as being its narrow focus on preparation for the exam:

Like in Maths, they go straight to the thing that you have to do for the Leaving Cert, rather than going through all the stuff that you don't have to do, that you don't really need to know. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Other students found that the notes they received in the grinds school were exactly what they needed to know for the exam and much better than their notes from school:

I just find that like I go to [Grinds school] and I learn off my notes for [Grinds school] way before I learn off my notes from class.

Because just I know they're really good and they're just, they're so exam based and I don't know, you just know that you're learning the right stuff, so I find them real helpful. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Other students spoke about the different teaching approach used in grind schools where they were less likely to be disrupted and, compared to their class in school, they had more opportunity to ask questions and be corrected when they were wrong. This was not possible in school as their teacher 'wants to move on' and feels these questions are 'disrupting her class':

> I get them in Maths like because I find Maths hard. It's way better when you're one to one because they know what you're doing wrong and they can correct you, I think it's way better.

> … Because like in Maths if you say something to her [the teacher at school], she'll go off the head like. (Park Street, boys' school, socially mixed intake)

> It's one on one as well like. If you don't understand, you can ask. (Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)

Other students also felt they benefitted from the individual attention they received in grinds and the lack of distractions:

> You learn more in grinds like.

> Because it's one-to-one tuition.

> … It's not a whole class like.

> You don't have any distractions. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

> You're not given the one on one here, there's 30 others in the class and you're sitting there going I don't know, that's why you need grinds. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Some students, however, were critical of grinds schools, feeling they were overpriced and that students could learn by paying attention in school or spending more time on study:

> My Spanish woman [grinds teacher], it's me and another girl, we're friends and we went to her last year as well. We do an hour and a half and it's €50 each week for two of us, so she gets €100 for doing

an hour and a half and she's a Spanish lady, ok so she speaks her own language. At least my Irish teacher only charges €30, had to go to college and earn that. She's Spanish, obviously she had to learn English but, you know, that is so much money so my dad is going like what €80 a week for my grinds. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

I do grinds in [Grinds School] and they're terrible, there's 90 people.

Yeah it is, even though the [Grinds School] is a brilliant school … they're just giving you notes, it's like these stupid revision courses, it's like maybe go to refresh your memory but they're just giving you notes so you could just be home studying. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Ah no, it's a waste of money.

… If you need grinds, it means you're not paying attention in school. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

2.4.5 Teaching and Learning in a High Stakes Environment

High stakes testing can directly and powerfully influence how teachers teach and how students learn (Madaus, 1988). When asked about their views on the teaching methods used in sixth year, the students interviewed had very clear ideas about the most helpful styles of teaching and the ways in which they learned most effectively. As at junior cycle, many spoke about active teaching methods and wished for greater discussion and interaction in class (for similar student accounts internationally, see EPPI, 2005; Gorard and See, 2010; Osler, 2010; Lumby, 2011). Students were positive about teachers who made subjects more 'relevant', in ways that they could 'relate to':

Some subjects like Business, if you relate it to like what's happening at the time … then it's more interesting because it's more relevant. And then in kind of science subjects, in Chemistry or that, when you do the experiments kind of, they're more, better because you understand them more, it's a little bit different than just sitting learning it. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Students responded well to discussions and debates during classes and saw this as an effective style of teaching and learning:

> In Geography she always lets us talk.
>
> *Interviewer*: Does it make it more interesting?
>
> Yeah, because they try and draw it out of you instead of her telling you what to do, they try and make you think about it yourself. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

There was a fundamental contradiction, however, between student views on more active teaching and learning and their increasingly instrumentalist view of preparation for the Leaving Certificate exam. By sixth year, many students interviewed felt that teaching to the test was the signal of a good lesson, one where exam preparation was prioritised with the provision of 'revision notes' (Dawson Street, mixed coed school). Going through previous exam papers and preparing questions were considered most helpful in preparing for the impending exams:

> Doing questions, working, like if you're doing the questions out of the paper, that's the best way I'd say of getting stuff revised. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)
>
> Doing more like exam questions and got us ready for the wording of the exam, the questions in the exam.
>
> Like exam technique and stuff like that. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Frequent test-based assessments were thus preferred as some students felt this encouraged or 'forced' them to study and keep motivated:

> And they need to give more frequent tests I'd say to kind of keep people on their toes.
>
> … Yeah, if you have a test you'll study but if you don't, it's harder to get down and do it. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

> Like she give us revision tests once a month and stuff and stuff like
> that kind of forces you to study, doesn't just leave it up to you. (Har-
> ris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Another group of girls in the latter school emphasised the contribution of
regular testing to their learning and had actually requested that tests be
given more frequently in class:

> I've asked teachers before to give like tests on stuff we've done and
> they've refused and it's like 'why would you not?'. (Harris Street,
> girls' school, middle-class intake)

Among many students, teachers were rated by how closely they stuck to
the curriculum, and students disliked when teachers 'veered off' the cur-
riculum, or at least those aspects of the curriculum which were likely to
'come up' on the exam paper:

> Like some teachers kind of go off the point sometimes and just waf-
> fle on about pointless things that isn't on the course and stuff. (Fig
> Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

> Like my Home Ec[onomics] teacher, she comes in and she knows
> how to cook, she tells us all about how to make mayonnaise today,
> that's not on our course, we don't care … it's like too much stuff to
> do. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

It is worth noting that this exam-focused approach was more evident
among students in schools serving more middle-class populations. This
is perhaps not surprising as many educational sociologists attribute the
higher educational performance of middle-class students to the more ef-
fective way in which these young people (and their parents) can success-
fully navigate a route through the educational system (see, from contrast-
ing perspectives, Bourdieu, 1984; Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). Students
are thus acting rationally in choosing to pursue the kind of learning
which is rewarded in the assessment system.

    In spite of the emphasis on having to 'cover' the curriculum, students
tended to value highly teachers who had an appropriate pace of instruc-
tion and who were willing to explain material that students were finding
difficult:

> *Interviewer*: What would you say makes a good lesson?
>
> They [teachers] don't push you too hard.
>
> It's [that] they're letting you work at your own pace. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

> *Interviewer*: What's a good teacher?
>
> Someone who makes you understand it.
>
> Someone that explains it.
>
> … And if you don't understand they don't just say it again, they change it.
>
> Someone who is interested in it.
>
> Someone who can explain things in more than one way.
>
> If you say like I don't understand that, someone that can rephrase it.
>
> Or apply it to something in real life that you'll understand.
>
> There's no point in having a teacher that they know it all but they can't explain it to you. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Many of these students were aware of the difference between teachers who covered the curriculum and those who ensured that the curriculum was understood:

> *Interviewer*: What makes a good lesson or a good class?
>
> Down to earth teacher.
>
> … She can get in contact with you like. And she'll talk and she's not just flying though things like. If everyone understands in the classroom then you can continue. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Students also emphasised the nature of day-to-day interaction with their teachers, pointing to the importance of a positive and 'caring' classroom environment and of teachers who were approachable ('helpful', 'easy to

talk to', 'friendly', Fig Lane, middle-class coed school) and had a good sense of humour:

> *Interviewer*: What do you think makes a good teacher?
>
> If they have a good personality like and if they don't take things too seriously you know.
>
> … Most of the young teachers they have the craic with you and everything, you wouldn't have to be pure serious in class like. (Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)
>
> One that actually cares about the students, whether or not they do well in their exams as opposed to just going in for the forty minutes, teaching and then leaving.
>
> Yeah, they have to have patience as well. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Such positive interaction was not seen as occurring at the expense of an orderly classroom environment, with many students seeing effective teachers as ones who could minimise 'messing' while at the same time being approachable:

> To be honest I'd prefer to keep the teacher and have that teacher able to control the class and keeping it nice and quiet and enjoyable. …
>
> We have a Maths teacher now. She can control the class and she's a very good teacher like. She has the odd joke and that. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)
>
> Being able to control the class, because there's a few teachers now that don't have control over us. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

The importance of an orderly classroom maintained without constantly 'giving out' to students was evident in previous years (see Smyth et al., 2007), with many early leavers emphasising the constant disruption of learning in their classrooms (Byrne and Smyth, 2010).

   In sum, sixth year students valued active learning methods and clear explanation, factors which they had emphasised at junior cycle level (see

Smyth et al., 2007). However, by sixth year, a more instrumental approach was evident among students, particularly more middle-class students intending to go on to higher education. These students saw good teaching as 'teaching to the test' and ensuring adequate preparation for the Leaving Certificate exam. At the same time, students continued to stress the importance of the quality of relations with their teachers as key to successful learning. Students appeared to respond to teachers who they felt trusted them, gave them more responsibility, 'cared' about them, were patient with them, encouraged them to do their best and treated them with respect (see Hallinan, 2008, on the US context). The nature of teacher-student relations in the case-study schools is explored in the following section.

2.5 Student-Teacher Relations

The previous section has indicated the importance of positive teacher-student relations to student views of what constitutes good teaching. The significant contribution of longitudinal research is that it allows us to explore changes in the experiences and attitudes of the same group of young people as they move through the schooling system. Figure 2.15 shows the extent to which students report positive and/or negative interaction with their teachers over time. The measure of positive interaction is based on the frequency ('very often', 'often', 'a few times' and 'never') in the two weeks prior to the survey of being praised for work, being praised for an answer in class, being praised for written work, being asked questions in class, and asking questions in class; the measure runs from 1 (low levels) to 4 (high levels). The measure of negative interaction is based on the frequency of being given out to for misbehaviour and being given out to for work not being completed or done properly; the measure runs from 1 (low levels) to 4 (high levels). It should be noted that these trends relate to those who remained in school until sixth year; higher levels of negative interaction were evident during junior cycle among those who subsequently dropped out of school (see Byrne and Smyth, 2010). At the start of first year, positive interaction is much more prevalent than negative interaction. During the course of junior cycle, positive interaction becomes less frequent and negative interaction

more frequent. Positive interaction declines somewhat over the transition to senior cycle but plateaus in sixth year. Negative interaction declines over the transition to senior cycle with a further decrease in sixth year.

Figure 2.15: Positive and negative teacher-student interaction across year groups
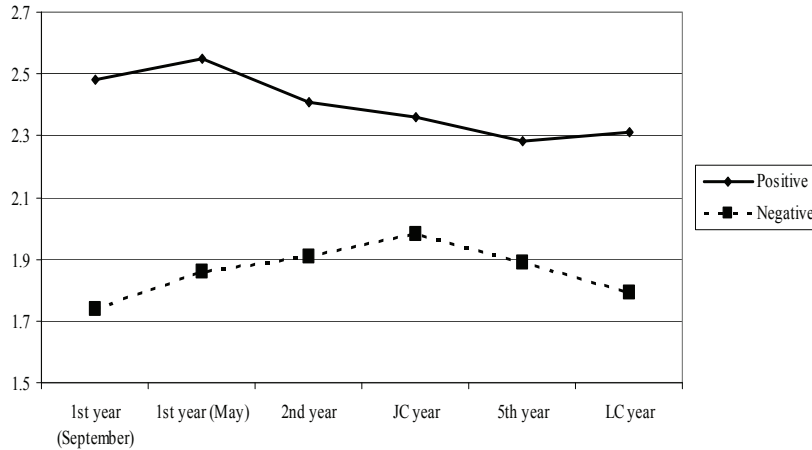
Among sixth year students, negative interaction is more prevalent among male students, those who had the lowest Junior Certificate scores and those who did not take Transition Year. LCA students report the highest level of positive interaction but also the highest level of negative interaction, reflecting a greater degree of student-teacher interaction in their smaller classes. The frequency of positive and negative interaction is found to vary across individual schools. As might be expected, students who report more positive interaction with teachers tend to be more positive about school and their teachers (with correlations of 0.37 and 0.31 respectively). Those who report more negative interaction are less likely to like school or their teachers (with correlations of -0.22 and -0.26 respectively). It should be noted, however, that these relationships are not very strong, indicating that attitudes to school and teachers are also influenced by factors other than recent teacher-student interaction.

Analyses of the student cohort at junior cycle level indicated the strong interrelationship between negative teacher-student interaction and student misbehaviour, with a cycle of students 'acting up' and teachers 'giving

out' emerging for some students (Smyth et al., 2007). After the 'honey-moon' period of first year, misbehaviour levels increase for both boys and girls moving into second year. Boys' misbehaviour levels decline between second year and fifth year, plateauing in sixth year (Figure 2.16). In contrast, girls' misbehaviour levels are relatively stable between second and fifth year, declining somewhat in sixth year. Over the whole of the schooling career, boys report higher levels of misbehaviour than girls.

Figure 2.16: Self-reported misbehaviour across year groups by gender
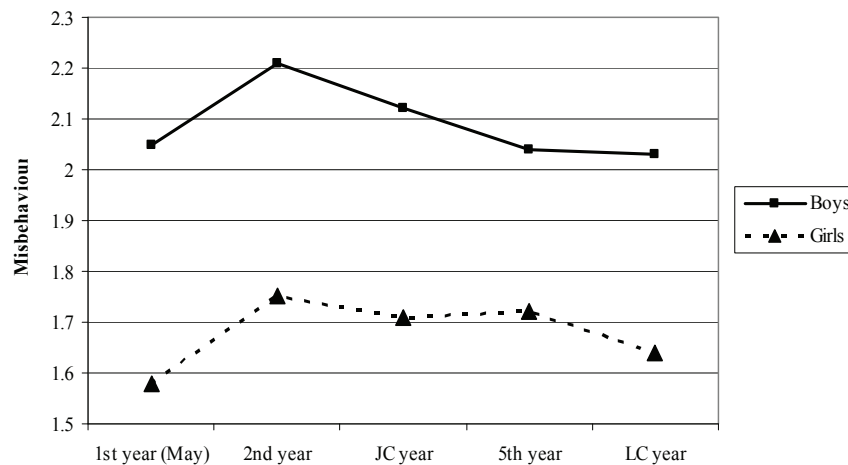
In sixth year, misbehaviour levels appear to be a response to academic difficulties for some students; misbehaviour levels are highest among those who achieved the lowest Junior Certificate grades and lowest among the highest-performing students. Students who feel the pace of instruction is too fast also have higher misbehaviour levels than other students, perhaps signalling frustration for those students who cannot keep up in class. Misbehaviour also seems to be a response to lack of engagement in the curriculum since students who are not satisfied with the programme or the subjects they are taking have higher misbehaviour levels than other students. Misbehaviour levels are higher among LCA students than among those taking LCE or LCVP, though this reflects the inclusion of more disengaged students into the programme rather than the impact of LCA. Misbehaviour levels vary across individual schools

but tend to be higher in working-class schools. Students with higher misbehaviour levels are more negative about school and their teachers (with correlations of -0.31 and -0.28 respectively). Misbehaviour is strongly related to negative interaction with teachers (with a correlation of 0.63), indicating the persistence into senior cycle of a pattern of 'acting up' and 'being given out to' among some students.

This analysis shows trends in the reported levels of positive and negative interaction with teachers over the course of second-level education. Sixth year students were asked to compare for themselves their treatment by teachers with what they had experienced in fifth year. Almost half (49 per cent) reported their teachers were 'about the same', 23 per cent found them 'more easy-going' while 28 per cent found them 'stricter'. This compares with fifth year responses where students were evenly divided between finding the teachers about the same or more easy-going than in third year, with only a minority of students finding teachers stricter.

Many students reported being given greater responsibility in sixth year and felt their teachers' attitudes to them had changed. Students felt it was up to them whether they did enough work – 'it's more you have to take responsibility for it' (Fig Lane, middle-class coed school) – and some felt 'a lot more independent as well, they [teachers] leave it up to yourself' (Wattle Street, mixed boys' school). Teachers gave them less direction and assumed they could take responsibility for their own learning:

> There's a lot more emphasis on yourself, you have to do a lot of the work, you're not really told exactly what to do. Usually last year if you had a test coming up, they'd be like study this chapter, this chapter, this chapter.

> You have to do it yourself now. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Many students found that when they were in sixth year teachers treated them with respect and talked to them like adults, reflecting their maturity. Students felt that teachers were more understanding and that there was less emphasis on being 'given out to' (in keeping with the patterns shown in Figure 2.15):

> They just see us more as people now, they're not always kind of giving out to us.
>
> … Like I don't know maybe it's just me but like I can walk into class like half an hour late and no one really cares. I'll just be like oh sorry I was at a meeting and that will be like ok.
>
> … Whereas if you did that in first year you'd be dead. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

> They are grand this year they treat us older as well like. You know they don't give out to us as much you know. If we don't have the work done they respect that we don't have the work done like. If we have a reason like, you know.
>
> … Yeah, they are much more understanding this year. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Many students appeared to enjoy the responsibility given to them by their teachers and felt their teachers were more trusting of them (characterised as 'mutual respect' by one group of girls in Belmore Street school):

> Most of them like, they say to you like it's your choice if you learn. But like they do like treat you like as an adult like instead of the way they treat like the first and third years. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Others felt that their teachers took account of the stress involved in preparing for the Leaving Certificate exam and treated them accordingly:

> They treat you more like an adult, they wouldn't treat you like a child, because they know you're probably under enough stress as it is but like you get on well with them, decent enough like. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Students appreciated the fact that during sixth year the teachers put the onus on them to do homework or study. Some students recognised that this approach was preparing them for how post-school education would be:

> They're not pushing you to study as such for like the Leaving Cert because they're kind of saying you should be doing it under your own steam at this stage because next year like in college you won't

> have anyone to push you. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

> They treat you as more of an adult, they talk to you on the same level…

> … Rather than talking down to you.

> … It was more like [last year] get that homework done and, now it's just like 'girls you should get that homework done but at the end of the day, it's your journey, you know, your life'. It's like college, you know, it's good. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

As students approached the exams, some reported being allowed increased input with regard to what and how they learned. In some cases, where students had covered their course content, teachers allowed them to decide what to do in class:

> Since we finished the course like, they ask us what we want to revise. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

> If the teacher was going to revise something, some teachers might ask if the whole class wanted some topic revised or something, she might go back over it again. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Many students noted reduced levels of homework in sixth year[1] and recognised that teachers were allowing time for studying. Some, however, felt they responded better to pressure from teachers and were concerned that they were being given too much responsibility:

> You wouldn't really get homework.

> They give you time to study, they don't really give you homework.

> You don't really get any work at all, they just sort of leave you to your own devices.

---

[1] The majority (63 per cent) of all sixth year students felt that they were getting more homework in sixth year than in fifth year. However, a significant rebalancing was also evident in the amount of time devoted to homework and study (see Chapter Three).

> Teachers don't really mind, like you know it's up to you.
>
> It's up to yourself.
>
> Which is pretty bad because you can't really work unless the teachers are pressuring you. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

For some students, therefore, this lack of pressure meant that they did not work as hard as they felt they should:

> It's much more optional … teachers are kind of like oh well we'll give you these exam questions, if you want to do them you can hand them up. If you don't, they don't care. It's kind of up to you more this year.
>
> … You don't do as much as you should. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

In contrast, other students found that increased autonomy actually motivated them as they wanted to live up to the high expectations set by their teachers:

> Our Irish teacher, he doesn't really say anything if you don't do the homework.
>
> … You almost feel disappointed if you don't give it to him like. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Although interactions between teachers and students are reported as being more positive than negative, some groups of students felt that teachers were still far too strict. A particular concern was teachers' emphasis on enforcing what were seen as arbitrary or trivial rules:

> Too strict.
>
> Giving out over nothing.
>
> Don't have a sense of humour. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)
>
> It's over stupid things like if you're wearing a fleece like because it's cold you have to take it off because it's not the school jacket. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

> If you do the smallest, slight thing wrong and they go cracked at you.
> (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Although the reported frequency of negative interaction did not vary markedly between working-class and other schools, students in many working-class schools characterised their teachers as having a lack of respect for them. Respect on the part of teachers for students was seen as a fundamental prerequisite for students showing respect to teachers (see Hemmings, 2003, on 'fighting for respect' in US urban high schools). In the absence of such respect from teachers, students described an escalating pattern of negative interaction between teachers and students:

> Picking on every single detail like.
>
> Small bit of noise and they make a big deal.
>
> … Yeah, you'd make even more noise then like. (Hay Street, coed school, working-class school)

Some described how their teachers addressed them as 'you' or by their surname which they felt was disrespectful:

> I'd be nice to the teachers if they'd be nice to me but if they are not going to be nice to me I'm not going to be nice to them you know what I mean.
>
> Like calling you 'you' and all that.
>
> … Hey you.
>
> Calling you by [sur]name or something. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Students from the same working-class school also discussed how they felt their teachers lacked respect and 'looked down' on them:

> *Interviewer*: What do you think makes a bad teacher?
>
> When they look down their nose at you and like that, make you feel that you are less, you know what I mean.
>
> It does my head in. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

The second-level education system in Ireland has been described as hierarchical, with an inequality in power and control between teachers and students (see Lynch and Lodge, 2002). During the junior cycle, students in the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study cohort were particularly negative about the exercise of what they deemed to be arbitrary rules and unfair treatment (see, for example, Smyth et al., 2007). By senior cycle, some students felt that this hierarchical approach was even more inappropriate, given their maturity and status as (almost) adults:

> In some ways I think they should respect you more, even though, yeah, they are your elders, they're older than you like.
>
> They have to show us respect too if they want respect.
>
> Like you go into fifth year and a teacher turns around to you and tells you to shut up. By the time you're in fifth year you're 16, you're not too far from being an adult. You're not going to turn around and go take it. You're just going to go what are you saying to me like.
>
> …They want to be spoken to with respect, so do we …
>
> We're not animals or anything like that.
>
> Yeah, they treat you like animals after that.
>
> Yeah.
>
> Shut up and sit down, don't open your mouth like you know. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

Although this pattern was more evident in working-class schools, a number of students across many of the schools pointed to instances of unfair treatment. Firstly, some students felt that teachers did not provide sufficient encouragement to academically weaker students and tended to 'look down' on or ignore them (an issue also highlighted in the retrospective accounts of young people who did not go on to higher education, see McCoy et al., 2010):

> Because they're just like, you could ask for help and they'd be just like, they ignore you, if you're not brilliant they don't help you. I'm telling you, that's the truth.

> … About four or five of us [are] doing ordinary level in a subject and the honours would be doing, like there'd be other girls in the class doing honours and…

> They'd [the teachers would] ignore us.

> And then they'd just give us sheets and say well do them questions, and they think that's gonna be alright but sure we never understand it. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Secondly, some students felt that they were labelled on the basis of mis-behaviour earlier in their schooling career, with the result that some teacher held 'a grudge' against them:

> A new day, a new start, that's the way I look at life, Miss. It's not fair, the school teachers don't look at it that way. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

> Because I used to be in trouble … like when I was in first year and second year and they think because I was like that then, that I'm still like that now. So it would be constant like, anything happens they call me like … Like if I'm in late or something I get suspended and all for the slightest little thing. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

2.6 Conclusions

Sixth year students are broadly satisfied with the programmes they take, with higher satisfaction levels found among Leaving Certificate Applied students. Satisfaction levels were higher where students liked the subjects they were taking, felt they were doing well academically and taking a course that would lead them into a desired post-school pathway. However, the evidence points to a somewhat less satisfactory experience for students who have not been doing as well academically, who reported more negative views of the programmes they were taking. In addition, many students criticised the reliance on a terminal examination and referred to the pressure of workload in the exam year, an issue which is discussed further in the following chapter.

Students were generally positive too about the subjects they were taking, subjects which were seen as having both intrinsic value (being

enjoyable and interesting) and extrinsic worth (leading to further educational or employment opportunities). Those with lower levels of prior achievement were, however, more critical of the subjects they were taking. In keeping with the pattern in fifth year, a significant minority felt that the subjects they had chosen were different in content and workload than what they had anticipated. In spite of high levels of subject satisfaction, over half of the cohort pointed to one or more subjects which they regretted taking and a similar proportion indicated subjects they would have preferred to take. There is some indication that having taken Transition Year is associated with lower levels of regret about subject choice, reflecting the opportunity to sample subjects in many TY programmes (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011).

Sixth year students vary not only in the programmes and subjects they take but in the levels at which they study subjects. In this chapter, we have focused on level take-up in Irish, English and Maths, and explored the factors shaping take-up. In Chapter Four, we will explore the number of higher level subjects taken in the Leaving Certificate exam. Students differed in the extent to which they saw the level they were taking as the outcome of 'choice'. In many cases, sixth years felt that the level followed on naturally from that taken at junior cycle, with the only change involving 'dropping down' from higher to ordinary level in response to subject difficulty and/or teacher advice. In some instances even, subject level was seen as shaped by decisions made by the school or teacher as far back as first year. There were differences across and within the case-study schools in the degree of choice afforded to students regarding the level taken. When asked specifically about selecting the Maths level, students saw Maths teachers as the main source of information and advice, although parents (particularly mothers) also played a very significant role.

Sixth year students were asked about the kinds of teaching methods used in their classes. A clear contrast was evident between LCA classes, which were characterised by more interactive group-work and project-work, and LCE/LCVP classes, which were characterised by more teacher-led interaction, use of homework and an emphasis on practising exam papers. For LCE/LCVP students, the 'Mock' exam assumed an important role in almost all of the case-study schools, providing feedback to students

on their progress, familiarising them with the exam layout and acting as a 'wake-up call' to those who had not been studying. The presence of the impending exam also prompted significant numbers of students to take private tuition outside school. Students generally feel that they learn most from student-led, interactive learning which they consider makes subjects more interesting and helps them to think independently. However, there is a tension between this view and an increased instrumentality emerging among students, especially those in more middle-class schools and in more academically-oriented mixed intake schools. These latter students prefer teachers who focus on the exam and provide regular tests and revision exercises, expressing impatience with teachers who provided a broader perspective or went 'off message'.

At the same time, students were clear that positive interaction with their teachers was key to effective learning. Thus, students respond best to teachers who are patient with them, have an interest in the subject and care about them. Most sixth year students felt that they had been given greater responsibility for their own learning and felt that teachers treated differently in light of their maturity. Negative interaction in the form of reprimands or 'being given out to' was less prevalent in sixth year than in fifth year. However, some students, particularly those in working-class schools, highlighted the lack of mutual respect between teachers and students, which contributed to a cycle of being reprimanded and, in turn, students acting out.

In talking about teaching and learning in sixth year, the presence of the Leaving Certificate exam looms large. In the following chapter, we explore the workload associated with exam preparation and the potential consequences for students in the form of stress.

Chapter Three

ACADEMIC STRESS AND THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE

3.1 Introduction

A certain amount of stress is part of everyday life and has some positive effects; however, excessive amounts or persistent stress have been found to have significant negative effects on physical and psychological health (Sommerfield et al., 2000). International research consistently shows that assessments and exams are a significant source of stress and worry for students within second-level education (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009). In this chapter we examine student workload and how this impacts on student stress levels. The chapter is divided into two main sections: we firstly examine student workload in sixth year and focus on how students compare schoolwork in sixth year to fifth year across Leaving Certificate programmes. We assess student opinion on balancing schoolwork, homework and studying in the lead-up to the exams, and investigate the amount of time students spend on homework in sixth year across the twelve case-study schools. Secondly, this chapter examines stress among sixth year students focussing on the main drivers of stress such as the students themselves, their teachers or their parents.

3.2 Student Workload: Schoolwork, Homework and Studying

In order to examine the potential causes of stress among students, we asked how they felt sixth year compared with fifth year and explored the main sources of pressure in keeping up with schoolwork, homework and studying. In fifth year, students reported an escalation of the workload

and study demands (Smyth and Calvert, 2011). Figure 3.1 highlights how 67 per cent of students felt that schoolwork and 64 per cent of students felt that homework were even 'harder' and took up 'more of their time' in sixth year compared with fifth year. Further analysis of students who felt that sixth year is 'about the same' or 'easier' and 'spend less time on homework' shows that they were generally students participating in the LCA programme, a group who had also reported a more manageable workload in fifth year (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011).

Figure 3.1: Comparison of schoolwork and homework with fifth year
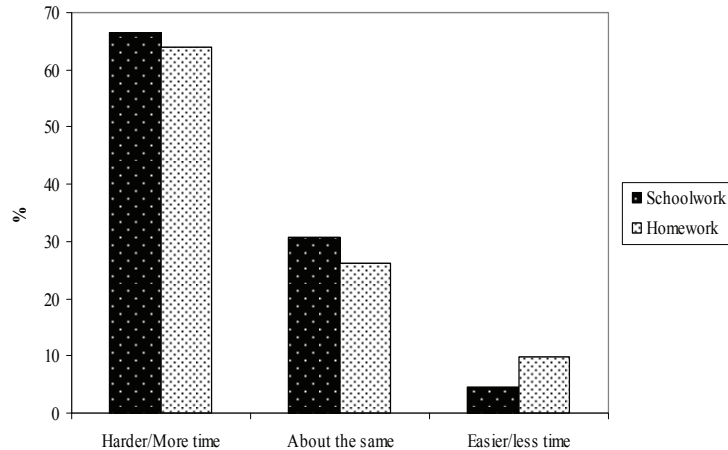
In interviews with students, it also became clear that students found sixth year harder than fifth year, with many noting the extra pressure of having to study as well as having to complete schoolwork and homework:

> Well there's less homework but it's kind of more studying this year, it's harder because there's kind of more pressure on because of the Leaving Cert actually coming this year, do you know what I mean, rather than last year.

> … It's a lot harder this year, I think. More work like.

> *Interviewer*: In what way?

> You have to try and balance study with homework.

> *Interviewer*: Do you get more homework this year?

> About the same as last year. Yeah, then you do study on top of that. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Similarly, students in Barrack Street noted the greater challenge in balancing schoolwork, homework and studying in sixth year:

> *Interviewer*: How do you feel this year compares with last year?
>
> Harder.
>
> *Interviewer*: In what way?
>
> Like study wise you have to study more and learn more things. Do more homework. Do more. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

One student in Belmore Street put it simply: 'Too much homework, too much everything. We are wrecked' (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake). The overall workload appeared to overwhelm these students who noted the lack of time to get everything done:

> *Interviewer*: What's the main source of pressure do you think?
>
> The work load, I think. And the study, like it's trying to fit in study after your home work because you have so much like… There's hardly any time. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

For students in Dawson Street taking the LCA programme, however, a different pattern emerged with many suggesting it was 'easier' this year with less homework than in junior cycle:

> Don't get much homework.
>
> *Interviewer*: Do you not?
>
> No.
>
> We don't get none at all really.
>
> Just like learning, revising.
>
> Just learn whatever you do. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Figure 3.2: Time spent on homework and study per weekday evening
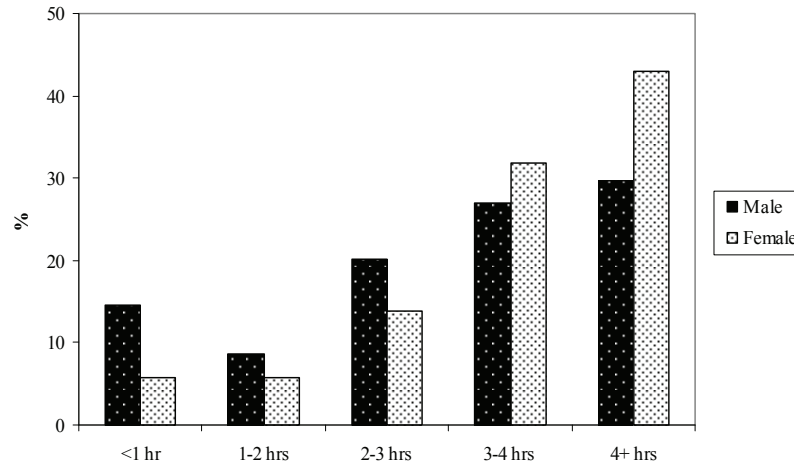
When we examine the amount of time students reported spending on homework each evening, significant gender differences emerge (even controlling for Leaving Certificate programme). Figure 3.2 shows that over 40 per cent of females are spending four or more hours a night on homework compared with just under 30 per cent of males.

LCA students spend much less time on homework/study than the other Leaving Certificate groups and there are significant differences by social class, with lower levels of time spent on homework among young people from semi/unskilled manual and non-employed backgrounds. Overall, higher performing groups of students (based on Junior Certificate results) spend more time on homework and study. Figure 3.3, which shows the percentage of students spending more than four hours per night on homework or studying, highlights variation by school. The amount of time appears to be related to the social class mix of the school but significant variation exists in the time spent on homework or study among schools with similar intakes. There is a clear social class gap but also some working-class schools (such as Dawes Point) with high values.

Figure 3.3: Proportion of students spending four or more hours on homework/study per evening by school
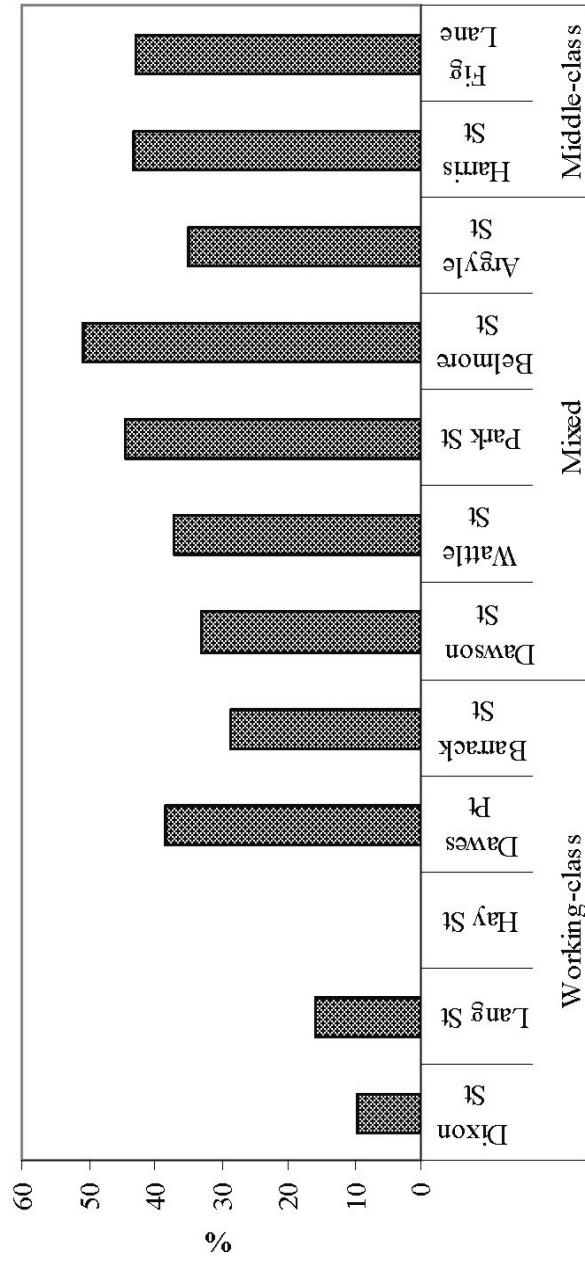
In the discussion so far, homework and study time have been combined. However, it is worth exploring how students are allocating their time between the two activities. Over a third (35 per cent) of sixth year students are spending broadly equal amounts of time on homework and study, 41 per cent are spending more time on homework than study while just under a quarter (24 per cent) are spending more time on study than homework. Students were asked whether they found it easy to balance homework and study; over a quarter (28 per cent) found it 'easy' or 'relatively easy' but 48 per cent found it 'difficult' and a further 24 per cent found it 'very difficult'. Difficulties in balancing homework and study are evident across the spectrum of student achievement (as measured by Junior Certificate grades).

During the qualitative interviews, it became clear that many students availed of the opportunity to participate in supervised study sessions after school which may have influenced the amount of time reported by students (above). Some students welcomed this facility as it provided a chance to get their homework and study done without distractions. However, it could sometimes lead to a ten to twelve hour school day. Some students in Park Street, for example, appeared to spend up to four hours in supervised study after school where they could do their homework and have study time:

> You can get your homework done, I do double study, you get your homework done in the first one and then you can study in the second one.
>
> *Interviewer*: So how long would that last?
>
> The first study is an hour and a half and then the second study is two hours.
>
> … *Interviewer*: This year?
>
> Well, you see you have the supervised study in the school so it's four hours after school, four hours in there. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Similarly, students in Argyle Street and Fig Lane enjoyed getting all their work done without any distractions before they went home:

> If I went home I'd be watching TV for an hour eating my dinner or whatever, whereas when you come into supervised study straight after school, you have to do it like, you've nothing else to do like. And you get it all done then or whatever, it's grand. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

> I think it's good in the study hall because they're supervising us. So you're not actually able to do anything else so you kind of have to get it done. Like I can't study at home, there's so much things to do at home, I get distracted so easily. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Other students, however, recognised that it was important to take a break after school and relax before starting to study again in the evening:

> I just find sometimes if you are in school you prefer just to go home and just relax for a while rather than going to it straight away. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

3.3 Stress Among Sixth Year Students

In the questionnaire, sixth year students were presented with a set of statements and asked whether they experienced these feelings of stress more or less than usual in the few weeks prior to the survey. These items are based on a modified version of the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1978), designed to reflect current stress. This scale was previously used in relation to sixth year students in 1994. Hannan et al.'s (1996) study indicated that exam pressure played an important role in student stress levels, with particularly high levels found among academically engaged female students. Further analysis (Smyth, 1999) indicated that certain aspects of school climate could influence student stress levels. Among both Junior and Leaving Certificate students, those experiencing greater levels of negative interaction with teachers and with peers (in the form of bullying) reported significantly higher stress levels as did those in schools with a strong academic orientation.

Figure 3.4 shows the profile of sixth year student responses to these statements. The levels of stress found are comparable to those found among Leaving Certificate students in 1994 and markedly higher than

the levels found among Junior Certificate students or young adults (compare Hannan et al., 1996). As in the earlier period, strong gender differences are evident in the patterns found. On four of the six items, female students are reporting significantly higher stress levels than male students. Fifty-five per cent of female students report that they feel constantly under strain 'more' or 'much more than usual' compared with 37 per cent of male students. Female students are also more likely than male students to report losing sleep over worry, losing confidence in themselves and having problems concentrating.

The six items were used to form a scale of current stress. This scale is reliable with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.79. Table 3.1 presents a multivariate model of the factors affecting overall stress levels, focusing on the main processes found to have an influence. A multilevel model is used to take account of the clustering of students within schools, since young people attending the same school are likely to share certain experiences. A positive coefficient indicates that the factor is associated with higher stress levels while a negative coefficient indicates that a factor is associated with lower stress levels.

Figure 3.4: Current stress levels among sixth year students (% 'more than usual'/'less than usual')
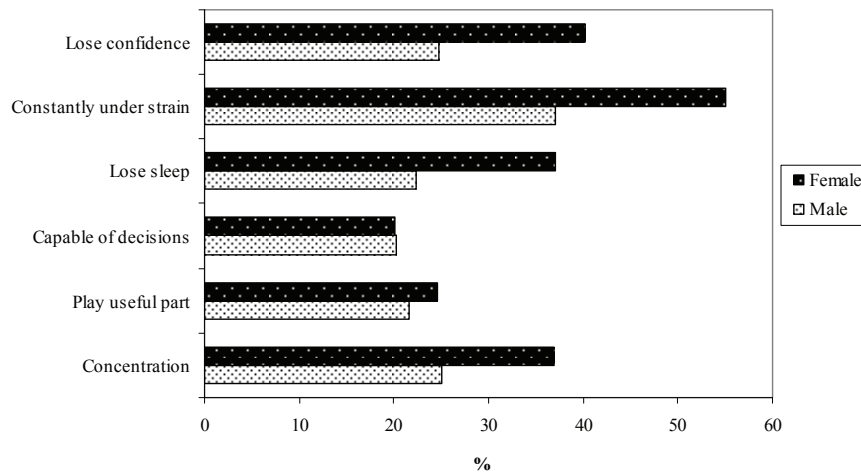
In keeping with Figure 3.4, female students have higher stress levels than male students, even controlling for a range of school experiences and prior achievement (Models 1 and 2). Stress levels are higher among

those in the highest sixty per cent of Junior Certificate achievement levels; this is likely to reflect the greater focus on doing well in the Leaving Certificate exam among this group. Variation in stress levels is likely to reflect the complexity of young people's personal situations and family lives; it is not surprising, therefore, that most of the variation is at the individual rather than the school level (see the variance terms in Table 3.1). However, certain aspects of the schooling process have a clear influence on student stress levels. In keeping with previous research (Hannan et al., 1996; Smyth, 1999), students who experience more positive interaction with their teachers have lower stress levels (Model 1). The effect of positive interaction is mediated through academic self-image, that is, the perceived capacity of the student to cope with schoolwork; in other words, positive interaction with teachers helps to reduce student stress levels because it reassures them about how they are getting on academically. Negative teacher-student interaction becomes significant and negative only when we take account of academic self-image (compare coefficients in models 1 and 2). This is somewhat surprising since it might be expected that students would feel under greater strain if they had negative relations with teachers; it may be that these students have 'withdrawn from the race' and are not experiencing the same exam-related stress as their peers. Students who had been suspended at some point in sixth year had somewhat higher stress levels (model 1) but this is related to lower academic self-images among this group. The quality of relations among students is also influential, with much higher levels of stress found among those who had experienced bullying in the two weeks prior to the survey.

Aspects of schoolwork are found to influence current stress levels. Students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme report lower stress levels than those taking LCE or LCVP (model 1). This is likely to reflect the way in which the emphasis on continuous assessment and project-work, described in the study by Banks et al. (2010), helps to re-engage young people with schoolwork. Model 2 shows that the effect of LCA is indeed due to enhanced views of their capacity to cope with schoolwork among the group. Chapter Two documented the significant number of students who expressed concern about the subject choices

Table 3.1: Multilevel regression model of the factors influencing current stress levels among sixth year students

	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	1.496	1.536
Background factors:		
Female	0.197**	0.145**
(Contrast: Male)		
Junior Certificate performance:		
2nd quintile	0.077	0.085
3rd quintile	0.163*	0.206**
4th quintile	0.196*	0.269***
Highest quintile	0.173*	0.326***
(Contrast: lowest quintile)		
School climate:		
Positive teacher-student interaction	-0.107**	–0.014
Negative teacher-student interaction	0.006	–0.069*
Experience of bullying	0.296***	0.289***
Ever suspended in 6th year	0.160‡	0.113
Schoolwork and curriculum:		
Taking LCA	-0.214‡	–0.051
(Contrast: Taking LCE/LCVP)		
Regret taking some subjects	0.120*	0.098*
Satisfaction with subjects taken:		
Satisfied	0.032	–0.038
Dissatisfied	0.186*	0.045
Very dissatisfied	0.353*	0.162
(Contrast: Very satisfied)		
Schoolwork harder in 6th than 5th year	0.078‡	0.064
(Contrast: Schoolwork easier or about the same)		
Would like help with schoolwork	0.143**	0.122**
Frequency of participation in sports within school (outside class-time):		
One or twice in past 2 weeks	-0.052	–0.043
Three or more times in past 2 weeks	-0.171**	–0.160**
Parental academic involvement	-0.014	–0.016
Too early to decide on future career	0.057**	0.042*

Academic self-image		−0.421***
School-level variance	0.006	0.005
Student-level variance	0.308***	0.284***
% variance explained:		
Schools	64.7	70.6
Students	18.7	25.1

Note: *** p<0.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ‡ p<.10.

they had made for senior cycle. Feeling that the subjects do not match students' interests or abilities is associated with higher stress levels; those who are dissatisfied with their subjects report higher stress levels as do those who regret having taken some of their Leaving Certificate subjects. Section 3.1 indicated that the majority of students report more challenging schoolwork in sixth year than in fifth year. These students tend to report higher stress levels, especially if they feel they need (but do not receive) additional help with their schoolwork.

More general aspects of students' lives impact on their stress levels. More frequent parental involvement in talking to students about how they are getting on in school is associated with reduced stress levels, although this effect becomes non-significant when other factors are taken into account. Students who take part in school-based sports on a more frequent basis (three or more times in the previous two weeks) have lower stress levels. Sixth year is a time when young people are making decisions about their future, a process which is described in Chapters Five and Six, and this process appears to impact on their stress levels. Students who agree with the statement that 'it is too early to decide what to do with the rest of my life' tend to have higher stress levels than others.

A key factor in influencing stress levels is a student's academic self-image, that is, the extent to which they feel capable of coping with schoolwork (Model 2, Table 3.1). Students who feel unable to cope with schoolwork have much higher stress levels; it appears therefore that difficulty with schoolwork is reflected in losing sleep over worry and feeling under strain. As indicated above, some of the processes influencing stress are mediated by academic self-image. Thus, positive teacher-student interaction enhances student capacity to cope with schoolwork

and therefore reduces stress. Dissatisfaction with the subjects studied reduces perceived capacity to cope with schoolwork and therefore increases stress levels.

3.3.1 Drivers of Stress

This section examines the main causes of stress for sixth year students. One of the key drivers of stress outlined by the students interviewed is the high stakes associated with the Leaving Certificate exam. Research in the UK shows that students regarded their GCSE exams as a highly significant juncture in life where, for the first time, their achievements and potential were measured and made publicly available as a label tagged to their self-identity (Denscombe, 2000). Similarly, the Leaving Certificate appears to constitute a fateful moment in young people's life trajectory. Students place enormous weight on their performance and results in envisaging their quality of life after leaving school. Similarly, students in this study emphasised the importance of the Leaving Certificate and in further discussions began to reveal that this stress is related to their own aspirations. In addition to this internal stress, students also highlighted the role of other people such as teachers and parents as stressors during sixth year.

In terms of the stress experienced by students, it is interesting to note that many students view the Leaving Certificate exam as the first exam that really matters in their lives. In the UK, Denscombe (2000) found that this pattern did not vary by social class and that all students regarded the GCSEs in this way. Similarly, the perceived importance of the Leaving Certificate did not vary across different social classes in Ireland, with the vast majority (93 per cent) of students in our study regarding it as 'important' or 'very important' to do well in the exams. Students were keen to distinguish between these exams and the Junior Certificate exams which they had taken two or three years earlier. One student, for example, compared the Junior Certificate to a 'table quiz' compared to the Leaving Certificate: 'It's a joke of a test compared to it [Leaving Certificate]' (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake). Other students felt that the Junior Certificate does not matter in later life unless you leave school early:

> The Junior Cert is very relaxed…

> This is really serious … nothing goes on your Junior Cert, well if you leave it might but if you're going all the way, it doesn't really. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Many of the student felt it was unfair that their entire senior cycle could be measured by just one week or even one day:

> One week and that's everything that could end up changing your life. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

> I feel like your whole life is determined on just one week like it's a bit, a bit of pressure. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Other students from Dawson Street and Lang Street stressed the importance of the Leaving Certificate in terms of their life chances:

> Because you're whole life depends on it.

> Yeah.

> Your future, if you don't do your Leaving you don't have anything. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

> It's the biggest exam you'll ever do in your life.

> They [teachers] said it's the hardest one as well. (Lang Street, coed school, working-class intake)

Students felt that the results of the Leaving Certificate are important for the rest of their lives, not just for the immediate post-school period:

> But it is important because like whatever job you are going to do, whether you are 40, you'll still need it if you are going for a job like. You still always need to show your results. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Many students reported feeling nervous about the approaching exams and being 'hopefully' ready for them when they arrive. Some had even greater concerns and were dreading the exams, feeling panicked and hav-

ing 'a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach when I think about it' (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake). Much of the internal stress among the students appeared to be connected to a lack of time and the realisation that there is 'not much time 'til your actual exam' added to the stress among students. This stress was associated with their own feelings of falling behind in their schoolwork in addition to feelings of 'leaving it too late' during sixth year and not keeping up with the pace of work (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake).

Research has previously shown that the level of stress experienced by students relates to their own aspirations and ability (Dencombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009), which are linked to their feelings of self-identity and self-worth. For some students in Harris Street, stress is associated with the realisation that so much work has to be done in a short period of time:

> You just kind of realise how much work really has to get done so just like, [it] dawned on me, 'oh god, there's so much to do', so think it's a lot more stressful. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Many of these students with college-level expectations are stressed not about passing their exams but that they will not get their first course choice:

> I'm dreading it [exams].
>
> Change every day, sometimes I'd be so panicked, I really want my first choice and other days I'm like ah sure it doesn't matter.
>
> Yeah, because I really want my first choice and it's high points.
>
> Yeah, we've the same first choice so. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Others feared their own disappointment if they did not get what they had applied for in college:

> I don't want to panic in case I don't get the points because then I'll be really disappointed, I don't want to be disappointed after my Leaving Cert. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Some suggested that exam preparation as early as fifth year would help them now as they approach their exams:

> You don't think about it [the Leaving Certificate exams] when you're in fifth year at all, you should be doing exam papers and stuff in school but you don't do any of that. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Similarly, students in Fig Lane, another middle-class school, discussed how they were already showing signs of stress and felt that they would become increasingly stressed as the exams approach:

> I know I definitely will be stressed coming up close to it and I know it starts in basically a month … I think it's incredibly stressful, oh I'm just so stressed about it. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class itnake)

It would seem that failure to achieve their expectations (their first choice) would result in negative esteem judgements for these students. For some students, the fear of failure is so great that they place enormous pressure on themselves causing panic, often limiting the amount of work they can do:

> It's all I want, there's always back ways in and everything but it's just, when you really, really want it, it can make you panicky about it but I can't really panic, if I'm not doing the work so. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Some students felt their stress was associated with their teachers' capacity to 'cover' the curriculum in time, an issue over which they had no control:

> You start panicking because you're afraid the teachers haven't covered everything.

> Because I know like in History I've got like an entire topic left to cover… so I'm kind of worried. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

This frustration with teachers was also evident among students from Belmore Street, who were concerned that courses had not been 'finished' in some subjects:

> Sometimes you feel like going 'oh my god like, do you realise how close the exams are like'. We haven't even finished our course in a

> lot of subjects and we have like another book and a half to go … that really frustrates me, because there's no point in cramming it. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

These comments reflect concerns expressed by fifth year students who emphasised the level of detail required in many of the Leaving Certificate subjects (Smyth and Calvert, 2011).

Interestingly, in Barrack Street, a working-class girls' school, students' desire to do well in the exams appears to stem from the perceived low expectations of some of their teachers:

> Because I want to do well and get a good job.

> I want to pass it like. It's not that I want to do well, I just want to pass it.

> Come back to him and tell him now we are good.

> Yeah, just rub it in his face, just say now I can, just to prove to him that I could do it. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Students are also concerned with how their results will be perceived by their peers. The fear of failing is not just related to their own self-worth but the esteem they have among their peers:

> If you fail it would be, you know, on your graduate night and everybody is going 'ah what did you get, did you pass or did you fail', you don't want to be having to say 'I failed', like even after doing it for what five years and saying at the end of it 'ah, I failed'. (Dixon Street, coed school, working-class school)

In addition to internal stress as described above, students also described how other people were 'giving them stress' (Denscombe, 2000), in particular, their teachers who they felt kept talking about the need to do well: 'Teachers are going on about the Leaving Cert the whole time and placing a lot of importance on it' (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake). In many ways, this group of students had a different perspective as to the significance of the exam to their teachers, who they noted overemphasised the importance of passing the Leaving Certificate:

> Teachers make out that if you fail the Leaving it's the end of the world or something. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

They argue that self-esteem can be achieved in alternative ways and not simply through achieving academically in the Leaving Certificate, views which contrasted with the majority of students who emphasised the 'high stakes' nature of the exam:

> There's something for everybody.

> Yeah.

> Even if you don't pass your exams. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students from Barrack Street felt that each of their subject teachers was trying to frighten them about the importance of passing their exam:

> They are making you feel it's one of the most frightening things you are ever going to do … Like every subject, if you don't pass English, your Leaving Cert is gone, if you don't pass Maths, your Leaving Cert, you don't have a Leaving Cert. So they'd have like, nearly every teacher is telling us the same thing.

> … So they are trying to frighten us really, aren't they? (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Some students noted that the teachers were themselves stressed about covering enough material for the forthcoming exams and passing this stress onto the students. Students felt that teachers emphasised the proximity to the exams as a way of getting students to stop talking or as a reprimand for being late:

> They [teachers] are stressing.

> Yeah, every day. You need to know this, you need to know this.

> Basically they say it's 11 weeks stop talking, or girls it's 11 weeks, why are you late? (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

They also felt that their teachers should give them more encouragement instead of putting more pressure on them and reminding them of the work they had yet to do:

> [Teachers] just tell us how bad we are getting on instead of how good we are getting on, you know what I mean. That's all they do.

> We are not doing enough and all like.

> That's what they always say.

> It wrecks your head. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

This stress projected by their teachers appeared to impact on students' own stress levels:

> It's a lot more stressful I think this year, just all talking about time and how close we are to the exams, and just all work and pressure I think.

> Yeah, there's a lot of pressure on us this year. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Students were particularly frustrated at the assumption by teachers that they would work every evening and weekend with little time for leisure activities:

> They don't realise that we have so many subjects they just think of their subject and you have to do all the work or you end up with no life to go out to.

> It seems like that you have to spend hours just on their homework so they are piling on the homework and then we go home and we have like.

> No time to yourself.

> Even the weekends, they're telling you that you have to study the whole weekend as well. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

However, many students appeared to put this pressure on themselves where even during their free time or at weekends, school is 'still on their mind':

> You literally don't get a break from school work, I mean yeah like we can go out at weekends or whatever but…

> But it's still on your mind.

> It's always on your mind. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Other students discussed the guilt associated with having free time because of the looming presence of the Leaving Certificate exam:

> It's constant pressure, like you just don't get any relief from it. Because even at the weekends, if you are not doing something, you feel guilty and it's like you can't get away from it. Even if you have nothing to do, you'll still feel guilty like. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Students were unhappy about the lack of non-exam subjects in sixth year, such as P.E., which they felt would help them cope with the increased stress associated with exam preparation:

> We should have P.E., we were supposed to start P.E. this year on a Thursday but we never did. We used to always either get off, I didn't mind getting off, but we used to get off or else someone used to come in. But you need a bit of P.E., I think, just to get all the stress. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

In some cases, students felt that their parents were a source of pressure. A number of them mentioned being 'lectured' by their parents or relatives about studying or family members comparing them to siblings who had previously done well in the Leaving Certificate:

> I get lectured nearly every day at home from my parents, about how I should be studying, I need to be studying. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

> People are putting pressure, like comparing you maybe to someone else, you know.
>
> … My auntie does it all the time, she compares me with my sister all the time. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

In contrast, other students reported that they did 'not get much [pressure] from home now, it's more in the school' (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake).

The pressure to study and complete homework appears to impact on young people's relationships with their friends as they have no time to socialise and 'get to know people':

> I just hate this year because it's changing my personality and stuff. I don't have time to like get to know people. If something happened over the weekend, like nobody is ever going to find out because I'm too busy going to class, doing my homework, doing study like. And I find as well loads of my friends and stuff like that, you don't have a laugh anymore, sure you don't. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Teachers at this middle-class school also recognised the increased level of stress among sixth year students but felt that it varied with some students becoming far more stressed than others:

> I think there are some students who definitely exams stress them out more than others, I mean there's a sort of a level of stress that's ok, that we expect but there are one or two students who really find exams particularly difficult. (Harris Street, staff, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Another staff member in this school similarly felt that a small number of sixth year students would get very stressed in sixth year which would often manifest in 'tears' or the students giving a 'sharp rude answer that wouldn't really be in keeping with their personality, being unusually rude'. This was considered more common among females:

> I don't want to sound sexist but I think girls in general tend to be much more conscientious and they bring an awful lot of stress on themselves, you know. (Harris Street, staff, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Some teachers noticed how some of the more 'conscientious' and 'motivated' students had become 'run down', 'pale' or 'tired' looking during sixth year whereas other students 'every day just take it as it comes' (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake). One staff member attributed stress to the amount of studying but also to students' social and work lives which put increased pressure on their time:

> A lot of them really find the pressure to study, because a lot of them are working outside school as well. You see, they've social lives, very full social lives, a lot of them are working and that causes pressure, the pressure of time and where to study. (Harris Street, staff, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Staff in Wattle Street also spoke about how students' lives outside school led to increased stress for some students, particularly those with part-time jobs and cars:

> You find they have been working on Sunday and Saturday … And they are keeping these part-time jobs going and they are not able to cope with school work. And they are actually working more than 40 hours a week, it's not right, you know. But yet they are under pressure to have money for their cars, to keep their cars going, and to keep them in money for entertainment at the weekend. And that has an effect in the classroom. (Wattle Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake).

A staff member at Fig Lane felt that because of the material wealth of the students at the school, extra pressure was placed on them to do well and succeed in their careers:

> You know, the pressure can be sometimes on them to perform and get these points and so on, and if they are not getting those points, you know, there can be pressure on them, you know. But, yeah, I think the perception there is that young people have never had it so good and that is true in many ways. But I think there's a greater emotional pressure on them, one to succeed and get into good jobs, good careers, and two to be confident and to be, you know, centre of the party kind of thing and if they are not then why not and you know. So there are definitely issues around that. (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake)

They felt that this 'emotional pressure' resulted in increased cases of 'eating disorders … bulimia, anorexia, certainly depression' at the school (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake).

Other teachers, however, felt that stress was 'needed, you know, to motivate them to achieve' (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake) and that students would have to learn how to manage stress to prepare for life after school:

> We can't avoid stress all the time, you know, I think there's far too much hype about the stress for Leaving Cert … as I say you have to learn to take it in your stride. You know there's going to be a lot more obstacles and most of them are going to go to university and they'll have to do exams as well. (Harris Street, staff, girls' school, middle-class intake)

In Lang Street, a working-class school which had used streaming at junior cycle level, one teacher associated stress with the 'better students' and thought that those taking ordinary or foundation subject levels would be less likely to suffer from stress:

> I wouldn't think now you'd find too many of those students stressed, especially the lower half … I suppose behind the scenes, with some of the better students, there could be stress, but it wouldn't manifest itself on a daily basis here certainly. (Lang Street, staff, boys' school, working-class intake)

One teacher from Park Street, a socially mixed school, felt that some students, particularly those who 'wouldn't have strong social backgrounds', can become de-motivated by stress in sixth year and rather than motivating them, it negatively impacts on their work rate:

> Some of them become de-motivated, the stress affects them and they become de-motivated and instead of actually increasing their work rate, it tends to go the other way. Kids that are, say, wouldn't have strong social backgrounds support at home, it can be a huge problem. (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

Similarly in Lang Street, one staff member felt that the pressure of the exams was getting to some of the students, particularly given the difficult 'family problems' at home:

> I expect the pressure aspect may be getting too great for them, and/or they may be just completely disillusioned with where they're going. (Lang Street, staff, boys' school, working-class intake)

Instead of a focus on academic attainment, this teacher felt that the best they could expect was that the students would become 'solid citizens':

> The best you can hope for them really, I suppose, is that they would be solid citizens that will work, and give something back to society, and for the most part, they are, they are, but just, I suppose, their own family problems. (Lang Street, staff, boys' school, working-class intake)

Some of the teachers attributed the stress experienced by students to their parents' aspirations rather than the Leaving Certificate exam itself:

> I mean I would have parents on the phone to me already … about some of the students were stressed out because of, because of what? Is it because of their own aspirations, or because of the parents' aspirations? I can never put my finger on it, sometimes it's a mixture of both, to be honest with you. (Argyle Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

A teacher at Fig Lane also felt that parents' aspirations contributed to feelings of stress at school:

> Parents have an awful lot to do with it. I think in some cases, probably schools like this, there's a pressure on kids to, I want my daughter or son to be whatever. (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake)

A staff member at Barrack Street, a working-class girls' school, suggested that students at the school experienced less pressure than children in middle-class schools as they have less pressure from their parents:

> Generally the inner city children don't suffer from the pressure that maybe middle-class … there wouldn't be as much pressure from parents, for example, to perform, you know. There would be a certain amount but it wouldn't be as much, parents. (Barrack Street, staff, girls' school, working-class intake)

The extent to which these perceived differences in exam-related stress between middle-class and working-class schools reflect the intended pathways of young people will be discussed further in Chapter Six.

3.4 Conclusions

This chapter examines the prevalence of stress among students in their sixth year, placing the patterns found in the context of student workload and exam preparation. The findings show that students find sixth year more difficult than previous years and many struggle to keep up with the pace of work. To overcome these problems, students in some schools spend four or more hours on homework every night, with many attending organised study sessions at their school.

The levels of stress found in this study are higher than those found in previous studies on Junior Certificate students and young adults (see Hannan et al., 1996). In keeping with previous research (Smyth, 1999), female students report higher levels of stress in sixth year than their male counterparts. There are some differences in the levels of stress among students across Leaving Certificate programmes, with LCA students reporting lower levels of stress compared to LCE and LCVP students. In keeping with previous Irish research (Hannan et al., 1996), students who experience more positive interaction with their teachers have lower stress levels. Moreover, the quality of peer relations is also related to stress, with higher stress levels among those who were experiencing bullying. Other factors influencing levels of stress among students include sports participation, which appears to reduce student stress, and dissatisfaction with subjects they are taking, which increases stress levels. Students who feel unable to cope with their schoolwork have much higher stress levels and this difficulty in schoolwork is reflected in losing sleep over worry and feeling under strain.

Findings from the qualitative interviews show students themselves place enormous weight on their performance in the Leaving Certificate exam because of its consequences for their quality of life when they leave school. Many view the exam as the first exam that really matters in their lives and feel that it does not compare with the Junior Certificate. The stress experienced by students appears to relate mainly to their own

aspirations, with many concerned that they will not get their first choice of higher education course and many students discussing the fear of failing or not getting what they want. In addition to their own internal stress, students also spoke about other drivers of stress such as their teachers and their parents. Many felt that teachers spoke about the exam far too often and placed too much emphasis on it. Some students suggested that teachers themselves were stressed about covering enough of the curriculum in time for the exams and they then projected this onto the students. Some of the school personnel interviews noted the increased stress among some of the students and, in some cases, feared for their health and mental wellbeing in the run-up to the exams.

Chapter Four

LEAVING CERTIFICATE
EXAM PERFORMANCE

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the factors shaping Leaving Certificate exam performance within the case-study schools. There is now a large body of research internationally which explores the existence of 'school effects' (for an overview, see Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). Schools are found to make a substantive impact on student outcomes, especially achievement, and studies have attempted to identify the school factors which 'make a difference' as a basis for policy intervention (see, for example, Rutter et al., 1979; Mortimore et al., 1988; Teddlie and Stringfield, 1993). These studies generally control for family background factors and prior achievement (as measured by test scores at the point of entry to the particular school or stage of schooling) to document the net effect, or 'value added', of school-level factors (see Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). In the Irish context, research on school effects has generally drawn on cross-sectional studies (Hannan et al., 1996; Smyth, 1999), relying on measures of school organisation and process collected within six months of taking the exam. These studies point to a number of school-level processes which influence Leaving Certificate achievement, including ability grouping, the quality of teacher-student interaction, teacher expectations, and student involvement in the school (Hannan et al., 1996; Smyth, 1999). The current study builds upon this research to locate Leaving Certificate achievement within the context of much longer term processes occurring over the entire second-level career.

The second section of the chapter places the twelve case-study schools in context, looking at raw differences in exam grades. The third section takes advantage of the longitudinal nature of the study to explore the relationship between experiences throughout the schooling career and the grades achieved. The fourth section develops this analysis to identify the main influences of prior experiences and processes on Leaving Certificate performance.

4.2 Examination Results in Context

Students in the longitudinal cohort sat their Leaving Certificate exam in 2007 or 2008, depending on whether they took Transition Year or not. For the purposes of comparing results across the case-study schools, data for all students taking the exam in the relevant schools in 2007 and 2008 are combined; these results are placed in the context of level take-up and grades received among the entire population of Leaving Certificate students across all second-level schools.

Chapter Two indicated significant differences between groups of students and across the case-study schools in the proportion of students taking higher level English, Irish and Maths, as reported in January of sixth year. Figure 4.1 shows the average number of higher level subjects actually taken by each student in the Leaving Certificate exam. Across all second-level schools in Ireland, students took an average of 3.7 subjects at higher level. Fifteen per cent of all students took no higher level subjects, 28 per cent took 1 to 3 higher level subjects, 29 per cent took 3 or 4 subjects at higher level while 28 per cent took six or more higher level subjects.

Considerable variation is evident across the case-study schools in the average number of higher level subjects taken, ranging from a low of 0.9 in Hay Street, a working-class coed school, to a high of 4.6 in Fig Lane, a middle-class coed school (Figure 4.1). There is a clear difference between working-class schools and those of mixed or middle-class intake, with students in working-class schools taking much fewer higher level subjects than those in other schools. The average number of higher level subjects taken is higher in the two middle-class schools, Fig Lane and

Figure 4.1: Average number of higher level subjects taken in the Leaving Certificate exam (LCE/LCVP)
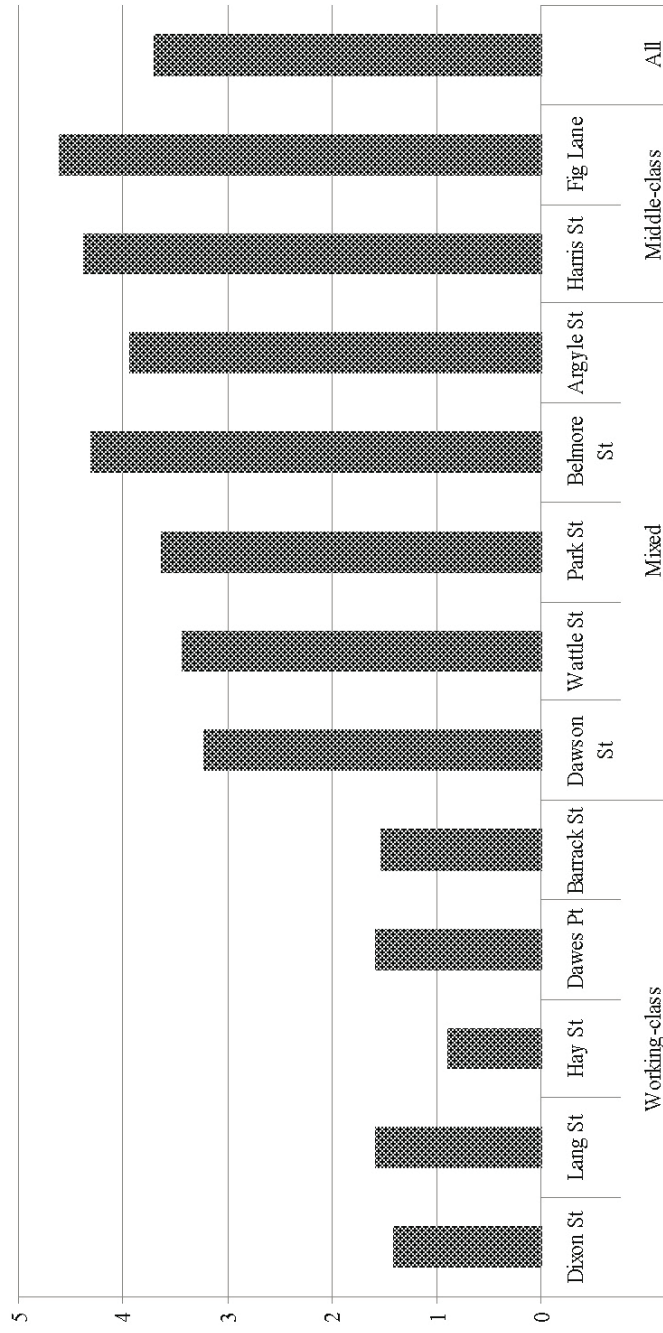
Harris Street, but the average among students in Belmore Street, a mixed intake school, is comparable in level to these middle-class schools. The extent to which these between-school differences reflect prior differences in level take-up at junior cycle, in Junior Certificate exam grades and/or in school policy regarding access to higher level will be explored later in this chapter.

Gender differences are evident in the take-up of higher level subjects. Pooling information from 2007 and 2008 for all students, female students took more higher level subjects than their male counterparts, taking an average of 3.9 compared with 3.5 for male students. Nationally, male and female students are equally likely to take no higher level subjects, with around 15 per cent falling into this category. The gender difference emerges in taking several higher level subjects; just under a third (32 per cent) of female students take six or more higher level subjects compared with less than a quarter (24 per cent) of male students. Within the case-study schools, the picture is more complex; in only two of the five coeducational schools do female students take significantly more higher level subjects than males.

In order to compare grades across the case-study schools, grade points were assigned for each subject reflecting the level taken and the grade achieved. These points ranged from 28 for an A1 on a higher level paper to 1 for a foundation-level D3 grade; zero points are awarded for E, F and NG ('fail') grades (see Table 4.1). These grade points were then averaged over all exam subjects taken; a similar approach to calculating Leaving Certificate grade point average has been used previously to explore the influences on performance (see Smyth, 1999). The approach used here is analogous to the Central Applications Office (CAO) 'points' system but has the advantage of taking account of all exam subjects taken and of foundation-level subjects. In the CAO system, the points awarded range from 100 for A1 on a higher level paper to 5 for a D3 on an ordinary level paper; no points are awarded for foundation level grades and total points are calculated across the highest six subjects.

Between-school variation in Leaving Certificate exam performance is depicted in the form of box-plots (Figure 4.2); the black line within each box refers to the median score within the school, that is, the point at which half of students achieve a higher score and half a lower score. The

length of the box is influenced by the difference between the 75th percentile, the point at which 75 per cent of students in the school are below this score, and the 25th percentile, the point at which 25 per cent of students are below this score, within each school; the 'whiskers' show the minimum and maximum scores within each school.

Table 4.1: Allocation of 'points' by exam grade and subject level

	Higher level	**Ordinary level**	**Foundation level**
Grade			
A1	28	20	12
A2	26	18	10
B1	25	17	9
B2	24	16	8
B3	23	15	7
C1	22	14	6
C2	21	13	5
C3	20	12	4
D1	19	11	3
D2	18	10	2
D3	17	9	1
E, F, NG	0	0	0
Link modules			
Distinction	22		
Merit	18		
Pass	14		

It is clear that the twelve case-study schools included in our study capture a good deal of variation in exam outcomes, with some of the schools scoring significantly above the national average and some scoring below this average. It should be emphasised that this is a crude representation of between-school differences, since the case-study schools vary markedly in the social mix and prior achievement levels of students coming into the school (see Smyth et al., 2004), an issue which is explored later in this chapter. Average (median) exam scores are lower, on

Figure 4.2: Leaving Certificate grade point average by school (2007-2008)
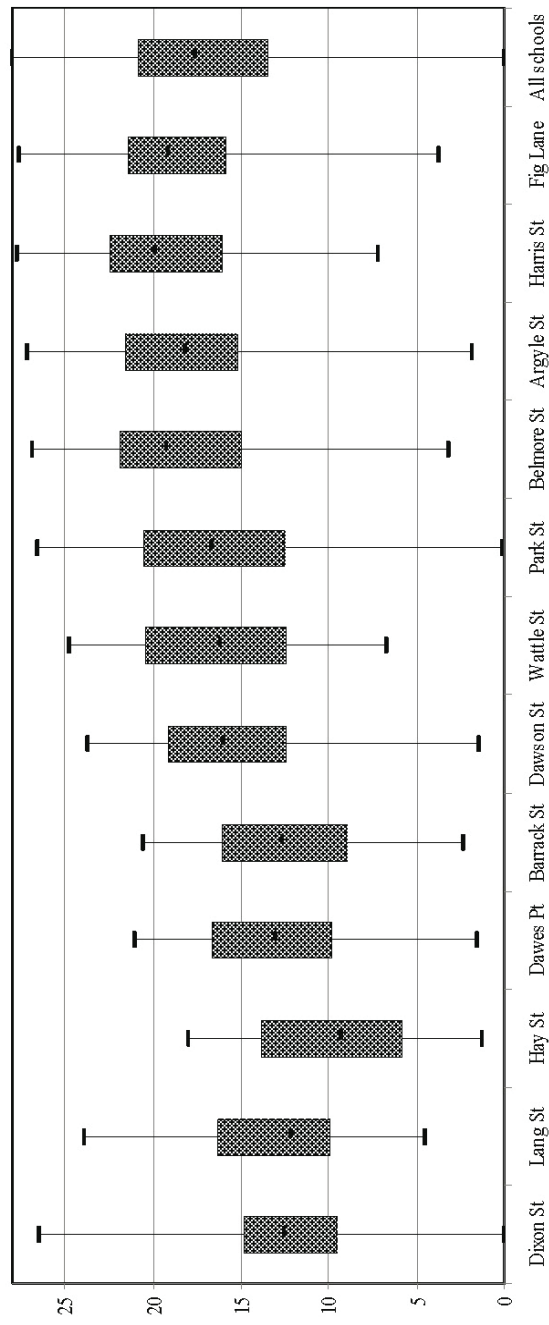
average, in the working-class schools, with particularly low scores in
Hay Street, most likely reflecting the low take-up of higher level subjects
indicated above. Scores are highest in the two middle-class schools, Fig
Lane and Harris Street, but also in Belmore Street, a mixed intake
school. Within coeducational schools, female students tend to achieve
higher grade point averages than males (except in Dixon Street), but
these differences are not statistically significant.

Figure 4.3 shows the patterns for Junior Certificate grade point aver-
age in the same case-study schools. The relative 'ranking' of the schools
is similar for Junior and Leaving Certificate performance, that is, schools
with high grades at junior cycle tend to have high grades at senior cycle.
For both sets of exams, students attending working-class schools tend to
achieve lower average grades than those in mixed or middle-class
schools. The relationship between Junior and Leaving Certificate grades
for individual students will be explored below.

Figure 4.2 indicated the pattern of performance across all Leaving
Certificate exam subjects taken. It is worth exploring whether there is
any variation in achievement in individual subjects. Because many Leav-
ing Certificate subjects vary in the profile of students taking them, the
analysis here focuses on average grades achieved in English, Irish and
Maths, taken by (almost) all students. At the individual level, students
who achieve higher grades in one subject tend to achieve higher grades
in another. There is a correlation of 0.7 (of a maximum of 1) between
English and Irish grade scores, and 0.68 between English and Maths
scores. The between-school variation is broadly similar to that shown for
all exam subjects but some distinctive features are worth pointing out.
Levels of achievement are generally higher in English than in Irish or
Maths; this is, at least partly, related to the larger proportion of students
who take higher level English (see Chapter Two). In English and Irish,
the highest achievement levels are found in the two middle-class schools,
Harris Street and Fig Lane, and two of the mixed schools, Belmore
Street and Argyle Street (Figures 4.4 and 4.5). However, the lowest-
scoring schools differ for English and Irish. Hay Street has the lowest
overall grades in English but grades among the other working-class

Figure 4.3: Junior Certificate grade point average by school (2005)
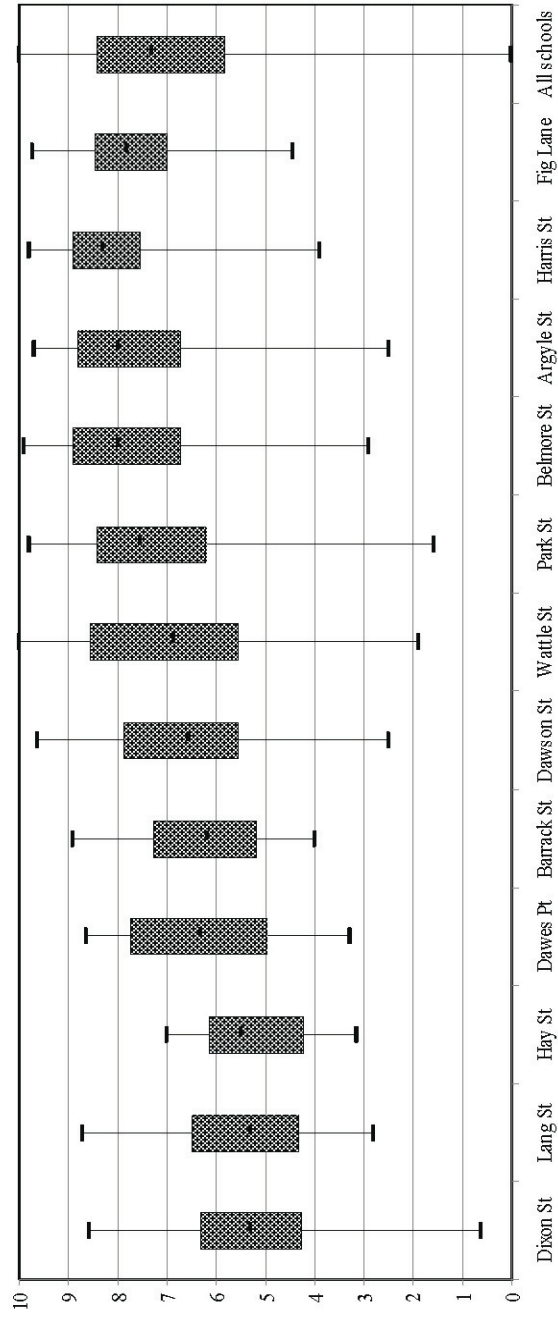
Figure 4.4: Average grade points in English (2007-2008)
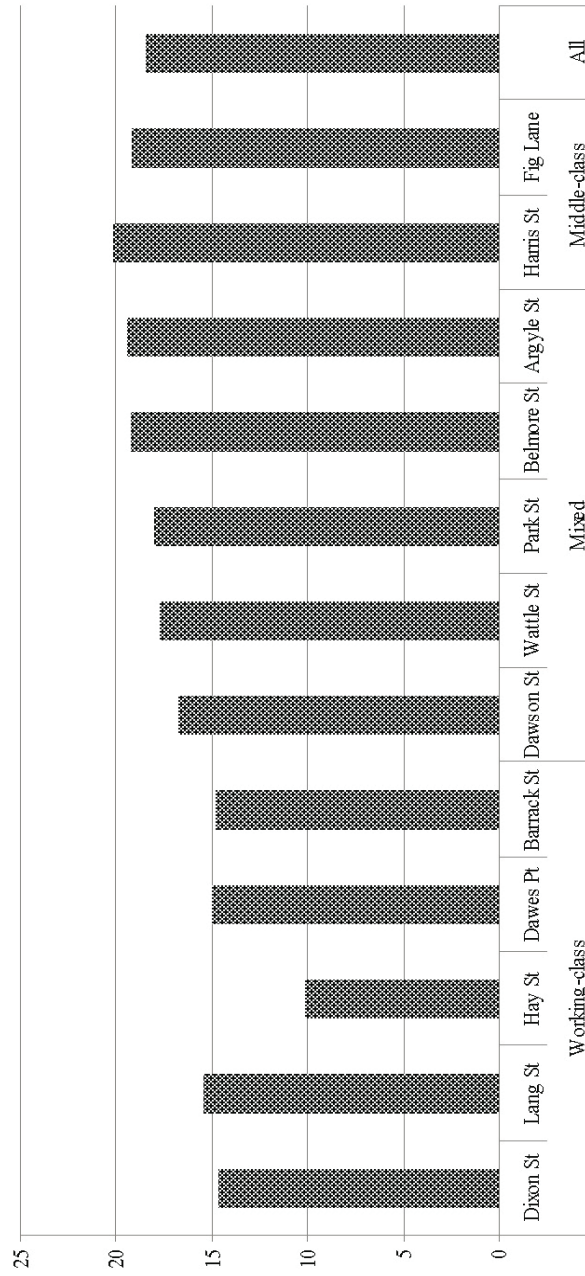
Figure 4.5: Average grade points in Irish (2007–2008)
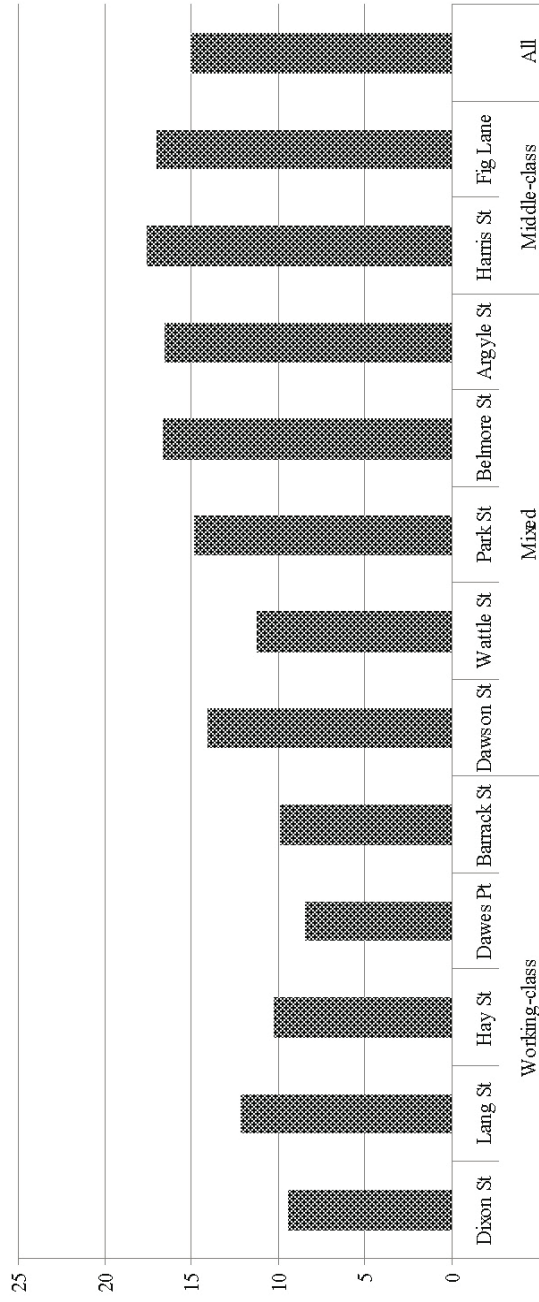
schools are roughly comparable to one another. In Irish, Dawes Point has the lowest scores, most likely because no students were taking higher level Irish (see Chapter Two), while Lang Street has much higher Irish grades than other working-class schools. The pattern for Maths is somewhat similar, with the highest grades found in Harris Street, Belmore Street and Fig Lane and the lowest grades found in Hay Street and Dixon Street, both working-class schools (Figure 4.6). Overall, it is evident that working-class schools tend to have lower average grades than mixed or middle-class schools across English, Irish and Maths. However, some variation in the relative 'ranking' of schools across subjects indicates the potential role of school policy regarding access to higher level as well as quality of teaching of a particular subject.

The analyses so far have focused on young people who took the Leaving Certificate Established or Leaving Certificate Vocational programmes. However, a small number of young people in the study cohort took the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. Figure 4.7 shows the proportion of the exam cohort who took LCA in the six case-study schools which provided the programme. LCA students make up 10-15 per cent of the cohort in four of the schools while they form only a very small minority (3 per cent) of students in Belmore Street, a mixed intake girls' school. There is a dramatic contrast with Dixon Street, a working-class coed school, where LCA students make up 43 per cent of the cohort. These patterns should be borne in mind in interpreting between-school differences in LCE/LCVP exam performance since in schools with higher proportions taking LCA, a smaller, and perhaps more selective, group of students is taking the LCE/LCVP exam.

Figure 4.6: Average grade points in Maths (2007-2008)
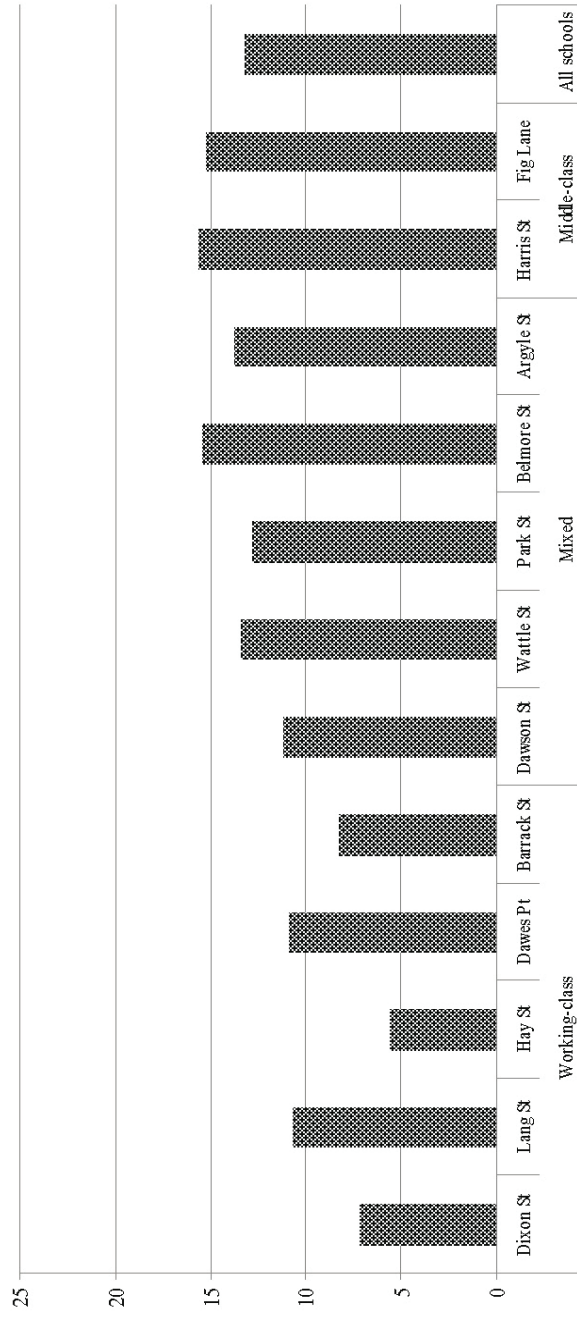
Figure 4.7: Proportion taking LCA in the case-study schools, 2007 and 2008 combined
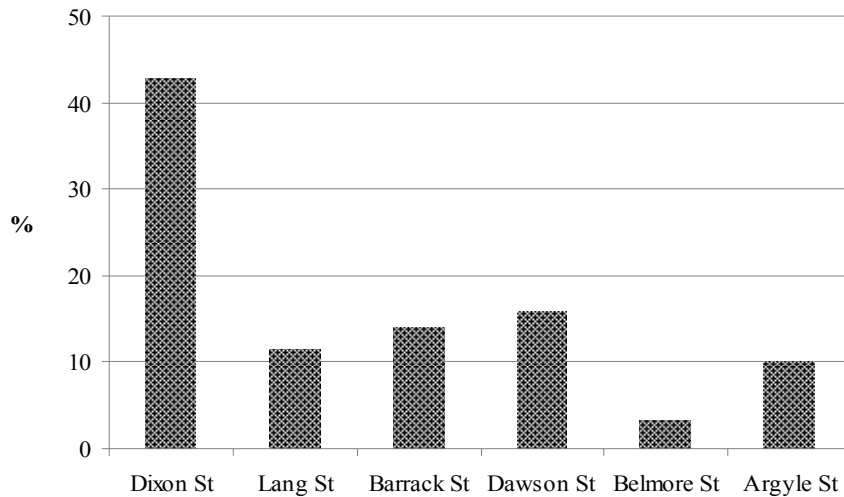
Across the case-study schools, 14 per cent of LCA students received a distinction, 48 per cent a merit, 25 per cent a pass and 13 per cent a record of credits. This compares with 18 per cent distinction, 52 per cent merit, 17 per cent pass and 13 per cent a record of credits for the national population taking LCA in 2007 and 2008 combined. Unfortunately, because of the small number of students taking LCA in the case-study schools, it is not possible to examine the relationship between student experiences and LCA performance in any meaningful way. The remainder of this chapter therefore focuses on results in the LCE/LCVP exams.

4.3 Leaving Certificate Performance: A Longitudinal Analysis

In this section we take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the study to explore the relationship between experiences during the whole of the second-level schooling career and Leaving Certificate performance. Analyses in this section are based on the 565 students who gave us permission to access their LCE/LCVP exam results. The section looks descriptively at variation in Leaving Certificate grade point average by prior processes while multivariate models of the factors influencing performance are presented in section 4.4.

The majority (69 per cent) of students in the case-study schools took 7 exam subjects while almost a quarter took 8 exam subjects. Differences were evident by Leaving Certificate programme, with the majority (85 per cent) of LCE students taking 7 subjects while the majority (70 per cent) of LCVP students took 8 subjects. This reflects the way in which some of the case-study schools time-tabled the LCVP modules as an additional subject (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011). The proportion of students taking 8 exam subjects varied significantly across schools, with students in Hay Street, a working-class school, and Dawson Street, a mixed intake school, more likely to do so than those attending other schools. This pattern largely reflected differential provision and take-up of LCVP across the schools.

Before looking at the factors associated with Leaving Certificate exam grades, it is worth exploring variation in the proportion taking higher level subjects in the exam. Figure 4.1 above revealed significant variation between the case-study schools in the average number of higher level subjects taken. However, the schools differ markedly in their student intake and in previous Junior Certificate exam performance (see Smyth et al., 2007). The question is therefore whether variation in higher level take-up is accounted for by prior differences. To try to unpack this variation, Figure 4.8 shows the average number of higher level subjects taken by students who scored in the lowest two Junior Certificate grade quintiles, that is, in the lowest 40 per cent of scores. The difference between the working-class schools and other schools is not as stark as in Figure 4.1; it appears therefore that the lower prevalence of higher level take-up in working-class schools reflects, in part, the prior achievement levels of their students. However, even within the same achievement band, take-up of higher level is found to be lower in working-class schools and higher in Fig Lane, one of the middle-class schools. The exception to this pattern is Harris Street, a middle-class girls' school, where take-up of higher level subjects is relatively low among the low-achieving group. In contrast to the situation for those with lower Junior Certificate grades depicted in Figure 4.8, there is very little between-school variation for the top quintile (fifth) of students; the patterns for this group of students are not depicted here because these students are not represented in all schools. It would appear therefore that school policy, teacher and student expectations have more impact on lower-achieving students' take-up of higher level subjects.

Figure 4.8: Average number of higher level Leaving Certificate subjects, lowest two quintiles of Junior Certificate performance only
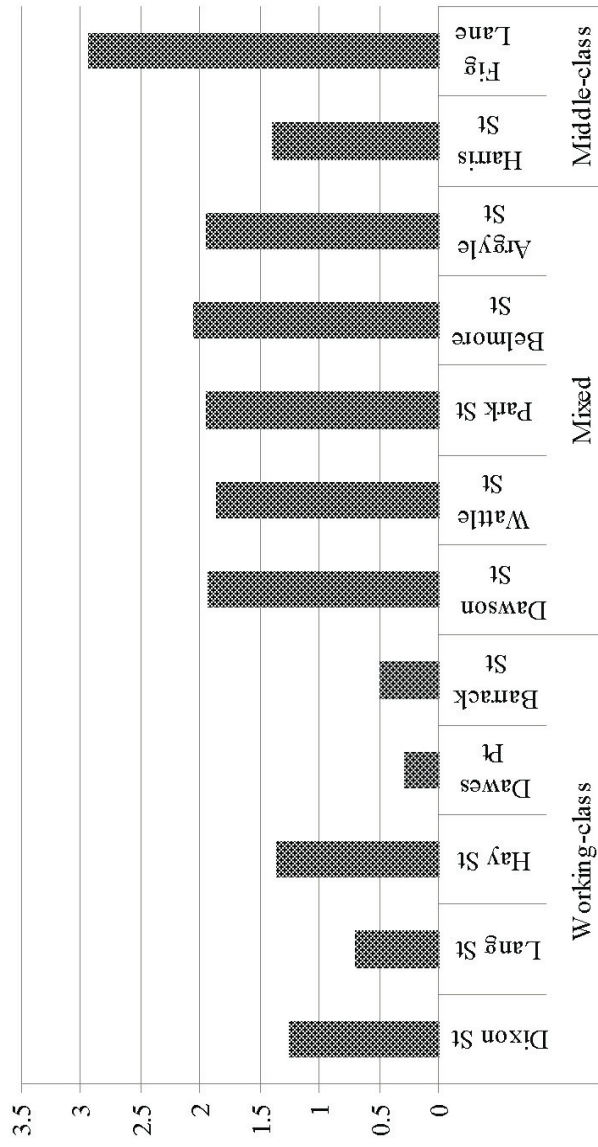
Previous analyses of the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data indicated marked social class differentials in entry test scores and in Junior Certificate performance (Smyth et al., 2004; Smyth et al., 2007). Clear social class differences in performance remain evident among the Leaving Certificate cohort, a pattern that is noteworthy given that working-class young people are more likely to have left school before the Leaving Certificate and those who remain are more likely to take the Leaving Certificate Applied programme than other students (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Banks et al., 2010). Figure 4.9 shows the highest exam grades are found among young people from higher professional backgrounds while the lowest grades are found among those from semi/unskilled or non-employed households (Figure 4.9). The extent to which the social class effect is mediated by prior performance will be explored in the multi-level models presented in the following section. Performance also varies by immigrant background, with newcomer students achieving a lower grade point average than other students (15.8 compared with 17.5 per subject).

Figure 4.9: Leaving Certificate grade point average by social class background
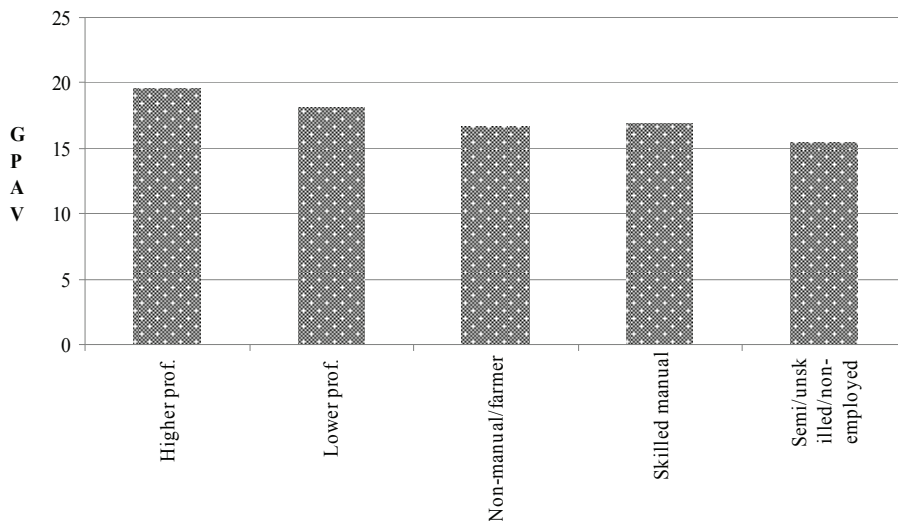
As might be expected, Leaving Certificate results are strongly associated with measures of prior ability or achievement. Students in the cohort had

taken Drumcondra reading and maths tests on entry to first year. Figure 4.10 shows the variation in Leaving Certificate grades by 'ability' on entry, with a clear gradient in performance according to test scores in reading and maths. There is a correlation of +0.64 between first year reading score and Leaving Certificate performance. The correlation between first year maths score and Leaving Certificate performance is somewhat lower at +0.59, but is still substantial.

Figure 4.10: Leaving Certificate grade point average by reading and maths test scores on entry to second-level education
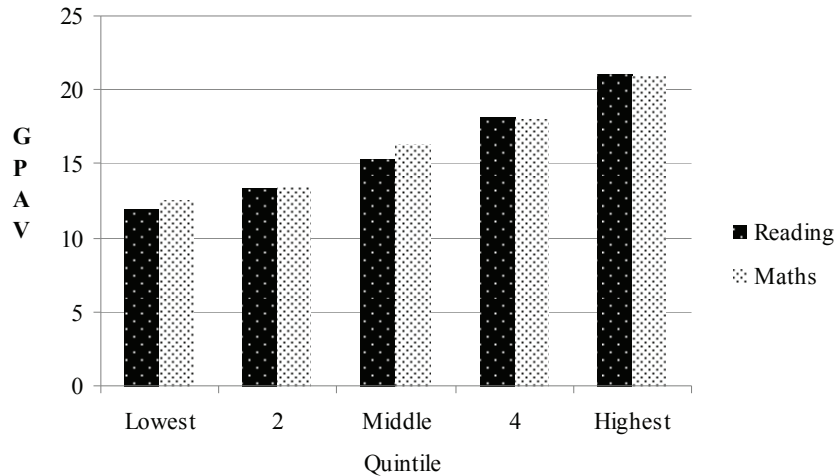
Leaving Certificate performance is closely related to Junior Certificate performance, mainly because the two exams assess the same kinds of abilities and capacities but also because access to higher level subjects is influenced by subject take-up and performance within junior cycle (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011; and Chapter Two of this study). Leaving Certificate performance is found to be very highly correlated with Junior Certificate performance (+0.86). Figure 4.11 shows the gradient in Leaving Certificate performance according to levels (quintiles) of Junior Certificate grades. There is a very substantial performance gap between those in the lowest fifth and those in the highest fifth, amounting to 12.5 (out of a maximum of 28) grade points per subject.

Figure 4.11: Leaving Certificate grade point average by Junior Certificate performance (quintiles)
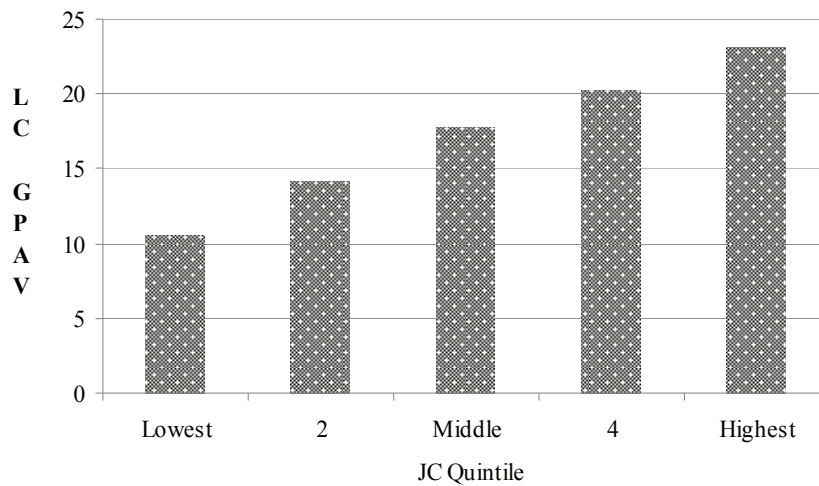
The type of class allocation used by the school at junior cycle was found to be significantly predictive of Junior Certificate performance, with students in the lowest stream class achieving lower exam grades, even controlling for initial ability (Smyth et al., 2007). In Figure 4.12, we show grade point average at Leaving Certificate level by the type of class students were in during junior cycle. These results must be interpreted with some caution as the vast majority of the lower stream classes either dropped out of school or moved into the LCA track (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Banks et al., 2010). However, clear differences are evident by initial class type, with students in mixed ability classes achieving the highest Leaving Certificate scores and very low grades among those who had been in lower stream classes at junior cycle.

Looking at the transition from primary to post-primary education, no significant relationship is found between the extent to which students report missing primary school in first year and later Leaving Certificate grades. However, curriculum discontinuity appears to be a factor; students who reported that Maths in first year was 'about the same' as in primary school achieve higher exam grades than those who find it easier or harder (18.4 compared with 14.8 and 15.7 respectively). No such pattern is found in relation to continuity in English or Irish. Students who

reported enjoying their first year subjects more than their primary school subjects also achieve higher exam grades (17.2 compared with 14.3 for those who do not).

Figure 4.12: Leaving Certificate grade point average by class allocation at junior cycle
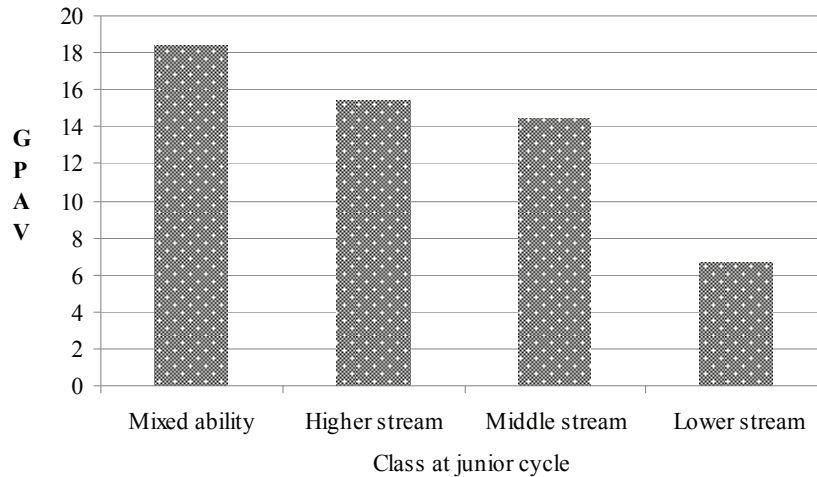
The frequency of positive and negative interaction with teachers was measured over the course of the schooling career (see Chapter Two). No significant relationship is found between positive interaction at junior cycle and Leaving Certificate performance. However, positive interaction in fifth and sixth year is positively related to Leaving Certificate grades (+0.15 and +0.18 respectively). The pattern for negative interaction is quite different. Negative interaction with teachers across all years (except the beginning of first year) is negatively related to Leaving Certificate performance (with correlations of -0.24 to -0.34). The relationship between negative interaction in second year and grades is almost as strong as that between negative interaction in sixth year and grades. This provides further support to our previous findings that second year experiences are central to establishing the dynamics of teacher-student interaction and thus impact on school engagement and performance at a later stage (see Smyth et al., 2007). Given the interrelationship between negative teacher-student interaction and student misbehaviour, it is not surprising that misbehaviour is also associated with underperformance at

Leaving Certificate level (with correlations of -0.23 to -0.38). Once again, the relationship between misbehaviour in second year and grades is almost as strong as that between misbehaviour in sixth year and grades. In sixth year, students were asked to compare their experiences with teachers in fifth year; those who report that their teachers are 'stricter' achieve lower exam grades (15.6) than those who find them 'about the same' (18.1) or 'more easy-going' (18.0).

Attitudes to school are somewhat associated with Leaving Certificate performance. Correlations between positive attitudes at junior cycle level and grades vary from +0.13 to +0.19. Liking school in senior cycle is more predictive of later performance than attitudes in junior cycle, with correlations of +0.41 and +0.37 for fifth and sixth year respectively. In contrast to the findings concerning the quality of teacher-student interaction, attitudes to teachers at junior cycle are not found to be associated with later performance. However, liking teachers at senior cycle is positively associated with Leaving Certificate grades (+0.21 for both fifth and sixth year).

As might be expected, perceived capacity to cope with schoolwork (academic self-image) is significantly associated with later performance. The correlations between junior cycle measures and grades varies from +0.21 to +0.28. The relationship at senior cycle is stronger, with correlations of +0.43 and +0.45 for fifth and sixth year academic self-image. In keeping with these patterns, students who find the pace of instruction 'too fast' in third, fifth or sixth year achieve lower Leaving Certificate grades. Expected Leaving Certificate performance (measured in February of the exam year) is significantly associated with actual grades; those who expect to do 'very well' have a grade point average of 19.9 compared with 17.2 for those who expect to do 'well', 14.1 for those who expect to do 'just below average' and 12.2 for those who expect to do 'well below average'. Those who see it as being 'very important' to do well in the Leaving Certificate achieve higher grades than those who see it as 'important' or 'not very important'.

Educational aspirations at junior cycle are significantly associated with later performance, with those aspiring to degree-level courses achieving the highest grades (with correlations of +0.46). Time spent on homework and study in junior cycle is positively associated with Leav-

ing Certificate performance (with correlations of +0.12-0.13 for first and second year and +0.24 for third year). The exception to this pattern is time spent on homework at the beginning of first year; this reflects the greater amount of time spent by students who were struggling to cope with the new demands of second-level education. The amount of time spent on homework and study in fifth year is somewhat more strongly associated with Leaving Certificate grades than the time spent in sixth year (+0.31 compared with +0.25). Those who report spending more time on homework in sixth year compared to fifth year achieve higher grades than others (18.1 compared with 15.4 for those who spend about the same or less time).

Students who took Transition Year achieved higher Leaving Certificate grades than those who did not – 18.4 compared with 16.5. The extent to which this reflects the higher prior achievement and aspirations of TY participants rather than the impact of taking the programme will be explored below using multilevel modelling.

Students who are very satisfied with the programme they are taking receive higher exam grades than those who are dissatisfied (19.7 for 'very satisfied' compared with 17.3 for 'satisfied', 16 for 'dissatisfied' and 12.5 for 'very dissatisfied'). Similarly, those who are very satisfied with the subjects they are taking receive higher exam grades (19.7 for 'very satisfied' compared with 17.2 for 'satisfied', 15.9 for 'dissatisfied' and 14.9 for 'very dissatisfied'). Students who state that there are subjects they regret taking achieved lower exam grades than others (16.7 compared 18.2). However, preferring to have taken other subjects is not associated with Leaving Certificate exam grades.

Life outside school is also associated with Leaving Certificate grades. Students who have a more active social life in sixth year achieve lower exam grades (r=-0.25) and exam grades are also negatively associated with a more active social life in third year (r=-0.27). The pattern for school-based sports is quite different, with the highest exam grades among those who have no or very frequent involvement compared with those who have moderate involvement. The frequency of involvement in non-school sports or in in-school extracurricular activities in sixth year is not significantly associated with exam grades.

Students who are taking private tuition ('grinds') achieve higher exam grades than other students (18.9 compared with 16). However, this cannot necessarily be taken as reflecting the impact of grinds, since previous research has indicated that those who take private tuition are mainly those with the highest prior achievement levels and aspirations and no net effect of grinds on Leaving Certificate performance is found when this is taken into account (see Smyth, 2009). In keeping with previous research (McCoy and Smyth, 2004), young people who work part-time during junior cycle achieve lower average exam grades at Leaving Certificate level; in sixth year, those who work part-time during term-time achieve an average of 15.5 grade points compared with 18 for those not working.

4.4 Factors Influencing Leaving Certificate Exam Performance

The previous section discusses the relationship between a number of background factors and Leaving Certificate performance. However, many of these factors are likely to be interrelated; in order to understand the processes shaping exam performance, it is therefore necessary to take account of a number of factors simultaneously. In Table 4.2, we present a series of multilevel regression models which explore the influence of individual background and junior cycle factors on Leaving Certificate performance. Taking advantage of the longitudinal nature of the study, the models progressively take account of student characteristics prior to second-level entry, followed by first year experiences, second year factors and third year experiences. As in earlier sections, we focus on students who took the LCE or LCVP programmes. The student cohort is clustered within twelve case-study schools and, as a result, these students are likely to share a number of characteristics and experiences. Using a multilevel model takes account of this clustering and thus provides more precise estimates of the influence of the factors examined (Goldstein, 2003).

Table 4.2: Multilevel regression models of junior cycle factors associated with Leaving Certificate performance

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Constant	16.051	15.266	15.613	15.327	13.846	16.293
Social background						
Female		0.249	0.272	-0.034	-0.213	0.001
Social class:						
Higher professional		1.645**	1.572**	1.579**	1.464**	-0.309
Lower professional		1.234*	1.106*	0.892*	0.674	-0.327
Non-manual		0.441	0.194	0.249	0.380	-0.804 ◄
Skilled manual		0.886	0.757	0.483	0.639	-0.370
(Ref.: Semi/unskilled/non-employed)						
Reading score on entry to second-level (centred)		0.123***	0.127***	0.117***	0.096***	0.021
Maths score on entry to second-level (centred)		0.252***	0.228***	0.206***	0.196***	0.076*

Transition				
Did not enjoy 1st year subjects more than primary	-1.797*	-1.147	-0.851	-0.540
Lower stream class at junior cycle	-5.364***	-5.083***	-4.999***	-4.730***
Junior cycle experiences				
Negative teacher-student interaction in 2nd year		-0.521*	-0.438▲	-0.135
Misbehaviour in 2nd year		-0.641▲	-0.484	-0.046
Academic self-image in 2nd year		0.941*	0.701▲	0.148
Educational aspirations				
Junior Certificate			0.366	0.222
Certificate/Diploma			1.474**	0.559
Degree			2.912***	1.203**
(Contrast: Leaving Certificate)				

Junior Certificate grade point average (centred)						2.467***
School-level variance	7.222*	3.062*	2.259*	2.135*	1.777*	0.816▲
Student-level variance	19.906***	15.472***	15.107***	14.063***	13.023***	7.911***
% variance explained:						
School level		57.6	68.7	70.4	75.4	88.8
Student level		22.3	24.1	29.4	34.6	60.3

Note: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ▲ p<.10. Models are based on 579 students clustered within 12 schools.

The first model is a baseline model, that is, it presents the average grade across schools without taking account of prior differences in the students attending each school. It indicates that the average exam score across the case-study schools is 16 (out of a maximum of 28), equivalent to an average of a B2 grade on an ordinary level paper. The school-level variance term is statistically significant, that is, the twelve schools vary significantly in their raw student exam scores. Comparing the school- and student-level variances indicates that 27 per cent of the variation in exam scores is between schools and 73 per cent between individuals within schools. Model 2 looks at the effects of characteristics prior to second-level entry, namely, gender, social class background and prior achievement. Prior achievement is measured on the basis of student performance in the Drumcondra Level 6 (sixth class of primary school) reading and mathematics tests, taken by the student cohort on entry to second-level education. These standardised tests were developed for primary school-children in Ireland, with national norms derived for different year groups. Using these test scores as measures of prior achievement allows us to explore which school factors influence later achievement relative to students' initial starting-point.

In model 2, students from professional backgrounds are found to achieve significantly higher grades than other students, even relative to their initial starting-point in terms of test scores on entry. Test scores in the Drumcondra reading and maths tests are also predictive of later Leaving Certificate performance, with higher-scoring students achieving significantly higher exam grades five to six years later. Comparing the variances between models 1 and 2, we can see that student intake factors explain over half (58 per cent) of the initial difference between schools. Thus, much of the 'raw' difference between schools is due to differences in the kinds of students who attend that school but significant differences remain between schools serving similar groups of students (in keeping with previous Irish research, see Smyth, 2009). Gender, social background and prior reading/maths score are found to account for 22 per cent of the initial variation between individual students.

Models 3 to 6 allow us to explore the school-level processes which enhance achievement, over and above the effects of gender, social class and prior achievement; in other words, they indicate which school fac-

tors 'make a difference' to student progress over their time at school. Model 3 (Table 4.2) looks at the nature of the transition process into second-level education. The majority of students enjoyed their first year subjects more than they had their primary school subjects (see Smyth et al., 2004). However, those students who did not engage with the new subjects in a positive way are found to achieve lower grades in the Leaving Certificate (by 1.8 grade points) than other students. A sizeable performance difference is found between students allocated to a lower stream class in first year and other students. Even controlling for initial reading and maths scores, lower stream students achieve 5.4 grade points per subject less in the Leaving Certificate exam than other students. This is a very large difference given the small number of lower stream students found in the LCE or LCVP programmes. Most of those who had been in lower stream classes at junior cycle had dropped out of school before the Leaving Certificate (Byrne and Smyth, 2010) or had entered the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (Banks et al., 2010).

Analyses of the earlier experiences of students in this cohort indicated the importance of second year for later student engagement, with many students drifting or disengaging at this stage of their schooling (Smyth et al., 2006). Students' capacity to cope with schoolwork (academic self-image) as reported in first year is found to reflect the turbulence of their adjustment to a new school setting and, as a result, is not predictive of later performance. However, those students who feel better able to cope with school-work in second year tend to achieve higher grades subsequently. The nature of teacher-student interaction in second year also emerges as predictive of later outcomes. Students who report more negative interaction with their teachers and higher levels of misbehaviour tend to underperform academically, all else being equal (Model 4).

Model 5 looks at the potential impact of student educational aspirations on later performance. Third year students who aspire to post-school sub-degree education tend to achieve 1.5 grade points higher than those who aspire to a Leaving Certificate while the achievement advantage is greater (at 2.9 grade points) for those who aspire to degree-level qualifications, controlling for social background. Model 6 shows that Junior Certificate performance is highly predictive of Leaving Certificate exam

performance. Furthermore, many of the earlier factors are mediated through Junior Certificate performance and so do not have a *direct* effect on Leaving Certificate scores. Thus, the effects of social background, reading score on entry and second year experiences (academic self-image, teacher-student interaction and misbehaviour) operate indirectly through performance at the end of junior cycle. Some junior cycle factors continue to have a direct effect. Even controlling for Junior Certificate grades, maths test scores on entry to second-level are predictive of Leaving Certificate performance, although the size of the effect is modest. A sizeable achievement gap (4.7 grade points) at Leaving Certificate level remains for lower stream students, even taking into account their lower Junior Certificate exam results (see Smyth et al., 2007); this difference translates into a gap of almost 150 CAO points. In addition, students who aspired to degree-level qualifications achieve higher Leaving Certificate grades, all else being equal. Background factors, junior cycle experiences and Junior Certificate performance are found to account for 89 per cent of the initial difference in Leaving Certificate grades between schools and 60 per cent of the initial difference between students.

Table 4.3 goes on to present a series of multilevel regression models which look at the influence of senior cycle experiences on Leaving Certificate performance, over and above the influences of junior cycle factors. Controlling for Junior Certificate performance allows us to explore the factors which influence student *progress* over senior cycle. Previous research on a large national sample in the mid-1990s (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004) had indicated higher Leaving Certificate performance among Transition Year (TY) participants than among non-participants, all else being equal. Descriptive analyses in section 4.3 showed higher exam grades among TY participants but this did not allow for prior differences between participants and non-participants in the cohort (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011). The results of the multilevel regression model indicate a positive but non-significant coefficient; that is, the TY group tends to achieve higher exam grades than the non-participants but this difference is not significant (results not shown here). Further analyses were conducted to separate out the schools where TY was compulsory from the schools where it was optional. Attending a school where TY is

Table 4.3: Multilevel regression models of senior cycle factors associated with Leaving Certificate performance

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	12.905	14.890	13.816	11.351
Junior cycle[1]				
Lower stream class at junior cycle	-4.896***	-4.634***	-4.303***	-2.698**
Educational aspirations:				
Junior Certificate	0.316	0.182	0.191	-0.280
Certificate/Diploma	0.476	0.431	0.412	-0.050
Degree	1.156**	0.945**	0.827*	-0.079
(Contrast: Leaving Certificate)				
Junior Certificate grade point average (centred)	2.266***	2.160***	2.160***	1.006***
Senior cycle transition				
Took Transition Year:				
Compulsory	0.588	0.511	0.447	0.605
Optional	-0.386	-0.181	-0.197	-0.201
Compulsory*JC GPAV	-0.040	0.045	0.046	0.100
Optional*JC GPAV	0.383***	0.356***	0.374***	0.341***
Academic self-image in 5th year	1.454***	1.334***	1.160***	0.755***

Out-of-school experiences				
Working 15+ hours during term-time in 6th year		-0.959◄	-0.876◄	0.086
Involvement in social life		-0.947***	-0.951***	-0.422*
Taking grinds in 6th year		0.916***	0.828****	0.124
School engagement				
Time spent on homework/study in 6th year:				
½-1 hour			0.128	0.033
1-1.5 hours			1.175	1.232◄
1.5-2 hours			0.524	-0.092
2-3 hours			1.161◄	0.764
3-4 hours			2.002**	1.148◄
4-5 hours			1.640*	0.865
5+ hours			1.649*	0.790
(Contrast: <1/2 hour)				
Subject levels				
No. of higher level subjects (in LC exam)				1.257***
No. of foundation level subjects (in LC exam)				-0.528*
School-level variance	0.824◄	1.088*	0.945*	0.267◄
Student-level variance	7.356***	6.838***	6.680***	4.161***

Note: 1. All of the junior cycle variables reported in Table 4.2 are also included in these models. For ease of interpretation, only the significant effects are reported here. *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ◄ p<.10.

compulsory is associated with somewhat higher Leaving Certificate grades, but this is not a statistically significant difference. The effect of taking TY where it is optional is found to vary by prior Junior Certificate grades, with TY associated with a greater performance gain for higher-achieving students (Table 4.3, model 1). Many fifth year students reported difficulties in adjusting to the academic demands of senior cycle, highlighting in particular the very detailed content of many subjects and the difficulty associated with higher level subjects (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011). Capacity to cope with school-work in fifth year is found to be significantly associated with later performance at Leaving Certificate level.

Model 2 (Table 4.3) looks at aspects of students' lives outside school. In keeping with previous research (McCoy and Smyth, 2004), students who work long hours during term-time tend to achieve lower exam grades. In addition, students who have very active social lives outside school tend to underperform academically. Section 4.3 indicated a performance gap of 2.9 grade points between those taking private tuition and other students. Model 2 indicates that taking account of the fact that more ambitious and higher-achieving students are more likely to take grinds reduces this difference by over two-thirds (68 per cent) to just under a grade point per subject.

Model 3 explores the extent to which time spent on homework and study in sixth year is associated with academic performance. As might be expected given the nature of assessment at Leaving Certificate, students who spend an average of more than three hours per night on homework and study make more progress relative to their initial achievement level than other students. Interestingly, spending much longer amounts of time on homework and study (e.g. more than five hours) does not appear to yield any additional performance advantage.

Section 4.2 highlighted significant differences between the case-study schools in the number of higher level subjects taken. In model 4, we add number of higher level and number of foundation level subjects taken in the Leaving Certificate exam. The causality of the relationship with grades must be interpreted with caution. Chapter Two has shown that the selection of subject levels reflects a long-term process, with on-going movement 'down' from higher to ordinary level. Thus, other sen-

ior cycle factors, such as taking grinds and amount of time spent on homework/study, will reflect decisions about subject levels. However, it is worth including subject levels in the models in order to illustrate their association with achievement levels and with between-school differences in student outcomes. As might be expected, students who take more higher level subjects achieve higher grade points while those who take one or two foundation level subjects achieve lower grade points. Part-time work, taking grinds and time spent on homework/study are no longer significant when subject levels are included, indicating the complex interplay between decisions about subject levels and engagement in schoolwork. Around half of the effect of prior achievement (in the Junior Certificate) is mediated through level take-up, indicating that Junior Certificate level take-up and performance serves, at least in part, as a channel into related subject levels at senior cycle (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011).

The results of the multilevel models presented in Tables 4.2 and 4.3 can be used to adjust the size of between-school differences to reflect variation in student intake across schools (shown in Figure 4.13). These patterns should be taken as illustrative as a larger sample of schools would be needed to provide very precise estimates of between-school differences. The first set of columns shows the 'raw' difference between each of the schools and the average; that is, the variation without including any controls for student intake. This is similar to what a 'league table' of the schools would look like. The pattern is, of course, similar to that shown in Figure 4.2, with lower grades found in Hay Street and higher grades in Harris Street, Fig Lane and Belmore Street.

The second set of columns adjusts the estimates for the gender and social background of students coming into the school. This reduces the scale of between-school differences, that is, some of the initial difference was due to variation in student intake. The third set of columns adds a further adjustment for the reading and maths scores of incoming first year students, which further reduces the scale of between-school difference among our sample. However, differences in Leaving Certificate performance are evident even controlling for student intake. The fourth set of columns adds a further control for Junior Certificate performance

Figure 4.13: Between-school differences in Leaving Certificate grade point average, controlling for gender, social background, test scores on entry to second-level education and Junior Certificate performance
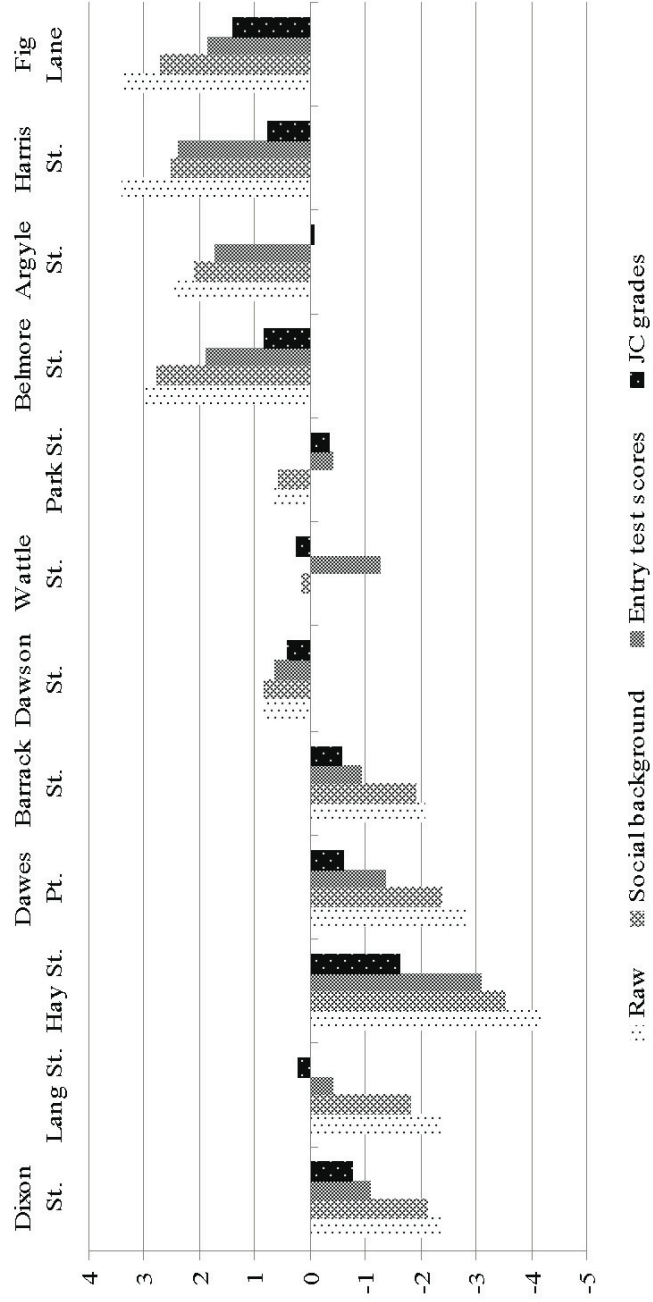
(and other junior cycle factors). The reduced size of the between-school differences shows that most of the variation is attributable to junior cycle processes. However, students in some schools, especially Fig Lane, Harris Street and Fig Lane, make more progress relative to their Junior Certificate achievement levels than those in some other schools. This is likely to reflect the larger number of students taking higher level subjects in these schools (see above) as well as teacher expectations, quality of teaching and the nature of the school climate.

4.5 Conclusions

This chapter has highlighted the factors which influence Leaving Certificate performance among students in the case-study schools. While exam grades to some extent reflect differences between students on entry to second-level education, certain aspects of school organisation and process are found to play a crucial role in promoting student achievement. Engaging students in the new subjects taken in first year helps to facilitate later achievement but the findings point to second year experiences as more significant than first year processes in longer term student engagement. In keeping with findings regarding junior cycle experiences (Smyth et al., 2007), second year appears to strongly set the tone for teacher-student interaction and engagement with schoolwork. For some young people, especially working-class boys, a pattern of 'being given out to' by teachers and 'acting out' in response emerges in second year and has implications for educational achievement which persist into senior cycle. Similarly, young people who are experiencing difficulties with their schoolwork in second year appear to find it difficult to regain the ground lost at later stages.

Findings from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study have pointed to the key impact of ability grouping on a range of student outcomes. Six of the case-study schools used ability or achievement test results to allocate students to their base class from first year onwards (Smyth et al., 2004). Even controlling for achievement on entry to second-level education, students in lower stream classes were found to underperform in the Junior Certificate exam and were more likely to drop out of school before Leaving Certificate level (Smyth et al., 2007; Byrne and Smyth, 2010).

Analyses of Leaving Certificate performance indicate a significant achievement gap between young people who had been in lower stream classes at junior cycle and other students. This gap is only partly due to underperformance at Junior Certificate level since a gap of 4 grade points per subject remains, even controlling for prior grades. The longer term impact of streaming on academic outcomes would appear to reflect restricted access to higher level subjects among those in lower stream classes as well as a climate of lower expectations emerging in these class contexts. It is noteworthy that, contrary to the rationale for utilising streaming, students assigned to higher stream classes achieve no academic advantage over those in mixed ability base classes.

A significant minority (four in ten) of the students in this cohort took Transition Year. Previous research (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004) had shown high performance levels among TY participants, even controlling for their higher levels of prior achievement and greater engagement in school. The findings from the current study are more complex. Taking TY in a school where it is compulsory has no net effect on Leaving Certificate performance, all else being equal. This pattern is likely to reflect the more mixed views of TY among those in schools where they were required to take the programme (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011). In schools where TY is optional, the relationship between participation and grades varies by prior levels of achievement; thus, TY is associated with a gain in performance for higher-achieving students.

Many students experience a difficulty in adjusting to schoolwork on entry to Leaving Certificate programmes, with LCE and LCVP students reporting more challenging course material and more complex modes of assessment. Successfully coping with schoolwork after the transition to senior cycle is found to be predictive of later educational performance. Students who found it easier to keep pace with their schoolwork in fifth year tended to make more progress relative to their initial achievement levels than other students. Students' lives outside school are also associated with later achievement, with more time spent in part-time work or social activities associated with lower grades. Students who take private tuition in sixth year tend to achieve higher grades on average, although there seems to be a complex interaction with time spent on homework/study and the subject levels taken. Time spent on homework and

study in sixth year is significantly associated with later performance. Leaving Certificate performance is related to both performance within subject levels and to take-up of subject levels. Much of the difference between schools in student performance levels is found to be related to the number of higher level subjects taken by students, and variation between schools in level take-up is found, even controlling for initial reading and maths test scores.

Analyses point to the motivating role of developing high educational aspirations at junior cycle, with those aspiring to degree-level qualifications achieving higher Leaving Certificate grades. In the following chapters, we explore variation between groups of young people in their post-school plans and the role played by school-based guidance in making these decisions.

Chapter Five

GUIDANCE AND DECISION-MAKING IN SIXTH YEAR

5.1 Introduction

Research shows that student decision-making in relation to post-school pathways can be influenced by a number of factors including social background, the home environment, expectations of success, and an individual's own preferences and aspirations (McCoy and Byrne, 2011). It seems logical that effective guidance is all the more important in a changing world. However, existing provision in many countries has been found to be subject to a number of constraints, including a focus on educational rather than labour market outcomes, the need to combine guidance with personal support, and the lack of integration with the curriculum (OECD, 2004). This chapter examines the factors influencing student decision-making during sixth year and how this varied across groups of students and schools. We focus on the extent to which students attributed their career and education choices to formal career guidance at school, including guidance classes or one-to-one sessions with their guidance counsellor, visits to colleges or universities through open days or a guest speaker at their school who gave them valuable advice or information. We also examine external factors influencing post-school decision-making, such as parents, siblings and wider family as well as work experience during Transition Year, summer holidays and as part of LCA. Students' own preferences and aspirations are explored in order to highlight the kinds of reasons for choosing particular post-school education pathways.

5.2 Career Guidance in the School

International evidence suggests that guidance counselling provision, such as individual guidance interviews, group-work sessions, access to career-related information and a wide range of work-related activities, can have a positive impact on the development of students' career-related skills (Morris et al., 1999). However, international literature has also high-lighted how certain groups lack information about the opportunities that are available (Thomas, 2001). Irish research shows, for example, that information about the higher education entry process, the range of choices available, and being able to assess interests in, and aptitude for, certain subject areas are central to successful college entry (McCoy and Byrne, 2011).

This section examines the forms of guidance provision in the case-study schools, highlighting variation in student opinion across the schools. Figure 5.1 highlights how guidance classes are the most common type of guidance provision across the case-study schools, with 60 per cent of students participating in four or more classes during their sixth year. Individual or one-to-one guidance counselling sessions are less common, with just 9 per cent of students attending four or more one-to-one sessions in their final year. The most common pattern was to have just one individual session with the guidance counsellor, which was the case for 46 per cent of students.

Figure 5.1: Access to guidance
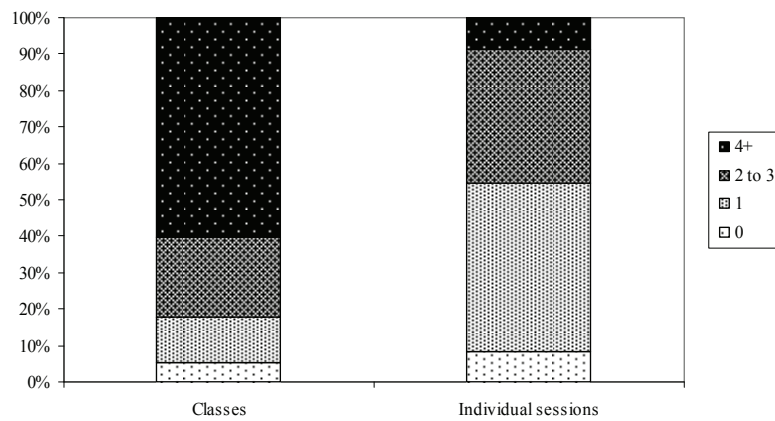
5.2.1 Career Guidance Classes

The majority of students were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the guidance provision they received (Figure 5.2). In keeping with previous research (McCoy et al., 2006), students were more satisfied with individual sessions than with guidance classes. The group interviews with students facilitated a more detailed exploration of student experiences of guidance in sixth year. In this subsection and subsection 5.2.2, we outline the perceived benefits of career guidance classes and one-to-one sessions respectively. Constraints on guidance provision are discussed in subsection 5.2.3.

Figure 5.2: Satisfaction with guidance classes and individual sessions
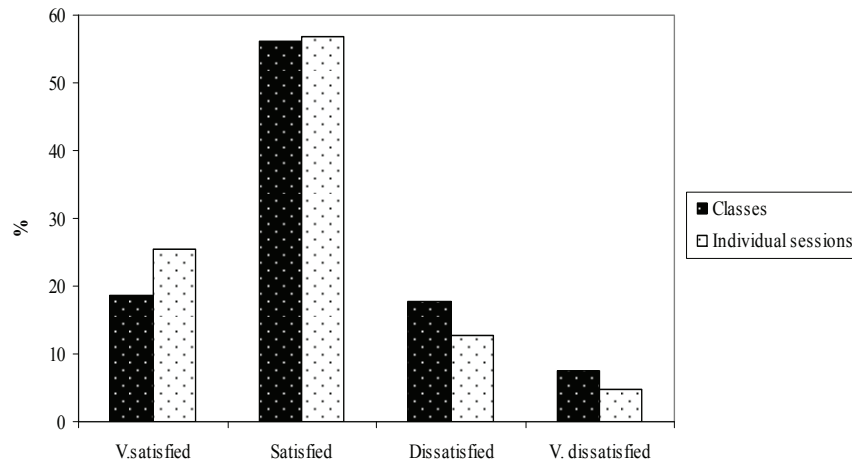
Provision of Information

For some students, guidance classes were seen as helpful to them in making a decision about what to do after leaving school by providing information on a range of options:

> It's good [career guidance class] because it gives you an idea of what you want to do…

> Yeah, it helps you, pretty much helps you to choose what you want. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Some of those who were unsure what they wanted to do when they leave school found that career guidance class gave them information about a broad range of options, careers and education pathways:

> [You] just go over the different options.

> Careers.

> Yeah, the different points needed for courses.

> The different options of where you want to go, the different pathways into each occupation, whatever you want to do. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

> Well we do, like we find out about FÁS and all these [courses].

> They do like, they're good like, they find you all the options, they set you up so that, for every situation. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Students in some schools spoke about the help they received in career guidance class when filling out their CAO forms:

> They're quite helpful really.

> It is quite helpful that we did that.

> And if you couldn't do it at home they had classes in the school to do them on the computers and the teachers were there to do it with us. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Other students discussed how in career guidance class their teacher was helpful in giving them information about access courses and the grants available to them if they did go to college:

> The only thing is she has been helping us with the access, you know, in case we do want to go to college then it might help us with points and finance when we get there. She also gives … information on any talks that are happening within the colleges, just we can go to them. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Some differences emerged in the type of career guidance provided to different Leaving Certificate programmes, with LCA students being given information about FÁS courses and PLC colleges. As the LCA is aimed at preparing students for employment, guidance classes described the role of trade unions in employment with students:

> *Interviewer*: What sort of things would you cover in that class then?
>
> Union rights, rights in the workplace.
>
> Unions and how to get into the union, and stuff like that, yeah.
>
> … How to get in to colleges, like, FÁS
>
> FÁS, and going to [PLC college]. (Argyle Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

Students liked the fact that the guidance class could be tailored to suit the various interests of students. In Park Street, a number of students wanted to work in trades and the guidance counsellor had given them information on how to go about it:

> A load of people in our class want to do trades and stuff so he's doing a load on that.
>
> ... And he's done a bit on the army as well, on cadetship. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Similarly, students in Dawes Point felt that their guidance counsellor listened to them and was proactive in organising activities like work experience or trips to colleges of interest:

> If you were interested in just say block laying or something … he'd try and organise something for you to go out for a week and get experience.
>
> Tomorrow there's an open day down in the [name of IOT], he'll bring the three of us down and he's going to introduce me to one of the people at the head of the course that I want to do for the interview. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

In some working-class schools, many of the students wished to enter the labour market directly when they left school. This group felt their teacher gave them 'ideas' and tailored the class to suit students' needs:

> Done a load of work [in class], you know, like gave out a load of sheets and you'd to write about what we are going to do. Just a few ideas.

> A 1 to 10 in jobs. You put down like what kind of job you'd like to do like, and she'd give you the points.

> Yeah, the points.

> Tells you want kind of a person, what kind of a person you are, whether you are working or indoors or likes using your head or stuff. (Lang Street, boys' school, working-class intake)

Many students commented on the personal commitment and helpfulness of their guidance counsellors:

> If you wanted the information all you have to do it to ask Mr. [name] and he would have got you the prospectus.

> Yeah, he would, he's good like that.

> He'd get you the prospectus for the colleges.

> Yeah, he's one of the best teachers in the school. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

> Our teacher, he's really good and whatever you want he'll help you, so if you want something specific he'll just get it for you, he'll do it like, give it to you no bother.

> …You could ask in class and he'd have it for you the next day.

> You could ask him in class for something and he'll show it to you like. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Students appear to respond well when they are provided with all the options through information leaflets and college prospectuses. For students in Belmore Street, the guidance counsellor prepared a monthly newsletter to advise them of any changes or more up-to-date information:

> She [guidance counsellor] always has letters and prospectuses coming in for people. She stacks them outside her room so that if we want them we can take them … She does a newsletter of the breaking news, you know, the kind of most up to date, you know, changes in courses and that's really good. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Aptitude Testing

Many students felt that they benefitted from the aptitude tests carried out in career guidance class. Students in Argyle Street liked that their guidance counsellor had provided tests and talked through their interests and their likely results in the Leaving Certificate:

> We all did like an aptitude test, like a test that shows you what kind of job area you'd be best suited to by choosing options and stuff. And we'd discuss which one you came out highest in and what you wanted to get, how many points you wanted to get, and how many points your course needs and just your general subject level. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Other students in Dawes Point found it helpful that their guidance counsellor worked through their interests and hobbies and provided aptitude and IQ tests in order to find out what courses might interest them:

> We had a thing like last year it took the whole day, it was like an exam but it was testing you in your computer skills.

> IQ test … Yeah, they ask you a load of questions and it comes up with what job would mostly suit you and that. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

Not all students were equally positive, however, since some students in Fig Lane felt that the aptitude test 'states the obvious' and was not of any real help to them in making their decisions:

> Oh, Centigrade, yeah, we did something this year to see what we are interested in just to help us.

> Interviewer: Was it any use?

> Yeah …

> Well it kind of states the obvious like.
>
> It kind of points out what you knew already. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

In addition to the guidance classes and aptitude tests, many schools facilitated access to guest speakers or college open days as part of the overall guidance programme.

Guests or Visiting Speakers

Students were positive about visiting speakers who came to the school to talk to them about post-school education courses or careers:

> They come in like, it was really good, there's only been a few open days but loads of people come in and talk about...
>
> It's like people come to talk about agricultural science or like law or nursing or the Guard, the Guard business, the Cadets or … Army. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Students could then follow up on the information they received with their guidance counsellor:

> And if you are interested you go to those talks.
>
> Or if you like if you ask Ms. [Guidance Counsellor] she'll go 'well I'll do my best to try get someone in to talk to you'.
>
> Yeah, she's really good like that. If you said like, listen, I haven't known much about nursing, she could try and get … a nurse to come in and talk to you about it. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

When asked about their decision-making process, students felt that some of the guest speakers were helpful in providing information about certain college courses and careers:

> We had a speaker in for the hotel management course and … they'd call out saying this will be on at a certain time and you'd go to the room. I went to the hotel management talks and I wasn't even putting it down but now I have it down like after that so I thought it was good anyway. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

People from professions, such as nurses and guards, in addition to representatives from colleges and universities, were the most common type of speaker visiting schools:

> The business school from Dublin came down didn't they?
>
> Yeah, [name of university].
>
> *Interviewer*: Were they any help?
>
> Yeah, because it kind of showed you the facilities and what you could do there and like the social life part. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

In Belmore Street, students had a wide variety of different forms of guidance provided by their teacher though visiting speakers and past pupils, covering careers ranging from 'paramedics' to 'accountants, auctioneers' (girls' school, mixed intake). In Hay Street, a working-class school, students had a guest speaker who explained to them about doing an apprenticeship:

> One came in about, he came in about the building part of it and just telling us what we'd need and what kind of courses we could do, the work, so many days work and then so many in the classroom then. What we'd be qualified as after the course finished. (Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)

Some students, however, appeared disappointed by guest speakers and people that came to talk to them about various colleges. They felt that the speakers were trying to 'sell' their courses and did not provide them with specific information:

> We had just talks from colleges, they don't tell you about the jobs, they're just trying to sell you, get you to go there.
>
> … It's not really people who are in doing the stuff.
>
> It's not really about courses or anything, it's just about the colleges. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Open Days

In addition to guest speakers, students were positive about, and appeared to benefit from, going to open days in universities or institutes of technology. In many cases, these trips influenced what courses they put on their CAO application form:

> On the open day that I went to, the college that I want to go to, I had great fun that day and that's what really kind of drew me towards that. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

> They are good because like you get to see what it's actually like, the campus and how to get down there, how to get to where you are going as well. It's good. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Students felt that they particularly benefitted from talking to college students which helped them with their decisions regarding higher education choices:

> They [open days] were good for getting the prospectus books and all that sort of stuff.

> You can talk to college students, they'd be at the stalls and you could ask them what it's like in college and all that. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

> Like the students bringing you around, they were really helpful because they loved it and you could tell by the way they were explaining that they loved it and they made me want to do it more so that was really good … And [name of college] as well, all the students were there, they were all at the weekend days and all the students came and told, were talking. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

In some cases, their trips ruled out certain options and confirmed their decisions about others:

> I was in [name of university], [name of university] and that was it, in [name of university] I went up because I thought it would be good. I just hated the place straight away, I didn't like it. I wasn't into the college layout or anything like that and then the topics covered were really strange. So I just pretty much decided straight away on [name

of university] then before I'd been there. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Students also appeared to benefit from attending the annual FÁS open days and Higher Options Conference held in Dublin and organised by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors:

> We went to Higher Options and if you went and asked someone about something they'd tell you all about the course.
>
> That was very, we got loads of books…
>
> Talking to other people on if they liked their courses. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Students from the LCA class in Argyle Street felt that the trip to the FÁS open day was helpful in making up their minds about what they wanted to do:

> When we went to see the colleges under FÁS and stuff, I kind of got an idea of what it will be like, and would they be interested in taking it. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students, however, felt that they were ignored when it came to seeing guest speakers or going to open days for various colleges. This group of LCA students from Dawson Street were frustrated with their career guidance as guest speakers for a particular college were invited to the school while they were out on work experience:

> Not helpful at all.
>
> Like the teachers said that she'd organise for [name of college] to come so that we can see them like and when we were on our work experience she ordered it and they came in when we were on our work experience.
>
> So we never got to see [name of college]. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Despite the fact that students in Dawson Street wished to see guest speakers at the school or go to open days of various colleges, staff mem-

bers appeared to have clear ideas of the career paths of LCA students which focussed on apprenticeships:

> For the LCAs, I would try and develop, well I've got apprenticeships mostly for young lads or girls who wish to go that direction and I'd have good links with them. Also employers, I have a standard sort of training facility with a local dentist here. He trains dental nurses and most of them come from LCA as well. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

Other students in Barrack Street, a working-class girls' school, were also frustrated by their guidance counsellor's approach to open days for colleges and universities. They felt that their school did not encourage them to attend them or did not believe them when they said they were interested in going:

> Now that you need to go they won't let you go.
>
> Or they won't let you go, they say…'you aren't even interested in this college' and I say I want to go to the open day.
>
> You have to see them to see if you like them, you know what I mean.
>
> They are telling you to go to the open days, to see if you want to go there.
>
> You are only allowed to go to one. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Some students felt that being given the option of three open days was not enough and suggested that the school should provide transport for students wishing to visit colleges:

> We were given a list of open days and we had to decide to go ourselves.
>
> You were only allowed to go to three of them, an option of three.
>
> And like I think the school should have organised transport to the open days as well. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Other students felt that the open days were a waste of time and they found out very little about courses and just 'walked around' the college:

> They're kind of a waste of time.
>
> Just a day off school.
>
> … They're really bad actually, all you do is walk around.
>
> … And no one ever goes to the lectures, well I never did.
>
> … It's just to look and see what the college is like, it's not actually to see what courses they have. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

These students from Barrack Street attended just one open day and only spent ten minutes in the college:

> They sent us to an open day in one college that was about all.
>
> That was it.
>
> We went out ten minutes and came back … I only walked in one door and walked out the other door. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

This group of students was also critical of not being allowed to attend more than one open day.

5.2.2 One-to-one Guidance Counselling Sessions

Good quality individual career guidance is important to the development of learning outcomes, such as career-related skills, especially opportunity awareness, career exploration and decision-making skills (Morris et al., 1999). In general, students were positive about one-to-one sessions with their guidance counsellor since these provided an opportunity to discuss their individual career plans. In Dawes Point, some of the students felt that these one-to-one sessions directly helped them decide what to do after school:

> It's [one-to-one career guidance] helped me decide like what I want to do so I really wasn't sure until I came in to the end of fifth year or sixth year like, I was kind of, I didn't really know what to do. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

Similarly, one student in Dixon Street had made their decision based on the information given to them by their guidance counsellor:

> My guidance counsellor, she helped me, she showed me all the different booklets on the different colleges and she knows a few people that are in the different colleges. And she found [name of institute of technology] is the best so I'm going to apply for that. (Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

For some students in Barrack Street, the information they received in one-to-one sessions made them change their mind about their post-school pathways:

> I knew exactly what I wanted for me to do after for college like and … she started telling me all the good things and bad things about doing it and then it totally changed my mind. And I seen what it was like so then I changed my mind, she was telling me the good things about doing it, so then I have a proper clear vision of what I want to do. (Barrack Street, girls, working-class)

It is interesting to note that all three of these quotes come from students attending working-class schools, where, in the absence of a family background in higher education, many are especially reliant on school staff for advice and encouragement (see McCoy et al., 2010).

Some students found their guidance counsellor helpful, particularly when they had specific forms to be filled in:

> Well, I was applying to colleges in England so I went through the whole application with the guidance counsellor.
>
> Interviewer: And did you find that helpful?
>
> Yeah, because it's a whole different system so he just talked me through it all. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Many students compared the one-to-one sessions with their guidance counselling classes and felt that they were better because of the individual attention they received:

> They're good because if you've something to say to her then you know you can go up but in class like, ah just…

And then they ring, if you want to know something they ring up, I wanted to know something about [name of university] and they rang up, I thought that was really helpful.

The one to ones are worth it.

Yeah, the one to ones are better.

Better than the classes. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Instead of having career guidance classes because loads of our time is taken up, they should take each person individually, fill out the form with them, literally fill out the form. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Students particularly liked when their guidance counsellor took an interest in them and helped them to make a decision rather than tell them what to do:

She doesn't like burst into a decision. She just helps you make up your mind as you do it with her and she just points you in the right direction.

And she bases it on what you like, not trying to change her mind.

Yeah, she goes out of her way, like she tries really hard. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Some students appreciated the fact that the career guidance counsellor showed them more than one way to access the course they want:

They tell you the back way as well.

Yeah.

They tell you the other way around it like.

Whereas other teachers say oh you need this and this. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

For students in Argyle Street who had specific courses in mind, the one-to-one sessions provided details on the types of courses available, whether in arts or sport:

> *Interviewer*: What sort of things did you cover?
>
> What are your interests and stuff like that and to judge from what you're interested in what college course might suit you best. I've gone for arts because it's what interests me the most.
>
> *Interviewer*: Did you find yours helpful?
>
> Yeah, she asked me what I was interested in and I said sport like. So she made a list of all the sport courses in Ireland and what would most suit me, what ones could I get into with my results like and so it's very helpful like. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

For students who were positive about their guidance counsellor, being available to students was a major factor. Students in the LCA class in Dixon Street appreciated when their guidance counsellor made themselves available and followed up on student requests:

> She's helping me get my application done for college. So she helped a lot.
>
> …We have a guidance class and then if we need to talk to her or anything you can go to her like. You just say can I talk to you later or whatever.
>
> *Interviewer*: And she's mostly available?
>
> Yeah, she'll make herself available for you. (Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

In Park Street, students felt that they got a lot of information from their guidance counsellor who appeared to be available whenever they wanted to visit him:

> You can go to him whenever you want. Yeah, we have meetings as well. I just had a meeting there not so long ago. You get a lot of info on what you could do and what your options are and what you'd be best suited for. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

International research also shows that subject teachers and other school personnel have an influence upon the choices made by young people (Keys et al., 1998; Maychell et al., 1998; Munro and Elsom, 2000). Some students in this study discussed how they received guidance from other staff at the school, such as their subject teachers. In Hay Street, for example, one student had discussed their career options with their teacher who had given them information on alternatives to going to college, such as doing a trade:

> There's a teacher over there like who explained more about the carpentry and joiners. He said that if I didn't make it for that, in college like, he said the PLC course would be a very good course, even if I didn't go to college after doing it like. I'd have something, a FETAC qualification at the end of it, so, you know I got advice like that as well. (Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)

5.2.3 Limitations on Guidance Provision

Research in different national contexts shows that young people would generally like more help with their decision-making in school (Keys et al., 1998; Maychell et al., 1998). Despite the positive experiences of meetings and one-to-one sessions with guidance counsellors, many of the students in this study were disappointed with the level of guidance they received in school. Figure 5.3 shows that just under two-thirds of those surveyed felt that they had enough information from the school to make their decision. At the same time, 80 per cent of young people in this study stated that they would like to know more about the jobs and courses available to them. This appears contradictory but may reflect that students appreciate the constraints on guidance provision and understand that they need to source some information elsewhere. As well as preparing for the Leaving Certificate exam, sixth year students are faced with making decisions about the education, training and employment options they wish to pursue. Just over half of the students felt that it was too early to decide what to do for the rest of their lives, indicating a variation in preparedness for the pathways ahead of them.

Figure 5.3: Satisfaction with guidance provision
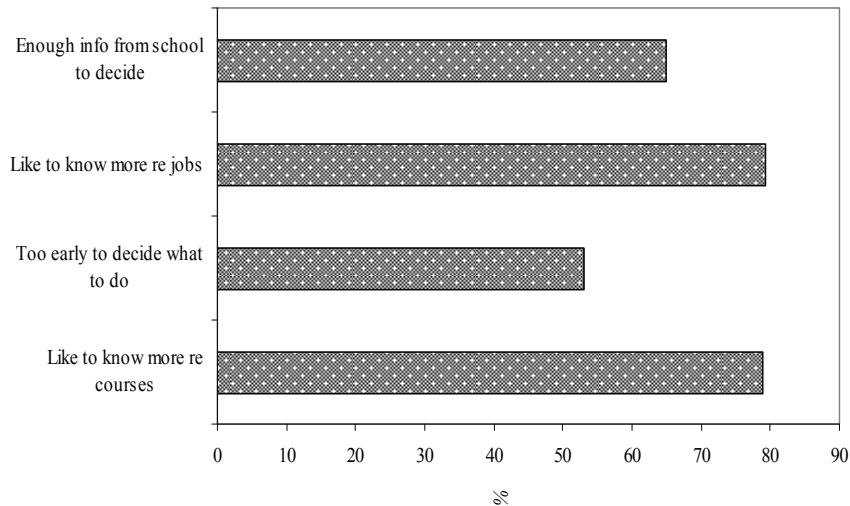
The Amount and Timing of Guidance

International research on guidance provision consistently highlights how young people would have found it more useful to have received career guidance at an earlier stage in their school career (Keys et al, 1998; Maychell et al., 1998). Similarly, recent Irish research has shown that students are positive about early information and support in relation to entry into higher education (McCoy et al., 2010). Many students interviewed as part of this study felt that their career guidance came too late and reported that this advice and information would have been more beneficial if they had received it at an earlier stage. This was particularly the case for students who needed certain subjects or subject levels to access particular college courses but realised too late as many of them had chosen their subjects and subject levels when they finished their Junior Certificate:

> I mean you are in fifth year, you've picked your subjects and you are going oh I like that course but I can't do it because I don't have the subjects for it, can't do it. … The teachers could come into the class and tell you what their subject is about for Leaving Cert. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

> In third, fourth year when you were picking your subject choices on what you need to get into certain courses that you might be thinking about doing because we weren't told any of that at all, when we were picking options for Leaving Cert. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

For some students, they realised that their choices were limited because of decisions they had made before their Junior Certificate exams when they did not know what they wanted to do:

> She gives you information about courses and like I picked my courses, or to be a wide range you know, like science and art and that kind of craic and then I was looking at the CAO form and it's like I can't do that because I don't do sciences, I can't do that because I don't do business. Should have got it [guidance] a long time ago like. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

These comments echo remarks made in fifth year, where many students felt they had had an unclear view of what was involved in certain Leaving Certificate subjects before choosing them (see Smyth and Calvert, 2011).

Some students who had taken ordinary or foundation level subjects found out too late the implications of their choices and had to change their plans for post-school education as a result:

> I wanted to teach and she goes you're not going to get the points. I was like but I'm going to try and she goes but you're not doing enough higher subjects, right ok, so then I just dropped that so. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

A staff member at Park Street also felt that guidance came too late for many students at the school:

> They get guidance a little too late … you've only contact with them at Leaving Cert level … which for a lot is a little bit late to start thinking about career. The seed should be sown much, much earlier on it. (Park Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

Even in sixth year, students reported varying experiences of access to guidance. In one school, students interviewed expressed concern about the lack of guidance provision in their school in sixth year:

> We don't have a guidance teacher.
>
> *Interviewer*: You don't?
>
> No, so that's actually probably the worst thing about school for sixth years like, because I've a few things I want to ask but there's no one there to.
>
> Yeah I think everyone has questions like but… (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

A broader issue was evident among some students who found the process of deciding on a future career very daunting. In these circumstances, it was felt that school-based guidance was of little assistance unless students had already decided on the path to take:

> Just the guidance counsellor, if you go to her like, she'll just ask you what you want to do, you have to tell her what you want to do and then she'll just tell you, if you don't really know what you want to do there's not a lot of information.
>
> There's nothing if you don't know what you want to do, there's nothing really like. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Views on the Content of Guidance Classes

Another issue which arose during the interviews related to the content of guidance classes, which many of the students felt were too narrowly framed in terms of third-level choices and CAO applications. There appeared to be a relative neglect of non-third level educational and training opportunities such as PLCs, training courses and apprenticeships (see McCoy et al., 2006, p. 191). In Dawson Street, one student had to research their own options as the guidance counsellor appeared to focus solely on going to college:

> There was some things I had to look into myself a bit more but even just for the other options, other things you can do after finishing school apart from going to college. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

In Dawes Point, students appeared frustrated by the emphasis on going to college. Some felt they did not get enough information on trades:

> *Interviewer*: And what kinds of things would you cover?
>
> Mostly college, PLC courses and that.
>
> If you want to do a trade, it's no good.
>
> Because they don't talk about trades really.
>
> They don't talk about trades really you have to go and do that your-self. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

Similarly, students in Lang Street students felt that the guidance counsel-lor spent all their time on preparing students for college:

> I'm not going to college either so I didn't get any attention. (Lang Street, boys' school, working-class intake)

Some of those interviewed mentioned the option of taking the 'back door' into certain careers or courses, either as a mature student or through intermediate courses. Some students appeared a little frustrated by the lack of options for them if they were not successful in getting adequate CAO points:

> They don't tell you about all the back doors into courses … Like if you don't get the points. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students felt that the onus was on them to get all the information they needed. They felt this was time consuming and would have liked their teacher to help them:

> Spent the whole lot of the first three classes looking for like forms, application forms for colleges to do hairdressing. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Even where students intended on going to college, many felt that far too much time was spent on completing the CAO form. They felt that this was a simple exercise that did not merit the amount of time given to it in class:

> Even when we do have it, it's useless, they do nothing for you….
>
> *Interviewer*: What kinds of things do you cover in the class?

Nothing.

How to fill out the CAO.

PLC courses.

How to fill out the CAO form, all you have to do is tick a box.

Your woman spent three classes on that…

How are you going to make a mistake writing your name? (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Interviewer: What kind of things did you do in them [classes]?

CAO, CAO, CAO.

Just went through the CAO.

Oh I'm sick of the CAO.

…We spent seven weeks on filling out a CAO form. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

In keeping with Figure 5.3 above, students argued that it would be far more beneficial to get information on different types of careers and occupations, thus widening their horizons:

Interviewer: What kind of things would you like to know more about?

What different occupations are like.

You should be told about things that you'd never think of as well…

There's courses out there that you've never heard of that you might actually be interested in. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

The pressure to study and maximise their time at school is evident in the following quotation where students would prefer to be notified of what subjects are to be covered in guidance class and they could then decide whether it would suit them; if it did not, they could then go and study:

> I think they should do it like he should tell you what's on this week
> and if you are interested in that go, if you are not just go and study.
> (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Teacher Expectations and Guidance Provision

Research has shown the nature of guidance provided can reflect the expected pathways to be taken by young people, with higher education being seen as the 'automatic' route for those attending middle-class schools (see, for example, McDonough, 1997, on the US context). Research on Irish young people by McCoy and Byrne (2011) highlights how within some disadvantaged school contexts, guidance can be more focussed on specific post-school options, such as further education, which are considered more 'appropriate' and require fewer 'points' in the Leaving Certificate exam (McCoy and Byrne, 2011). In the current study, some students from working-class schools similarly felt that their guidance counsellor had low expectations of them, reporting that they felt they were capable of much more in terms of post-school education and employment opportunities. In Barrack Street, instead of spending too much time on the CAO application process, many students felt that guidance counsellors overemphasised PLC courses and, as a result, they felt discouraged from applying for third-level courses:

> For people who want to go onto college like they [are] just shoving
> PLC courses down your neck. Like there's nothing wrong with PLC
> courses and all but if you have your heart set on college like and
> someone's telling you PLC courses all the time and telling you that
> you won't get into college like. Actually saying you are not going to
> get into college, don't bother trying like or anything like.

> …That's why I don't even talk to her [guidance counsellor] about
> college, I just do it myself now. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

The same group of students felt that their guidance counsellor 'put them down' and felt that she was surprised to see so many of them applying to go to college through the CAO process. They felt that everyone should be given 'an equal chance' and her role should have been to encourage them:

> I can't even talk to my guidance counsellor. Just, she just puts me off every time I go to her like so I'll do it myself.
>
> And she shouldn't be doing that, she should be encouraging you. Like when we were doing the CAO she was like 'this is a joke I haven't seen this many people filling out CAOs in all my life'… you know … in the room.
>
> Basically putting you down like.
>
> … There was 20 of us or something and she was like 'wow this has never been like this and all'. As if to say to people like 'what are you doing this for?'.
>
> Like she should give everyone an equal chance like, whether you are able for it or not like. If they want to do it, let them like. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

These comments are particularly relevant in light of the working-class profile of Barrack Street school and raise an important issue around teacher and guidance counsellor expectations and the lack of information on, and attention given to, higher education entry in working-class schools more generally (see McCoy et al., 2010).

Findings also show that a mismatch of expectations between students and staff existed in other schools. In Argyle Street, a socially mixed school, for example, some students felt that their guidance counsellor discouraged them from applying for what they wanted and argued that they should be 'realistic' about their course choices:

> But the career guidance counsellor always puts us down as well, like she'll tell us … She doesn't even say what if to me like, she says 'I don't think, you have to be realistic [name of student]', I go 'what do you mean realistic that's what I want, I'll work for them points if that's what I want to do'. 'Ah but you have to be realistic why don't you go for this', I don't want to go for that like you know what I mean, because what I want to do is not in a PLC course, you know what I mean. (Argyle Street, coed, socially mixed intake)

This echoes McCoy et al.'s (2010) finding that students attending the same school may be subject to very different expectations from staff, depending on their prior achievement.

Other students in Park Street felt that when they told their guidance counsellor what they wanted to do, they seemed to focus on the amount of points needed to do the course rather than ways in which the student could reach their goal:

> They ask you what you want to do and then you just say whatever, say you wanted to do engineering and then they just tell you 'oh you need so many points for this' and I know that like. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

In this boys' school, students described how their guidance counsellor seemed to advise them all to do the same course:

> Like at the start of the year, our first career guidance teacher, she brought us in one at a time. We did an aptitude test last year and then she brought us in to discuss the results and like out of say five lads, me, him and I don't know who else, she told us all to do health and safety. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Other students felt that their guidance counsellor focussed on careers that few of them were interested in and presented these options in an overly positive light:

> She showed us something on a career probably no one was interested in and like made it out to be the best career in the world.

> The best career going. We watched a video for one day about being a bar man like. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Students also found that their guidance counsellor lacked time and understanding when students did not know what they wanted to do:

> There's such a rush on the man like.

> Throwing careers at you, do you want to do this, okay would you like to do that.

> Then he kind of gets real angry.

> Oh angry, if you don't like a college. If you don't like a college now, there's war. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Lack of Time

During the interviews, students were particularly disappointed with the lack of time given to guidance counselling at school. Many felt that their guidance counsellors were over-burdened combining their teaching work and role as guidance counsellor. The interviews highlight insufficient time allocation for guidance and guidance-related activities and students appear to be missing out on the guidance and counselling they need (see McCoy et al., 2006, p. 190). Research also shows that many guidance counsellors face the situation of juggling subject teaching with their guidance responsibilities. McCoy et al. (2006) found that in the context of limited resources, guidance counsellors found juggling teaching and guidance difficult and it impinged on their capacity to deliver a comprehensive guidance service to their students. This is particularly relevant for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, where parental experience of college entry may be absent and where siblings and peers are not familiar with the higher education process. In Barrack Street, a working-class school, students felt that the information they received was not enough and that their guidance counsellor was too busy and did not have enough time:

> And it's not like can I go to her, if I said Miss can I go to you, she'd say ah I'm too busy, I'm too busy. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

As described above, students appeared to benefit a lot from one-to-one sessions with their guidance counsellor; however, some students in the LCA class in Dawson Street complained about the lack of time available for these sessions:

> One to one but they say come back and they'll give you more prospectuses but she never, you never get back to her.
>
> She never gave us one to one.
>
> And you go and put an appointment on the board and then your name is rubbed out because she can't fit you in. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Similarly in Fig Lane, students felt the guidance counsellor did not have enough time for these meetings:

> The meetings were good.
>
> It was so hard to get a meeting with him though.
>
> You have a time but then he just doesn't come or he has someone in.
>
> Or he's on the phone.
>
> So you are just standing outside his room for about half an hour waiting. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Students in Harris Street felt that more guidance counsellors were needed in the school in order to facilitate individual sessions:

> I think they should know each and every single person in sixth year and their lives, I really do, like there should be at least five of them or something. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Previous research has shown that guidance counsellors have difficulties balancing a teaching role and a pastoral role which involves promoting a 'caring, supportive, non-disciplinarian image' for students (see McCoy et al., 2004, p. 192). In some schools, this dual role appeared to affect the level of trust, confidentiality and respect between students and their guidance counsellor, given the blurred boundaries between 'teacher' and 'counsellor':

> I think if there's a guidance counsellor at the school they shouldn't be, they shouldn't be teaching you the subject, they should be just solely advising you. So you can go to them but if [you] have them for a subject you are not going to go to them, I don't feel I could trust them. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Staff in Dawson Street also raised the issue around combining teacher and guidance counselling among LCA students in particular. It was felt that teaching them a subject and being their guidance counsellor did not work:

> I find sometimes they don't open up to me and I think that's because I have them for about four or five subjects that I'm not seen as a guidance counsellor to them anymore.
>
> … And I would find the relationship quite different there, that sometimes I have to chase them for work and that's what I don't like. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students in Fig Lane talked about receiving professional guidance from private guidance counsellors outside school. One student, who was unhappy with the level of career guidance at school, went to a private guidance counsellor, finding this very helpful:

> I went to someone outside of school for careers guidance.
>
> Interiewer: What was that like?
>
> I just thought it was so bad here. It was really good. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Another student spoke about going to a local guidance counsellor who gave them 'lots of ideas':

> There are other people outside the school that do it as well, I've been to one down in [name of town], he sends you all these forms and stuff and you fill it out and he analyses them and you go see him and he gets it in his head what might be good for you to do and he gave me lots of ideas, he was very helpful. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

During the interviews, students were asked what could help them to make their decisions about the future more easily. In relation to choosing courses in further or higher education, some of the students in Belmore Street highlighted the difficulties in choosing subjects in college that they had no experience of in school:

> Because like there's people like saying they want to be whatever but like if you haven't got a subject to see what that's like, you're not gonna be properly prepared for it like when you went to college. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Some students in Harris Street therefore felt that it would help if they could attend colleges or first year lectures at the beginning of sixth year to get an idea of what specific courses were like:

> It would have made sense, say at the start of sixth year [if] we got a week off and we went to lectures, to first year lectures in college, so you know what you're in for because you really don't know until you're there on your first day. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Similarly, students in Lang Street suggested that, as with work experience in Transition Year, a period of time in sixth year could be spent attending classes in university which would help them figure out what they wanted to do:

> Just like what's involved in the course like. And what's involved in the job after like. Maybe given indications, again like so that your work experience in fourth year or whatever when you pick it, you want it to be, you'd need another one in sixth year, but like instead of working experience you go to the course and do classes, like in university. (Lang Street, boys' school, working-class intake)

This section has focused on the provision of formal guidance in the school setting. The following section explores other influences on the decisions young people make.

5.3 Other Influences on Decision-Making

This section examines other factors which influence student decision-making in sixth year. We focus on the influence of parents, siblings and wider family networks, and examine how some students are influenced by their competence in certain subjects at school. We also highlight how a small proportion of students appear to have always known what they wanted to do from a young age. Others are influenced by work experience in which they have participated during Transition Year or the LCA programme and/or while working at summer jobs.

5.3.1 Family

Parents are seen as a key source of information and influence upon a young person's career choices. Evidence suggests that both career education and support from parents are important to help young people through the transition process (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Maychell et al., 1998; Munro and Elsom, 2000; Rolfe, 2000). Recent Irish research has shown that advice and support from parents can vary by social background and even within socio-economic groups. Focussing on young people from non-manual backgrounds, McCoy and Byrne (2011) suggest that parents from the lower non-manual group view the 'child as expert' in post-school decision-making and, although highly supportive of their decisions, did not push students in a particular direction. Our student cohort has been highly reliant on their families for advice on choices of programmes, subjects and subject levels throughout their schooling careers (Smyth et al., 2004, 2007) and parents regularly discuss post-school options with their children at senior cycle stage (Byrne and Smyth, 2011). Figure 5.4 shows that over three-quarters of sixth year students surveyed considered their mothers and fathers important or very important influences on post-school plans. Parents were followed in importance by the guidance counsellor at school (69 per cent). Over half of the students pointed to their friends as having an important influence. Subject teachers were also an important influence on a sizable group of students while tutors and year heads played a less important role at this stage.

There are relatively few differences between male and female students in the perceived importance of certain groups of people, although mothers are seen as a more important source of influence by girls than boys. Clear-cut differences are evident, however, according to the social class mix of the school (Figure 5.5). Students attending working-class schools are much more reliant than those in mixed or middle-class schools on school personnel, namely, the guidance counsellor, subject teachers and class tutors/year heads, in deciding on a future direction. It is worth noting that for these students, the guidance counsellor is as important an influence as their mother. Students in working-class schools are also more reliant on their friends than those in other schools. It would appear therefore that, in the absence of family-based knowledge of the educational system, especially of higher education, young people in

more disadvantaged school settings seek out a range of sources of information to decide on their future.

Figure 5.4: Influences on future plans (% 'very important'/ 'important')
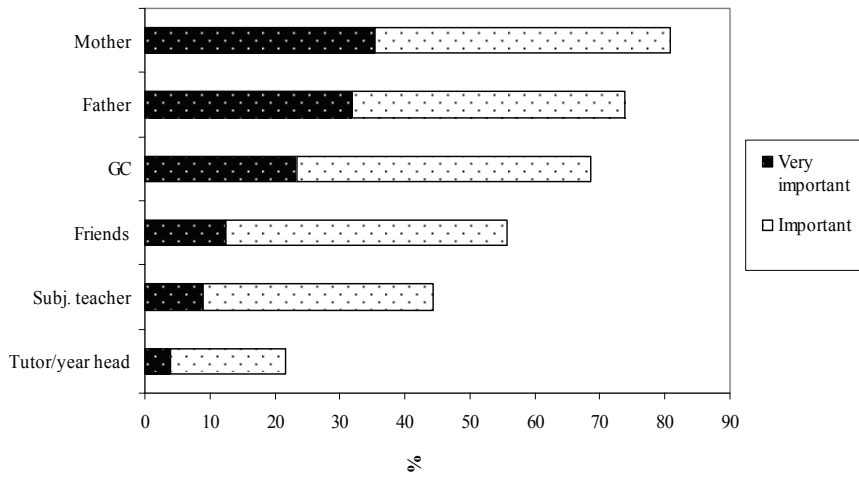
Figure 5.5: Proportion of different influences considered 'very important' or 'important' by social class mix of the school
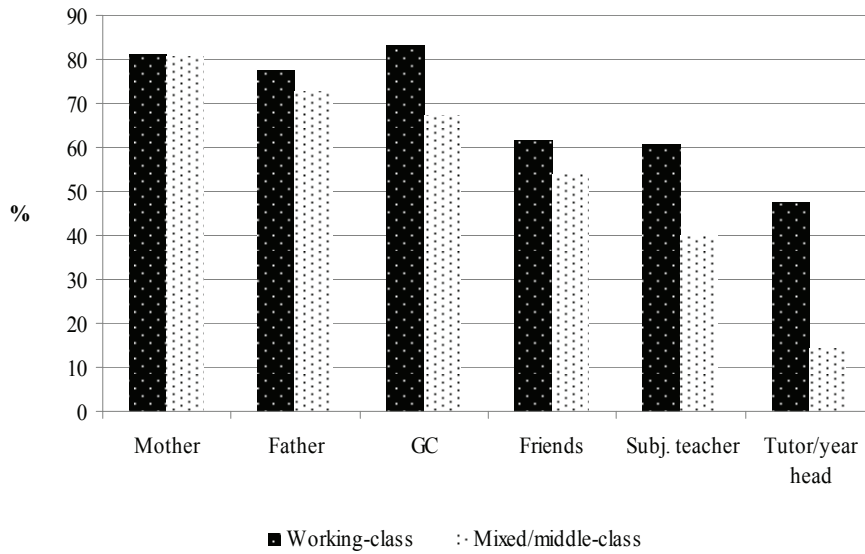
During interviews with young people in the case-study schools, the direct influence of parents in the decision-making process was evident among some students. For some students from mixed and middle-class schools, certain occupations such as engineering were 'in the family' so students applied for the same course in a number of universities and institutes for technology to make sure they were successful:

> My dad's an engineer and I'm good at drawing and my brother's an engineer and it's sort of in the family, I guess. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

For other students, their parents had brought them to their place of work and this had sparked their interest in pursuing relevant college courses:

> My dad is an engineer and he brought me to work a few times and showed me around and I kind of liked it so. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

In some cases, the choices of students differed from what their parents wanted them to do:

> Well I really like business, like I do Accounting and Economics, they are like my favourite subjects and my mum wanted me to do French because she thinks it's like EU and the age of modern languages and all that. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

In addition to their parents, some students relied on the experiences and advice of their older siblings and wider family. In some cases, the negative experiences of siblings in college informed what courses students applied for. One student interviewed was advised by her sister to apply for a general arts degree as she had taken a course in speech therapy and did not like it:

> *Interviewer*: How have you decided what course you might do?

> My sisters.

> … Yeah, one of them did speech therapy and she didn't like it so she was just saying to do arts and then you can do whatever you want after. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

In Fig Lane, a middle-class school where many students had family members with third-level qualifications, the experiences of older siblings meant that students obtained specific information about the content of courses for which they were applying:

> My sister helped me because she does law so she'd tell me what that is and then what subjects like in school would tell you. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Having an interest in certain subject areas and witnessing their siblings enjoying their courses or careers appeared to give students reassurance and confidence to apply for something similar:

> My sister is doing a primary teaching course as well, she's always drawing things and stuff and I said I'd love to do it. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

In addition to influencing the subjects to opt for in university, the colleges or institutes that parents, siblings and peers had attended also influenced student decisions:

> *Interviewer*: What's helped you to decide [which college you would like best]?
>
> I've older sisters so.
>
> *Interviewer*: So the same college as them?
>
> Yeah. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

> *Interviewer*: How did you decide what college to go to or what?
>
> My sister is in [name of university].
>
> … She loves it so. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

5.3.2 Favourite Subjects

Many students spoke about how doing well in a subject at school influenced their plans to go to college and what courses they applied for. Some students felt the decision should be based on their aptitude for cer-

tain subjects but thought that it was also important to have an interest in it as well:

> Whatever you've got an aptitude for as well, if you are rubbish at something you're not going to do it.

> … But interest as well, you could be really good at something but not have any interest in it. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Across many of the schools, those with an interest in Maths, Economics and Accountancy appeared to be clear about what they wanted to do:

> I was looking at civil engineering in [name of university]. Just I like, the subjects I like are kind of based on that, I like Maths and Physics, that kind of subjects and that's kind of what it's based on. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

> Might do something in economics, maths or something like that.

> …Your subjects kind of dictate what you can do.

> That's true, yeah.

> Whatever you're interested in. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

5.3.3 Always Wanted to Do It

Some of the interviews highlighted how some students had always had ideas as to what they wanted to do. In some cases, these aspirations had stemmed from hobbies they had had or simple interests as a child. One student in Argyle Street felt that he 'knew since third year' what he wanted to do and he had 'always liked construction' (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake). Another student from Belmore Street felt that she had made her decision to become a midwife when she was eleven years old:

> Ever since I was like eleven I didn't know what the words are like, you know delivering babies was like, but I just knew I wanted to do something with young children like. Like I have no brothers and sis-

ters so I always sort of had a fascination with like big families… like ever since I was small so I had an interest. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Other students spoke about having a 'passion' for a particular career such as architecture:

Interviewer: How have you decided which course to pick?

What you are interested in, what you have a passion for. It's like I know myself I want to do architecture and I have done for years so. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Similarly, other students aimed at working in areas where they already had an interest or a hobby:

I'm sporty and really enjoy it, I'd rather be out and about, kind of moving and doing stuff.

… I've been doing music as a pastime for 10 years so I knew a lot about it and I enjoy doing it. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

One student spoke about their interest in doing a dance course and had applied to colleges in Ireland and England:

I want to do dancing, I want to do a two year dance course, it's in Dublin and I'll do choreography and I applied for England … I've always been dancing my whole life like so I just want to do dancing. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

The decision-making process around what course to apply for is also clearly outlined by the following student from Park Street, who was basing his decision on his experience designing buildings and gardens and his aptitude for Physics and Maths:

I've always been kind of good at designing things, good at drawing things so, I've done a few things at home like designed parts of the house, what to do with the extension, just rough kind of blue prints I gave to the builders some time before and they said it was perfect … so I like designing things and building things. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

5.3.4 Work Experience

Student access to work experience depends on the senior cycle programme they take, with work experience representing an important component of the Transition Year and LCA programmes. For some students, their time spent on work experience during Transition Year, in LCA or during the summer months played an influential role in their post-school plans. For one Harris Street student, her decision to do veterinary medicine was made during her work experience in Transition Year:

> Work experience in fourth year, the best week of my life in the vets, so I was like I want to be a vet. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

When asked what influenced their career plans, some students in Belmore Street felt that their Transition Year work experience was important in shaping their decisions:

> We did our work experience.

> So we done work experience there, found that helpful. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

In some cases, work placements changed students' minds about possible options in post-school education:

> Oh I loved it [working in a national school]… Because I was full sure I was going to be something in Irish when I finish but then I done work experience and I didn't like it. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Others had worked in summer jobs and this influenced their decisions:

> Working, I worked out on sites now and I've seen what civil engineers can do and it's what I'm into. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

> Experience, I worked in a hairdressers and that's when I changed my mind from the other thing, option that I had, so like, no, I like hairdressing. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Some students spoke about doing work experience or summer work with an employer who they hoped would take them on when they finished school:

> I was working the last couple of years, kind of, I like working, doing a trade like.

> … I did carpentry as work experience but during the summer then I'd be working with other people. (Lang Street, boys' school, working-class intake)

5.3.5 Getting Enough Points

For students wishing to continue to third-level education, the type of college course chosen was heavily influenced by their ability to get certain grades in the Leaving Certificate exam and therefore enough CAO points to access the course. Many students were acutely aware of the CAO points system and the possibility of missing out on their first or second choice. The majority of students chose courses with points that they felt they could realistically attain but many suggested that they had put down first choices that they were unlikely to get:

> Well I'd like to do physio but the points are quite high so I've just put lots of different choices on my CAO.

> …Teaching, primary teaching, but I'm not sure, the points are too high. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Some students chose certain universities as they offered bonus points for certain subjects such as higher level Maths:

> *Interviewer*: And how did you decide on [name of university]?

> Pick up bonus points for honours maths so I thought it was the easiest one to get into. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

In some cases the high points associated with certain courses discouraged students from applying.

> She wants to be a nurse.

> You need points for a nurse.

> We are not given any options at all.

> No, nothing.

> I'd love to be at home, I'd be a midwife or social care but you wouldn't get the points. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

In other cases, students opted for specific colleges or courses where they knew the points for a new course would be low:

> It's a new course so the points will be low, entry level. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

> I asked [the guidance counsellor] which is the lowest points and it turns out it's a good enough course so it's grand. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

5.3.6 Getting into the Right College

The interviews highlight how for some students choices about third-level entry were influenced by the type of college or university they wished to go to. This choice process appears to be quite complex and influenced by a range of factors. Location was of major importance with the majority of those interviewed wishing to attend colleges close to home:

> Distance from home is kind of a factor for me. I could have picked [name of city] or [name of city] and I picked [name of city] in the end. Just a bit too awkward you know.

> I wanted to go to [name of city] but it's a bit far really like. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

For some students, going to a college or university that was within commuting distance was important and many would not consider going to another city or regional town:

> Dublin, you don't want to go down to like [name of town] or [name or regional city] or any place like that.

> Interviewer: You want to be in Dublin?

> Commuting distance. (Fig Lane, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students simply did not want to move away from home. They felt that their local university had all they needed and did not see the need to move elsewhere:

> Just I didn't want to leave like so, I wanted to stay in [name of regional city].

> Just if it's offered in [name of regional city] then I don't see the need to leave. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

In one school located near an institute of technology, students appeared to be influenced by its proximity:

> It's nice and close and you have the same subjects here as you would anywhere else. (Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)

For students in smaller towns, the location of the college to their home played a major part in their decision to apply for courses there:

> Well I chose [name of institute of technology] because … I don't want to be out of [name of town] because I live there and the college isn't that far away so that's why I chose there. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

A number of students spoke about not wanting to go to any college in Dublin as they 'hated it' or would feel out of their depth:

> Dublin to me now would just scare me completely, just you know so much hustle and bustle and just.

> So many people. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

One student talked about how she did not want to go to Dublin but may have to if she wanted to do a course in primary school teaching:

> I put down all the national, where you can do national school teaching.

> I love [name of regional city], I just love the city, I can't stand Dublin so I kind of think of that.

> … I kind of thought if I went to Dublin I'd be completely lost and I'd be out of my depth.

> I thought that as well but then I just kind of got over it and like if I want to do it. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Staff in one school noted a gender difference in who was willing to travel from home to study. They found that boys were more likely to leave if they were in a group whereas the girls at the schools were more independent and 'motivated':

> I would find the girls that are a wee bit older are motivated. I'm going to go anywhere and friends don't have a big part to play. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

Another staff member at Park Street felt that students at the school tended to stay local for financial reasons but also because they 'have a cushy number at home':

> Well, I suppose one of them one would be financial on it, as well it takes time to adjust. They feel like mammy's at home to look after them, have dinners and everything cooked for them. So that they're not facing the trauma of having to cook for themselves and they probably have a cushy enough number at home and it, they're sorta quite happy to stay there in it. (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

The cost of moving away to go to college also played a part in student decision-making. Despite wanting to study animal care in England, one student spoke about how costs and not wanting to move away influenced her decision:

> I want to go down the route of more practical animal care and there's actually no courses in Ireland for that but right now I don't think I will go to England, I think I'll stay in Ireland just because of the cost and I don't really want to go over to a different country. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Other students spoke about accommodation and transport costs and how this influenced which colleges or universities they applied for:

> If you can afford to go there, it's alright if it's [name of regional town] because you pay for your bus up or your car or whatever but if

> it was outside you'd have your living expenses and you'd have to get a job on top of your work, that was the main factor then as well.

> I was able to choose [name of university] because my aunt lives up there so I could stay with her. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

A small number of students spoke about wanting to move away from home and looking forward to a 'change of scenery':

> Dublin is the only place you can really go, you can go [name of regional city] but it's a new course and it's a different course and you can go to [name of regional city] but it's a private college as well so Dublin just seemed like the most logical because it's the kind of centre of Ireland like.

> *Interviewer*: What about the rest of you, how did you decide?

> Just wanted to leave [where they lived].

> … That was the specific reason and as well change of scenery as well would be nice. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

One student spoke about looking forward to a new experience and although he had relatives there, he wanted to experience 'different things':

> *Interviewer*: Okay and how did you decide what college to pick?

> Like it's just [name of regional city] because it's local but like then again I want to go to [name of UK city] or Dublin just to kind of new experiences or whatever like. Go abroad and see different things like. (Lang Street, boys' school, working-class intake)

Some students were influenced by the atmosphere in some colleges which they felt were 'more homely'. One student from Fig Lane knew a number of members of staff at one college and this also influenced her decision:

> I know some of the lecturers up there and it's just more homely and I've been around the place. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Another student at Fig Lane had liked a university when she went on an open day but also knew of other students who were at the university or planned on going:

> I just loved it, we went there and like I know people that go there and that, I just loved it. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

> I was told that [name of IOT] was one of the best courses and then [name of IOT] is kind of near home. And plus I'd know people down in [name of regional town] as well. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

The reputation, prestige and positive atmosphere associated with some universities and colleges also emerged as factors which influenced student decision-making about which colleges they would like to attend:

> Yeah, like some colleges are recognised as better at some things than others.
>
> *Interviewer*: But how did you find that out?
>
> Just reading the website. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Other students talked about the good reputation of a journalism course in one university. In addition, this student had heard about a good social life and atmosphere on campus:

> And it had one of the best courses
>
> Yeah, [name of university] is the best for journalism as well.
>
> I heard it's good [name of university] for science as well but my friend goes there and there's savage craic up there like so that's kind of why I want to go there. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Some students' decisions about which college to go to were also swayed by the reputation of college sports teams, sports facilities and social life:

> I just want to go to [name of university] for [name of university] rugby really. That's the truth, yeah. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

It just seems like a really good social life there. Good sporting facilities as well and…

…I just like the whole atmosphere up in [name of university]. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

5.4 Conclusions

Research on student decision-making around post-school pathways in Ireland consistently shows that access to, and the availability of, career guidance can vary across groups of students (McCoy et al., 2006; McCoy et al., 2010). In keeping with these findings, guidance provision appears to vary significantly across the twelve case-study schools in our study as do student perceptions of guidance counselling, both individual and group sessions. The content and focus of guidance classes also appear to vary across the schools.

On the whole, students were satisfied with the guidance they received, while at the same time expressing the desire for more information on the pathways open to them. Positive aspects of guidance were seen to include the range of information provided, the commitment of the guidance counsellor, the use of aptitude tests, access to guest speakers and attending college open days. Students appear to be more satisfied with individual sessions with their guidance counsellor than with guidance counselling classes, with some students describing these sessions as 'very helpful' in reaching their career decisions.

Across all schools, however, some students reported being disappointed with the level and nature of provision. Constraints on the time available to meet with the guidance counsellor were cited by many students, especially in contexts where counsellors were 'juggling' subject teaching, guidance and personal counselling. Some students felt that there was an over-emphasis on college applications in their guidance classes and not enough attention was given to alternative options such as apprenticeships or employment. The focus of guidance classes was found to vary by Leaving Certificate programme and by the social mix of the school. LCA classes often focused on access to apprenticeships in contrast to the higher education focus of LCE/LCVP classes. Some students in working-class schools felt that school staff held low expectations of

them and expressed frustration that they were encouraged to focus on 'realistic' options rather than to 'do their best'. This is particularly noteworthy given that working-class students are more reliant on guidance counsellors (and other school personnel) for advice in a situation where few members of their family have experience of post-school education. In contrast, in more middle-class schools, progressing to higher education appeared to be 'taken for granted', with discussion focusing on which colleges to attend and which courses to pursue, and students drawing on detailed information from their siblings or parents who had been to third-level education.

An important issue emerging from the study relates to the timing of guidance provision. Given constraints on guidance allocation, many schools focus guidance provision on senior cycle, especially sixth year, students (McCoy et al., 2006). As a result, some students are found to reach sixth year without realising that their prior choices have limited the future options open to them. Thus, decisions made as early as first year often set the parameters within which students can make decisions.

In addition to formal guidance at school, students discussed other factors which had influenced their decision-making in sixth year. Parents, siblings and wider family networks appear to play a major role in shaping students' decisions. Some students discussed how certain careers were 'in the family' or that their parents had brought them to their place of work. Siblings appeared to influence college course choices, with many being able to provide specific details of course content and levels of challenge in some courses in higher education. In addition to these influences, students felt that their aptitude and enjoyment of certain subjects, such as Maths or Accountancy, influenced what they would do when they leave school. Others suggested that they had always wanted to work in a certain area or were pursuing a life-long hobby. Work experience also appeared to play a role in shaping student decisions, with many influenced by their work experience in Transition Year and LCA. Other students were influenced by their time spent working during the summer holidays.

For students who had already decided to go to higher education, other factors shaped their course choices and decisions about which college to go to. Not surprisingly, the likelihood of getting enough CAO

points influenced what courses students applied for. Some students noted that their first choice was beyond what they were capable of and their second and third choices were realistically linked to their probable grades. For some students, the decision centred on which college to go to, with distance from home a factor for many students interviewed. Many of those interviewed were reluctant to travel too far and had chosen colleges near their home. This was particularly the case for rural students, many of whom were reluctant to apply to colleges in Dublin as they were intimidating or the costs of living away from home were too high. Some students, particularly those in middle-class schools, were influenced by the reputation of the college or were attracted to certain colleges because of their sports facilities or social life.

This chapter has explored young people's decision-making processes concerning post-school pathways. In the next chapter, we focus on the results of these decisions and their plans for the immediate future.

Chapter Six

LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines student reflections on their entire school experience and explores their plans for when they leave school. The first part of this chapter examines how students across the twelve case-study schools feel about their time at school now that they are soon to leave the second-level system. Discussions centre on what students feel they get out of school and what it prepares them for in the future. We also examine areas where students feel their second-level education could have been improved. The second section of this chapter examines students' plans and intentions when they leave school and how these plans vary by the social profile of the school. It is worth noting that the surveys for this study took place in 2007 and 2008, so student plans and aspirations for the future should be understood in the context of the full employment and economic prosperity which existed at the time.

6.2 Reflections on Second-Level Education

This section examines students' own perceptions of their time in post-primary school; in particular, we focus on what they feel were the main benefits of their education. Sixth year students were asked whether their second-level education had been 'a lot', 'some' or 'no' help in developing a specified list of skills and competencies (Figure 6.1). Students were generally very positive about the contribution of their schooling to their personal and social development; 57 per cent felt that school had been 'a lot' of help in making new friends, 50 per cent in communicating well with others and 40 per cent in increasing their self-confidence. Basic

skills (such as reading/writing skills) and some aspects of 'learning to learn', including knowing how to acquire a new skill, how to find things out and how to think for yourself, were also seen positively. However, sixth year students were less positive about the extent to which school had prepared them for work and adult life; only 32 per cent felt that school had been 'a lot' of benefit in preparing for adult life, with a lower proportion (23 per cent) considering it had prepared them for the world of work. In addition, less than a quarter (23 per cent) of students described their schooling as having been 'a lot' of help in acquiring ICT skills. Students were similarly critical of the extent to which school had fostered longer term interest in physical and cultural activities; 36 per cent saw school as 'no help' in fostering an involvement in sports, with 42 per cent reporting it had been 'no help' in developing an enjoyment of reading for pleasure and 52 per cent considering it had been 'no help' in fostering an appreciation of art and music.

Figure 6.1: Perceived benefits of second-level education, as reported by sixth year students
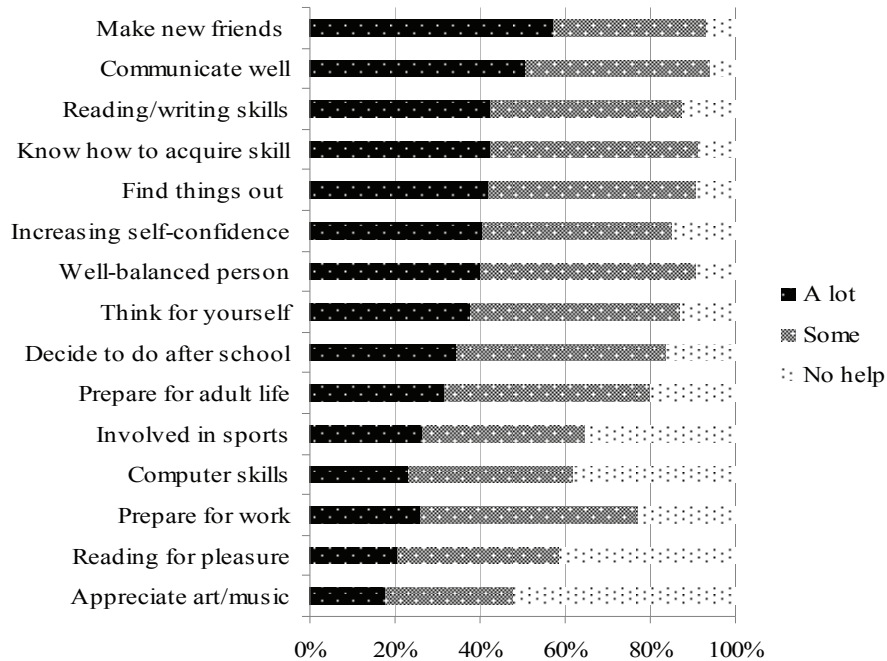
There were surprisingly few differences for most outcomes in the perceived benefits of second-level education across those taking different Leaving Certificate programmes. The exceptions related to preparation for work and ICT skills, with LCA students being much more positive about these aspects of their education than their peers taking LCE or LCVP (Figure 6.2). LCA students were also somewhat more positive about the extent to which school had prepared them for adult life.

Figure 6.2: Perceived benefits of second-level education by Leaving Certificate programme
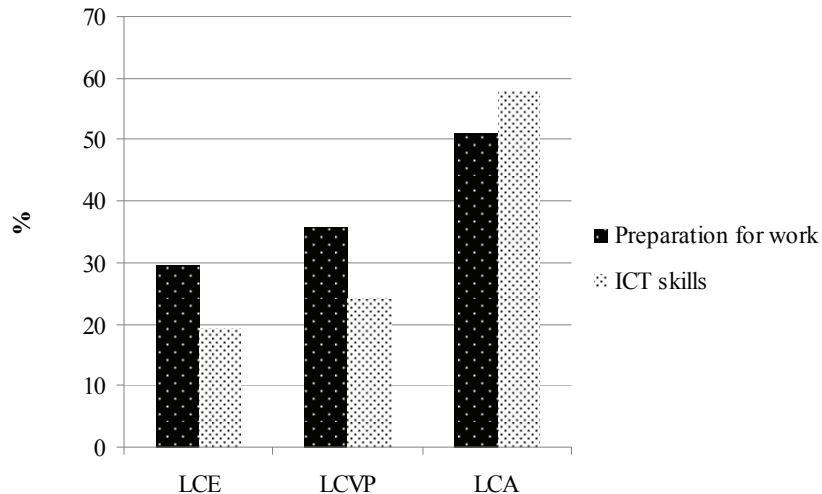
Higher-achieving students (in terms of Junior Certificate grades) appear to be more positive about some of the benefits of their education, including increasing their self-confidence, helping them develop into a well-balanced person, and improving their reading/writing skills. In contrast, students who had achieved lower grades in their Junior Certificate were more positive about their ICT skills, most likely reflecting the greater use of ICT in the classroom in working-class and male-dominated contexts (see Chapter Two). Young women were somewhat more likely to feel their schooling had helped them to talk and communicate well with others, to make new friends and to think for themselves, but these patterns are more related to their distribution across schools rather than gender

differences within schools. However, they were much less likely than young men to report their schooling had fostered an involvement in sports, with 43 per cent reporting it had been 'no help' in this respect compared with 28 per cent of their male peers. Students with higher stress levels tend to be more critical than other students of the benefits of second-level education. What is striking is that these differences apart, there is very little variation in the assessment of schooling by gender, social class, prior achievement or having taken Transition Year.

There is very little systematic variation in terms of the objective characteristics of schools. Girls' schools are somewhat less likely to foster an interest in involvement in sports. Furthermore, students attending working-class schools are more likely to be positive about the benefits in terms of ICT skills, a pattern which reflects the greater use of ICT for teaching and learning in these settings (see Chapter Two). While variation is evident across individual schools in the perceived skills and competencies developed, this variation is not easily explained and is likely to reflect the complex interaction between the subjects provided, teaching methods used and the nature of the school climate. In the remainder of this section, we focus on the perceptions of the benefits of second-level education across the case-study schools.

6.2.1 Making Friends

In interviews with students about their perceptions of school and opinions about what they got from school, students often initially responded with humour, with comments such as 'nothing', 'not much' or 'a headache'. However, in further discussions and in line with the survey findings above, the majority of students interviewed felt that their friends were one of the most important benefits of their time in school. Some of the students in Argyle Street spoke about making lifelong friends in school with other people that they can trust:

> Like you make friends that you'll probably have for years.

> … You've got your friends, they are people you can trust. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students felt that their friends were the only positive aspect of their entire school experience:

> Your friends and that would be the only thing you'd take out of it. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Students in Dawson Street also spoke about forming friendships which they felt could last a long time:

> Even friendships you made.

> Could be forever.

> … Made loads of friends. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

In Dawes Point, students spoke about the importance of their friends in school and, in particular, the fun they have had in their final year together:

> Friends.

> Yeah, the best years of your life, really have a good laugh like.

> Experiences.

> Some memories, some memories from this year, brilliant like. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

In Park Street, students felt that they 'wouldn't have lasted' in the school without their close group of friends:

> This school would be absolutely crap on your own, sometimes what makes it only good is that you do have friends in here. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Other students at this school commented that their school friends would provide positive memories for them in the future:

> At least you have something to look back on, at least you had a bit of a laugh with your friends. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Student comments about friendship often preceded other comments about how school had helped them to mature and develop socially. This, many felt, helped them to broaden their circle of friends:

> Yeah, [it's a] good laugh and you learn stuff along the way like, stuff about yourself really. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

> [You get] social skills.

> You get to interact with more people, like that you normally wouldn't like. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students felt that most people change during their time in school and gain confidence:

> You come out of yourself more.

> I would have been very quiet when I first started but now.

> Most people just change like that. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Similarly, students in Fig Lane felt that between first year and their final year, school had helped shape their personality:

> It kind of shaped your personality a little bit as well.

> Yeah, like when you look back on it.

> Because I know in first year.

> Yeah, so different.

> I was like … in primary school I was so different. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Trips away, in particular, appeared to help some students mature and gain their independence:

> It helps you mature a lot.

> … I think like the trip over to France and stuff I think would make you more mature and stuff because you're living on your own like. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

Many students attributed the greatest change in their personal development to their time in Transition Year:

> Because you have that break for a year that when you come back into fifth year you are kind of like 'okay, now I know what I want to do'.
>
> You cop on.
>
> Yeah, you grow up so much.
>
> Yeah, you change so much.
>
> TY is a mad year because you do actually just grow up.
>
> Even from the beginning of TY to the end of TY the difference in people is unreal.
>
> Yeah, everyone is always saying [to] me you changed so much in TY. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Some students at the school felt their close friendships stemmed from their time in Transition Year:

> Quite a lot, like after doing Transition Year we all became much closer as a year, made better friends. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Students in Harris Street suggested that being in a classroom of different students encouraged them to be more accepting of difference:

> You accept people, you're really together in your class and there's so many different types of people in our class.
>
> It's good to be able to get on with them. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Some Barrack Street students felt that the approach of teachers in Transition Year allowed them to mature and enjoy it:

> I'm glad I did it, I matured, I learnt a lot more as well about myself.
>
> It's more relaxed and you still do stuff and you weren't given out to. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Others at the school felt that it gave them that extra year to mature before beginning the Leaving Certificate programme:

When you are with friends and you are doing stuff and in groups.

I'm delighted I did it now. Because I loved it now kind of way, I don't think I would have been mature enough for it [otherwise]. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

6.2.2 Getting an Education

In addition to their friends, many students referred to education as something they had gained during their time in school:

An education. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Just learning about the subjects we did.

A broader knowledge.

Like general knowledge. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Instead of considering their broader education, some students felt that their time in school had simply given them the opportunity to do the Leaving Certificate exam:

That's about it, the Leaving Cert. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Students in Fig Lane made the distinction between the education they received and the education available in 'grind schools', where they felt students were able to get much higher marks (points) in their exams:

Yeah, I suppose like education-wise when you look at other schools, like the [name of grind school] or like [name of grind school] and stuff, they do way better education.

Interviewer: In what way?

They get better results and that kind of thing.

The results here are good though …

I don't know, it's just its a lot easier for them to get good results because like, I don't know, I suppose the teachers. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

This comment echoes remarks in Chapter Two where many middle-class and high-aspiring students had come to adopt a very instrumental view of education, one in which obtaining high grades was the main objective. However, students then discussed how these schools were not really like 'school' and lacked the social aspect that they had in Fig Lane:

> [Name of grind school] is a totally different thing like though, it's not like school, well it is school but it's kind of.

> ... I'd rather go here than [name of grind school] because of like the whole kind of social aspect of here. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Some of these students were still in touch with some friends who had left Fig Lane to attend a grind school and felt that the focus on the Leaving Certificate exam there was excessive:

> ... It's just exam, exam, exam, like you can't miss a day or else your gone, you're so like lost the next day and it's just crazy, they don't have any like extra-curricular things, they're in school every Saturday like, no break. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

6.2.3 Preparation for Adult Life

Other students spoke about more general life skills that they had built up during their time in school such as a positive work ethic, punctuality, and being able to take orders:

> In school kind of does the whole, you know, you have to be in on time and being punctual and stuff, which is important. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

> I suppose you just learn to obey rules, like not coming in late and get yourself prepared for a job. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Some students felt that some subjects such as Home Economics prepared them more than others for their life after school:

> In certain subjects probably, like they tell you what to expect like if you are raising a child or having to pay bills what it's going to be like, all the finances and that … how to socialise and how to speak in public. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Students from Belmore Street felt that it was not school but work that prepared them for adult life after school:

> I think work prepares you way more than school ever would like. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Students in Hay Street commented that teachers at the school only focussed on preparing students for the exams rather than employment or adult life:

> *Interviewer*: Do you think school prepares you for the world of work?
>
> No.
>
> Only for Leaving Cert, they only prepare for the test, the exam. (Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)

Other students felt that it was not the role of school to prepare them for adult life. Some suggested that they could get these skills when they went to college, that this was their 'gap period' where they could prepare for the world of work. Displaying an instrumentalist viewpoint, these students felt that school was simply something that prepared for the Leaving Certificate exam:

> I think so like you are four years there [in college] and then that's your gap period, whereas this you have to concentrate on, like some teachers will give you life lessons and you are like I don't want life lessons, I can't write this down in the Leaving Cert. I want to learn about the Leaving Cert. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Others suggested that it was not the role of the school to prepare them for adult life. Instead they had to go out and experience life for themselves:

> Like in the working world you have to experience it yourself.
>
> You have to just get out there.
>
> Yeah, get out there yourself like. (Lang Street, coed school, working-class intake)
>
> I don't want help with it [preparing for adult life], it will be fine.
>
> …Things will sort out themselves. (Wattle Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Comparing the skills developed across different programmes, some LCA students felt that they were better equipped than LCE/LCVP students for entering the labour market because of the work experience component of the programme. Students also felt that they were more prepared to do interviews with potential employers:

> Good work experience because you know traditional Leaving, like say if they wanted to go like leave CVs into a shop for a job and we went with our CV to the same shop like, we have more of a chance of getting the job because we have work experience. We get work experience, they never went on work experience. So it's good in that way like. Then they get like, like we have interviews through the year and all so it helps us like if we do get interviews for jobs. Like we'll know what the interview is going to be like. (Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

6.3 Perceived Gaps in Second-Level Education

During the interviews, we asked students what was missing from their school experience and if they had any ideas about ways in which second-level education could be improved.

6.3.1 Work Experience

Many of the students interviewed felt that school should provide more work experience to help them in their decisions on what to do in college and also help students wishing to enter the labour market. When asked how their education could have been improved, students responded:

> Work experience.

> Work experience, get out of the classroom, head off for a week or two.

> Work experience.

> Even a week, just to get us out of the school for a week working, to see what it's like. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

> Work experience, like put people in work experience just to see what it's like. Because the only reason we got it because we were in LCVP and we don't do fourth year so we don't really get a chance. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

These students emphasised, however, that work experience had to be meaningful and help shape their later decisions:

> Realistic jobs, you see some people go on work experience and they go and work in [name of supermarket] or [name of supermarket] and they're not really going to be working, really aspire to work there, they just do it because it's handy for them, people should go out and try and get the jobs they want to do like. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Students in Belmore Street also felt that work experience should have played a greater role in their education. Again, these students emphasised having meaningful work experience more related to their everyday lives, rather than the abstract content of many school subjects:

> More experience of like the jobs that you actually will get after school like.

> … Because you're not gonna become a poet, like things that you will do, will need different experiences.

> I think they should like take topics and some careers and do some classes on them so you know like what it's like and then I think you should in the ordinary Leaving Cert have like work experience on your curriculum. To learn actually what you want to do, see what it's like and experience it. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Some students who had the opportunity to participate in work experience expressed dissatisfaction because of the short period of work experience and access to one placement only:

> We got one week of work experience last year … That wasn't enough.

> ... Some people chose something and then they didn't enjoy it at all and they wanted to try something else but you didn't get another choice. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Students in Barrack Street felt that they should have been brought out of school more, on work experience or study visits. They felt that the school was too focussed on covering the curriculum in time for the exams:

> Bring us places, you know, not saying bring us to the pictures but bring us like into jobs and all that and show us, you know, work experience.

> Yeah, we never ever went out with this school. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

6.3.2 A Broader Curriculum

Some of the students felt that they should have been able to do more subjects which are related to their lives and their future careers. Some students in Fig Lane felt that the curriculum over-emphasised writing and should focus more on technology:

> If they made it more technology-based, because it's just all the writing like. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Other students had opinions about the choice of languages available at the school and felt that the options of Spanish or Italian were more appealing than the current option of French and German:

> Not really, the languages I think in the school, I don't know, we do French and German, I think there should be Spanish instead of German.

> Yeah, I would have loved to do Italian.

> Because German, not that many people speak it, like Germany, whereas Spanish it's all over like South America and stuff like that. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Students in Park Street felt that as it was an all-boys school that it would have been useful to do subjects such as Materials Technology (Wood) and Metalwork to prepare them for careers in trades:

> I think in this school they should, because so many people want to do trades, they should do Woodwork and Metalwork.

> … It's a boys' school and that's what most lads want to do at school. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

One student in Hay Street would also have liked a broader range of subjects as they wished to do a coaching course:

> I'd like to have done a coaching course but it's just, I don't know, there's not enough people in the school like to do it. (Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)

Students in Fig Lane suggested that they could have done more practical courses, such as driver education, which they felt they would benefit from:

> I think they should have brought in a subject that like your really going to use in life, like drivers' ed or something like that.
>
> Yeah that should be part of it, definitely.
>
> They have that in America, they should have brought that in here. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

6.3.3 Preparation for College

In preparation for entry into college, some students felt that their school could have organised days where they could hear the experiences of past students or find out more about the college system in general:

> We could have had more, I think colleges came in to talk to us, if we had more people coming from there to tell us a bit more stuff, then we'd have a rough idea of what was going to happen.
>
> Even if the past students came back and talked to you about their experiences and how.
>
> Yeah.
>
> How did they get on and how they found it. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

> Just to tell us a bit about what . . .
>
> What college is like and all that.
>
> Yeah, what college we can go to, what we can do after college. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Students in Hay Street (coed school, working-class intake) felt that 'shadow days' with current college students would have been helpful.

6.3.4 Preparation for Adult Life

Despite some students (above) feeling that it is not the role of the school to prepare students for adult life, others argued that they would have liked more information on life after school. Students in Barrack Street felt that teachers overemphasised the academic part of their education and had not prepared them for the world of work and adult life:

> They don't prepare you, some teachers will prepare you about like what life is going to be like on your own and all that but most of them are just going on about the basic subjects. It's not like, some of it is relevant but you are not going to use all that. They are not preparing us for going out and just working and living on your own and coping with things. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

Similarly, students in Harris Street felt that the school ignored education for life and only prepared them for the academic aspect of college:

> Prepares you for college and that's where you learn for your adult life.
>
> Yeah.
>
> You're only prepared for the education side of college. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Similarly, students in Park Street suggested that more 'life education' was needed, in particular sex education:

> We could do with a bit more life education.
>
> *Interviewer*: Like what kinds of things?
>
> Like they're supposed to give you sexual education but they don't at all, nothing. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

In Argyle Street, students suggested that the school provide advice on parenting and childcare, given the number of young parents in the school:

> Child-care … like I think that would be handy anyway, because like there's a lot of young parents and stuff, and do you know, it just would have been handy, because I know there's lot of young parents in this school. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

In sum, sixth year students were broadly positive about the personal and social developmental aspects of their education but highlighted the need for greater preparation for adult and working life, suggesting that a life skills courses and access to work experience for all students would enhance their overall educational development.

6.4 Moving Forward: Plans for the Future

International research highlights how young people are now faced with an increased number of choices in relation to their plans for the future (for example, Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Heath and Cleaver, 2003). Some research suggests that the increased choices available to young people on leaving school have led to more individualised trajectories, ones no longer shaped by their gender or social background (see, for example, Heinz, 2009). Others have argued that for many young people choices continue to be constrained by their social position (Weis, 2009). This section examines how the choices that young people's plans for the future vary across different student groups. We explore the extent to which students' social class and school context influence their plans for the future. Using survey and qualitative data, we assess the extent to which students plan for the short or long term and whether they feel in control of their lives in making these choices. Student fears and doubts about the future are explored in addition to perceived barriers to post-school progression. As indicated above, this study captured the opinions of students during a period of economic prosperity and the authors assume that the situation today would be quite different in terms of post-school options.

Sixth year students were asked what they were most likely to do after leaving school. Most of the cohort intended to go on to third-level education (Figure 6.3). Clear gender differences were evident, with girls more likely to intend to go to higher education (73 per cent compared with 57 per cent) or another form of education, usually Post-Leaving Certificate courses (10 per cent). Male students were more likely to plan on apprenticeship entry (13 per cent compared with 1 per cent). Only a minority of students (17 per cent of male students and 7 per cent of females) intended to enter the labour market directly rather than pursue some form of post-school education and training. The 'other destinations' group is mainly

made up of young people who intend to take a 'gap year' before college (6 per cent of all male students and 4 per cent of all female students).

Figure 6.3: Post-school intentions among sixth year students
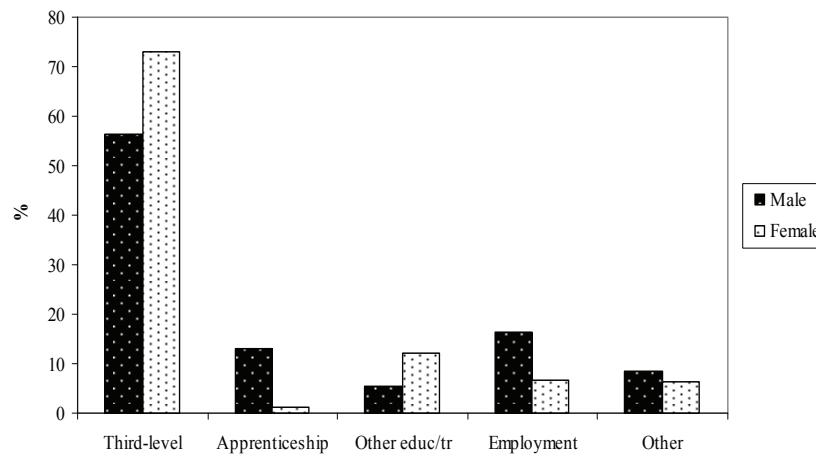
Plans to enter non-tertiary post-school education and training are influenced by the interaction of gender and social class. Entry to apprenticeship and PLC courses is highly gendered so Figure 6.4 shows the proportion of males entering apprenticeship and the proportion of females entering PLCs by social class background. Young men from working-class backgrounds are more likely than other groups to intend to enter apprenticeships, with over a fifth of those from skilled or semi/unskilled manual backgrounds planning to do so. Planned entry to PLC courses is highest among young women from semi/unskilled backgrounds as well as those from non-employed households.

In keeping with the actual patterns of transition to higher education (see McCoy et al., 2010), there is a clear social gradient in the proportion of students who intend to go on to higher education. The vast majority of those from professional or farming backgrounds plan to go on to higher education (Figure 6.5). In contrast, these plans are much less common among those from semi/unskilled or non-employed households. In terms of the social mix of the school, students from working-class schools are much less likely to intend to go on to third-level education than those

Figure 6.4: Proportion planning to enter apprenticeship and PLC courses by social background and gender
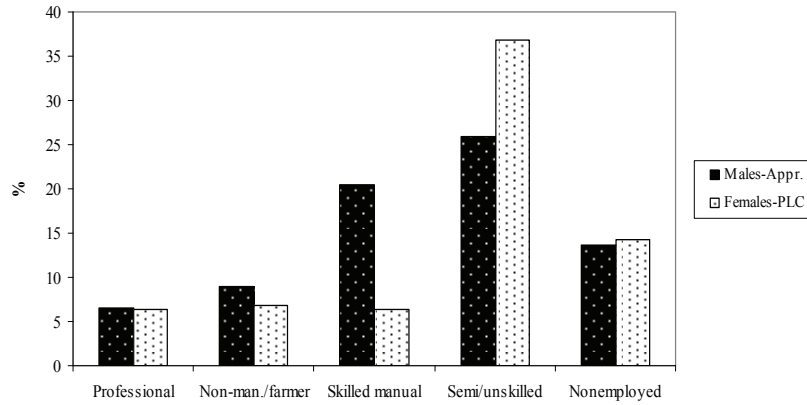
attending mixed or middle-class schools (Figure 6.6). However, there is some variation around this pattern, with over half of the girls attending Barrack Street, a working-class girls' school, intending to go on to college. There is no clear demarcation between mixed and middle-class schools, with Belmore Street (a girls' school) and Wattle Street (a boys' school) having comparable levels of aspirations to students in the more middle-class schools, Fig Lane and Harris Street.

Figure 6.5: Proportion planning to go to higher education by social class background
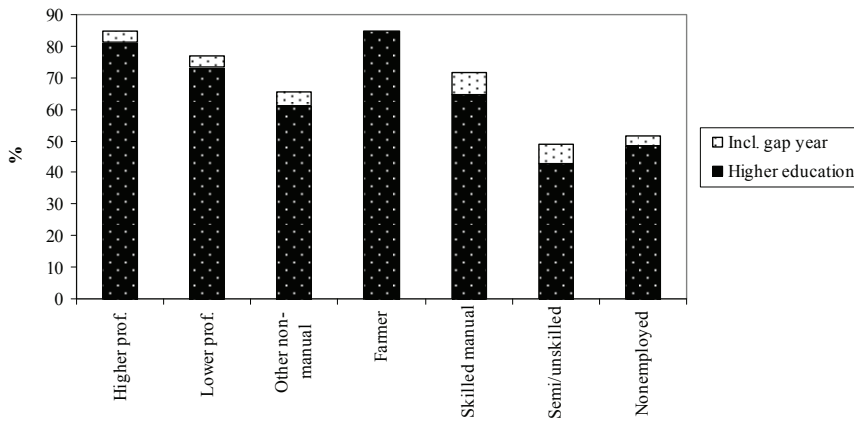
Figure 6.6: Proportion planning to go to higher education by school
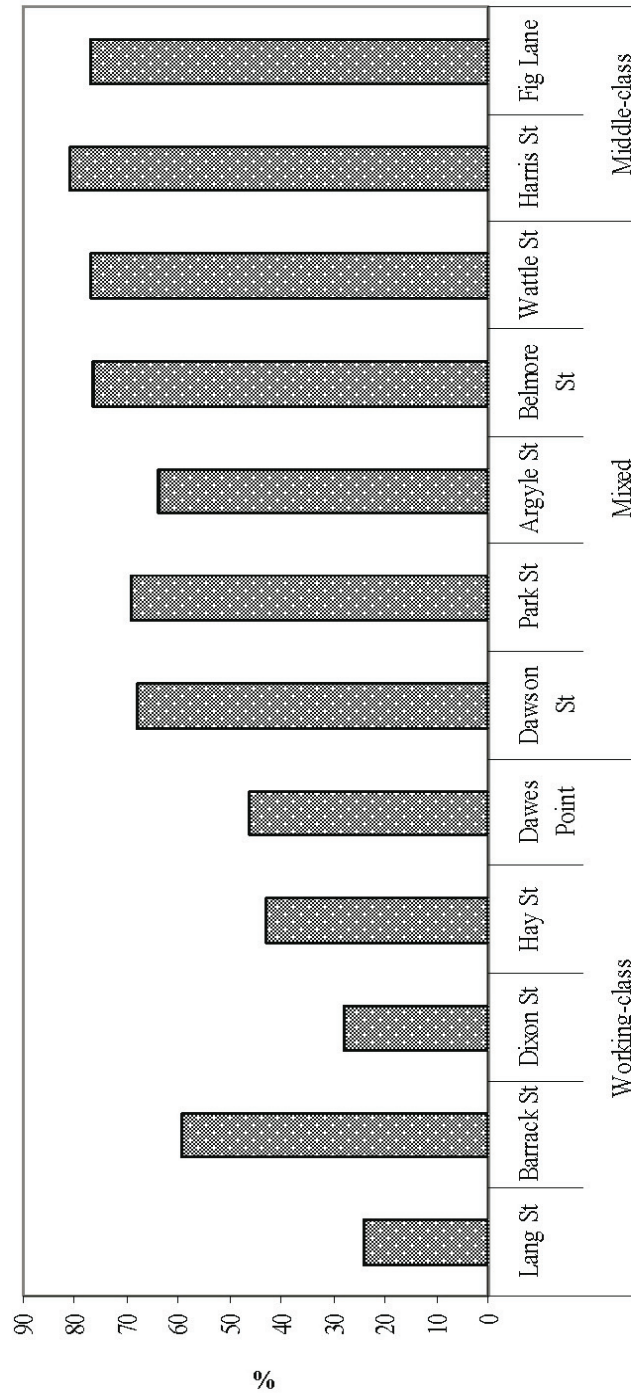
As might be expected, there is a strong relationship between prior achievement levels and higher education plans. Over four-fifths of those in the top three Junior Certificate quintiles intend to go on to third-level education. This drops to just over half among the second lowest quintile while only a quarter of the lowest-performing group intend to go on to college. Those who took Transition Year are more likely to intend to go on to higher education – 77 per cent compared to 58 per cent among non-participants. This pattern applies controlling for individual social class background. However, the situation is more complex in terms of school social mix. In mixed or middle-class schools, TY participants are more likely to go on to higher education than non-participants. However, in working-class schools there is no appreciable difference in intentions between the two groups. The latter pattern should be interpreted with some caution, however, due to the small number of students in working-class schools taking TY. Similarly, TY participation is not associated with enhanced chances of aspiring to higher education among those who achieved the lowest Junior Certificate grades.

Figure 6.7: Proportion planning to go to higher education by Junior Certificate achievement
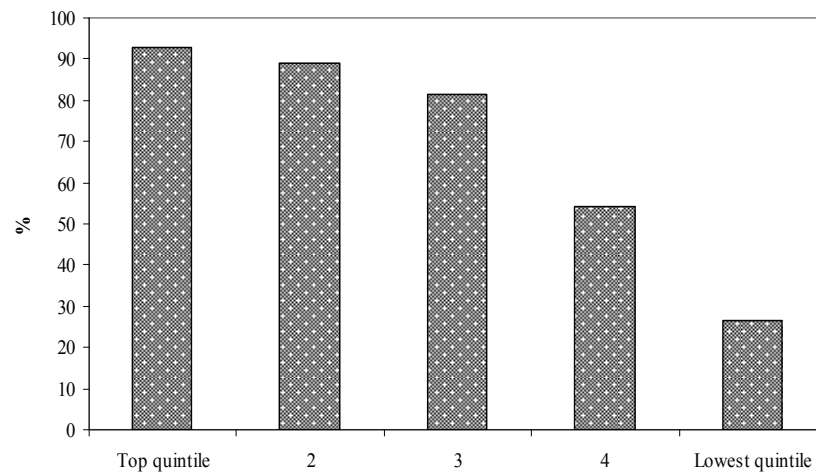
Table 6.1 presents a multilevel logistic regression model so that we can explore the simultaneous influence of a range of factors on higher educa-

tion intentions. Model 1 shows that the twelve case-study schools vary significantly in the intentions of their students. In model 2, clear gender and social class differences are evident, in keeping with the descriptive analysis presented above. Female students are over twice as likely to intend to go on to higher education as males from similar social backgrounds. In keeping with actual transition patterns, higher education intentions are structured by social class background, with the highest rates found among the professional and farming groups and the lowest rates among those from semi/unskilled or non-employed backgrounds. Model 3 adds in further variables reflecting young people's pathways through, and experience of, post-primary education. As might be expected, Junior Certificate grades are highly predictive of later plans, with the top quintile nine times more likely to intend to go to higher education than the lowest quintile.

Given the post-school pathways open to them (see Banks et al., 2010), it is not surprising that students taking the LCA programme are extremely unlikely to plan to go to college. The differential plans of TY and non-TY participants shown in the descriptive analyses above are, in fact, due to their higher prior achievement and earlier ambitions. It is evident that plans to go to higher education are not formed in senior cycle alone but are shaped by earlier experiences. Students who had degree-level educational aspirations in third year are more likely than others to still intend to go on to college. Conversely, students who reported negative interaction with their teachers in third year are less likely to plan to go to higher education, even controlling for their grades. The gender gap is reduced somewhat in model 3, reflecting the higher aspirations and grades among females, but female students are still 1.7 times more likely than males with similar characteristics to have such plans. Much of the effect of social class is mediated by Junior Certificate performance and school experiences; in other words, those from professional backgrounds are more likely to plan to go to college because they achieved higher grades, had more positive relations with teachers and held high aspirations from an early stage. However, the social mix of the school has a significant influence, with students attending schools with a concentration of working-class students less likely to plan to go to college, all else being equal.

Table 6.1: Multilevel logistic regression model of higher education intentions

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	0.519	-0.531	-0.215
Female		0.815***	0.507*
Social class:			
Higher professional		1.516***	0.462
Lower professional		1.191***	0.683
Other non-manual		0.540	0.179
Skilled manual		0.893	0.604
Farmers		1.673**	1.347*
Non-employed		0.524	0.338
(Contrast: Semi/unskilled manual)			
Junior Certificate grades:			
2nd lowest quintile			0.410
Middle quintile			1.346***
2nd highest quintile			1.807***
Highest quintile			2.232***
(Contrast: Lowest quintile)			
Pathway:			
Took Transition Year			0.100
Taking LCA			-3.380**
Educational aspirations in 3rd year:			
Leaving Cert			0.004
Certificate/diploma			0.501
Degree			0.967**
Negative interaction with teachers in 3rd year			-0.456**
Attending working-class school			-0.542*
(Contrast: attending mixed or middle-class school)			
School-level variance	0.408*	0.129	0.025
N	732 students within 12 schools	732 students within 12 schools	732 students within 12 schools

Note: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ‡ p<.10.

The extent to which gender and social class influenced post-school intentions was also evident in the focus group interviews with students and individual interviews with school personnel. In the remainder of this section, we provide a detailed overview of student ambition and school expectations by school social mix. We begin by examining the post-school plans of students from the two middle-class schools, Harris Street and Fig Lane.

6.4.1 Middle-class Schools

For the groups of students interviewed in the fee-paying middle class school, Fig Lane, going to college was the natural trajectory. It was assumed and expected by the students themselves and their families:

> *Interviewer*: What do you think you'll do after leaving school?
>
> Go to college.
>
> Go to college.
>
> College.
>
> College. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Student planning at Fig Lane appeared to go beyond their courses in higher education as they considered their entire career. One student had realistic expectations of the points they would get but had devised an alternative plan so they could still study what they wanted:

> I wanted to get into property, or designing houses or stuff to do with property, but then I was thinking of architecture, but I wouldn't get that high points, it's 500 and something points, so it's the next step down from that and then you can go on to do that after a year. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

This student's second choice, however, differed considerably as it was an arts degree which they felt could lead to a teaching career:

> I was thinking of architecture technology in [name of IOT]. Or my second option would be [name of university] but I don't know, it's arts. I don't know much about that yet, but I heard it's supposed to

be a good course, if you want to get into teaching or anything. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Other students at Fig Lane had made similar selections in their CAO application. This student has 'Business' as their first option and an arts degree (with business subjects) as their second choice:

Business or arts in [name of university].

Interviewer: And why did you pick those?

Well business is my first choice but I think you can do arts and pick the business subjects like economics and all that. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

In interviews with staff at Fig Lane, the emphasis on college entry as the natural route for most students was clear:

The vast majority of them, I would say around 90 per cent of them would go on to CAO courses and that's a range of courses from honours degree courses down to two year certificate courses. (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake)

Teachers recognised that, for some parents, there was an expectation that the school would prepare students for college entry:

I would say there's any expectation amongst the parents out there of me that that is a major part of my role to prepare them for applications to those places. (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake)

Over time, the school had developed relationships with specific 'follow-on' institutions which students were encouraged to attend:

[Name of institute of technology] / [name of university] would be our big follow-on institutions here, and hence that's why we have put the programme together. The vast majority would go on to those courses and hence that's why our sixth year classes and our guidance programme would be geared towards that. (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake)

Staff also suggested that some of the students at the school would enter employment directly through their family businesses and perhaps do a 'refresher course' instead of a college degree:

> Their families are key business people, and they will actually, you know, will go back into their business having spent their six years here and then do some refresher courses on some aspects of the business but not necessarily take college degrees. (Fig Lane, staff, coed school, middle-class intake)

In the other middle-class school, Harris Street, the group of students interviewed were also clear about the specific courses that they had applied for and the majority had specifically chosen the college that they would like to go to:

> I want to do veterinary nursing but I'm going to have to do science first.
>
> Interviewer: Ok, yourself?
>
> I want to do human nutrition in [name of university].
>
> I want to do history and politics in [name of university].
>
> I want to do commerce in [name of university].
>
> Engineering and I don't know where.
>
> Product design in [name of university]. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

Students spoke about their first and second choices and about how their decisions would be based on the number of points gained in their exams and their eligibility for certain courses (see Chapter Five). There appeared to be a wide variety of choices among students at this school whose preferred college choices ranged from teaching to journalism:

> I want to go to Pat's to do primary school teaching and then hopefully just be a primary school teacher.
>
> Marino primary teaching as well.
>
> I don't know.

Probably social science in [name of university].

Journalism in [name of IOT]. (Harris Street, girls' school, middle-class intake)

6.4.2 Schools with a Socially Mixed Intake

In schools with a socially mixed intake, students were more cautious about their decisions which appear to centre more on the type of course rather than entry to higher education. Students had selected specific courses in further and higher education and it was clear that their choice would be decided by the points they achieved in the exams. Students spoke about first and second choices and had 'back-up' plans if they did not get their preferred courses:

Interviewer: What do you think you will do after you leaving school?

I'm thinking of going to [name of IOT] and doing a multi-media course.

Maybe a pharmacy technician course in [name of IOT] or a beauty course in [name of IOT].

An interior design course in [name of city] or an art teaching course in [name of city].

A food science course in [name of IOT] to become a dietician.

Hopefully be a primary school teacher and if I don't get it here I've applied to England and I'll go to England to do it. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

However, a staff member at the school remarked that students tended to aim at being 'just good enough' (see Meo, 2011), only doing sufficient work to gain entry to their desired course:

I think that they should do very well, however I do think that for some of our students in senior cycle that there's an element of that they decide that they need 300 points to do X course and that's all they do, they don't bother pushing to achieve their full potential, they settle and that's something that worries me.

Interviewer: So they are going to opt for the easier?

> Yes, they won't bother doing the honours paper in one subject because they don't really need the points in it whereas they're well able to do it, you know. (Dawson Street, staff, coed school, mixed intake)

Having submitted the CAO form about a month prior to the interview, students had a clear idea of the university or institute of technology they wanted but were waiting on their results to find out which course they were eligible for:

> *Interviewer*: What do you want to do after you leave school yourself?
>
> Go to [name of town] and probably do accounting or something, do business.
>
> Equine science in [name of university].
>
> Graphic design in [name of IOT]. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Overall, the vast majority of students in the girls' secondary school, Belmore Street, intended to continue to third-level education. Courses ranged from certificate to degree courses in nursing, teaching and engineering:

> I'm going to do a business course. Just a business studies course. I'm not sure where I'm going just yet.
>
> I'm hoping to get veterinary nursing in [name of IOT].
>
> The new childcare course coming out in [name of IOT] and going into Montessori teaching then after that.
>
> I want to do teaching.
>
> I want to do medicine or something science. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)
>
> My first choice on the CAO is physio in [name of university] and then the rest of it is all engineering and quantity surveying and stuff like that. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Some students had plans to do more artistic and creative courses:

Theatre performance with arts in [name of university].

I'm the same as her.

…I want to do dancing, I want to do a two year dance course, it's in Dublin and I'll do choreography and I applied for England. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Other students discussed how they wanted to do hairdressing or social care:

I'm either doing hair dressing in some college, I'm not too sure yet or else social care.

Interviewer: And yourself?

I'm going for hairdressing. (Belmore Street, girls' school, mixed intake)

Speaking with staff at Belmore Street, it was clear that the emphasis at the school is on going to college directly after school or after a gap year:

See the numbers here are very high, ninety-two percent of them go on to third level and interestingly I would say that that other eight percent they go on later. (Belmore Street, staff, girls' school, mixed intake)

It was felt that the types of courses chosen by students ranged from 'medicine right down to a PLC course', with choices often influenced by where individual guidance counsellors placed most emphasis:

What they do really is influenced as well by the guidance counsellor, and I… and you can only see that when there's a change in the guidance counsellor.

…you can see the different emphasis that people put on things. (Belmore Street, staff, girls' school, mixed intake)

In Park Street, an all-boys secondary school, some students had just planned for college and had not thought about their future after that point:

> Just go to college, I don't know what I'm doing after that. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

As in Belmore Street, students had specific college courses in mind but had applied for other options and felt they could change their mind:

> I was thinking of equine science but I can't really get that much information on it and I'd say the career possibilities would be small enough so I don't know, I might just do arts. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Teaching was also a popular choice among students:

> I was thinking of doing second-level teaching.
>
> … Second-level teaching as well.
>
> I don't know, I'm taking a year out.
>
> I'd say second-level teaching. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

Other students did not want to work in an office environment when they left school so they were applying for apprenticeships and jobs where they could work with their hands:

> I'm not 100 per cent yet, I might do a trade but I don't know.
>
> I'm doing plumbing. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

For others, money was the main motivation but they were glad to be getting away from schoolwork:

> I just want to go and start making money, I wouldn't be able to stick my head in a book again like. (Park Street, boys' school, mixed intake)

A staff member at the school felt that the majority of students would go to college, although this varied from year to year:

> I mean if you break it down of thirty, I mean you could have ten wanderers that are not going to go anywhere, but I think that the bulk of our lads will be going to some form of third level, others will go

> to apprenticeships, be it with their parents or whatever, some of them go to family businesses, but generally speaking there's probably a small core of guys, that really the system from first year to fifth year doesn't do anything for anyway, and I mean I think that you have that … aspect of life here. (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

Another teacher also felt that most of the students 'go on to third level, at some kind of level', although with an increasing number of students doing PLC courses:

> Some of them do a PLC, Post Leaving Cert., and surprising more and more, even of the better students, are taking the year out doing PLC. (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

They also raised the issue of the lack of value placed on apprenticeships by society more widely:

> And then we have a certain number that go to trade and again of course that's another issue in relation to the Leaving Cert., that the value that people see on trades in terms of social acceptability is very low, whereas the actual social value of working at something that you like is tremendous but that's not taken into account. But we got quite a number of students that would go into, say, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, mechanics and so on. (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

This was attributed to the booming construction sector at the time of the interview:

> I mean a lot of lads see that the money's out there in the trade world, they want to get a trade. (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

However, it was considered that the subjects taken by the students at the school did not equip them adequately for their apprenticeships since the school did not provide more 'practical' subjects:

> Well like the, the hand and eye studies, that we don't cater for, particularly in a boys' school … I think we could limit the subjects that the guys are doing … I think that the flexibility is lacking within the educational system. That unless you do ten subjects in the Junior Cert, and

> unless you're doing seven or eight for the Leaving Cert, there's something wrong. (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

In contrast to 92 per cent at Belmore Street, staff at Park Street felt that 'about 70 per cent to 80 per cent' of students would go on to a third-level course 'of some form'. PLCs, apprenticeships, the Guards, the Army or a job were other pathways for the remaining students:

> [Those] who wouldn't have got the points would go onto do the Post Leaving Cert courses. Some would go into apprenticeships … some maybe the guards the army, and few would go into employment. (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

The school's close proximity to a university was seen as encouraging young people to 'aspire to third level':

> We're so close, I mean, that's one of the advantages … of living in a university town … that it does encourage the kids to aspire to third level. (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

However, the proximity of the university was viewed as putting added pressure on students to go to college, even if they were not able or willing to:

> But the disadvantage is that it does put pressure on them, you know that my friends are going, and these are going why am I not going, and you know, there's a lot of that as well. (Park Street, staff, boys' school, mixed intake)

In Argyle Street, students had similar attitudes regarding their choices in further and higher education. Student choices appeared to be broad, with some planning on doing degree courses in subjects like engineering and zoology, others intending on doing apprenticeships and hairdressing:

> *Interviewer*: What do you think you will do when you leave school?

> A beautician.

> I hope to do bio chemistry in [name of university].

> Music in [name of IOT].

> I don't know yet.
>
> Beauty therapy or interior design. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)
>
> I want to work with animals so I've applied for veterinary medicine and zoology and then some animal, practical animal courses in England. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Other students were unsure of the choices that they had made on the CAO application form. Students stressed the magnitude of their decisions for their future careers and happiness:

> It's got to be something that you can do, you know, it's going to be your final career at the end of the day like … You really want to do something that is going to make you happy not just money, job interest … what you want to do. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Other students had made choices but were unsure and felt they might change their minds at a later date and do something else:

> I've put accounting as number one on my CAO but I'm not too sure, I think I might change and do something completely different, I don't know.
>
> I put BIS down, business information systems, but I don't know, I don't really want to do anything. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

For some students, their decision would be made by the amount of points they get in their exams and whether it is enough for the courses they applied for:

> Depends on the points situation.
>
> … You put down a few things and hope. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Some students in Argyle Street had plans beyond their degree course and they had begun to think about what post-graduate courses would be suitable for their career path:

I'm doing nutrition and science in [name of university] and I'm going to do a post-grad then to be a dietician. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Others, however, had just planned on the degree course but no further:

Interviewer: Right what about yourself?

Arts in [name of university] and then I don't know, see what happens. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

For students in the LCA programme, there appeared to be direct linkages between the LCA curriculum and students' post-school education and career choices. Modules aimed at preparing students for the world of work, such as Hair and Beauty, Childcare, Construction and Engineering, influenced students' decisions to apply for specific apprenticeships or jobs:

Interviewer: So what are you going to do?

Hairdressing

Interviewer: What about yourself?

I'm going to college to do hairdressing, and I'm going to do an apprenticeship

Interviewer: Right.

I'm going for the Army

Interviewer: Right, ok.

Electrician.

Interviewer: Is that an apprenticeship?

It is, yeah, through FÁS, yeah. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake, LCA)

6.4.3 Working-class Schools

For students from working-class schools, plans for the future were more mixed. As in the schools with a socially mixed intake, some student

plans appeared to be dependent on getting enough CAO points. Post-school pathways also appeared to be more varied, with some students intending on going to higher education; others had plans to do PLC courses or apprenticeships and others planned to travel, join the army or get a job. In the girls' school, Barrack Street, students intended going to 'college', a term which covered both university and PLC courses:

> Travel and tourism in [name of college of further education].
>
> Em … music, technology and civil engineering and social studies.
>
> *Interviewer*: Anywhere else?
>
> I don't know yet.
>
> Journalism in [name of university] or arts in [name of university].
>
> Psychiatric nursing in [name of university] or [name of university]
>
> Maths in [name of university]. (Barrack Street, girls' school, working-class intake)

As with students in other schools, their plans for college depended on whether they got an adequate number of points in their exams. Some students appeared to have already given up on their preferred courses because of the high points associated with certain courses (see Chapter Five). Staff in Barrack Street felt that students at the school were 'a bit of a mixed bag', with the majority applying for PLC courses and a smaller number going to third level:

> I suppose PLC course for a lot of them, yeah, and they do quite well in those, I have to say. It caters for the needs of the students that we have, because a lot of our students are middle of the road, they are not taking higher level subjects maybe in, you know, most of their subjects. And for that reason then the PLC colleges cater for that but we would have maybe 10 to 15 per cent who are more academic and who go ahead, yeah. (Barrack Street, staff, girls' school, working-class intake)

Interestingly, another staff member in Barrack Street felt that students at the school lacked ambition. Despite many intending to go to college, she felt that student planning was far more short term:

> Very few of them are going onto college, third level, there's no ambition there to do that, just immediate gratification rather than long-term planning, that's what's going on in their heads. (Barrack Street, staff, girls' school, working-class intake)

When discussing how students in Barrack Street will do in the exams, students were described as 'not very academic' but staff felt they will do 'reasonably well':

> They're very average and you've to struggle to get them through now, so they will do reasonably well, that's what we're hoping for them. They find, they find study difficult now. We have … some students with special needs you know and that, so that's difficult enough for them, yeah, so we're hoping that they will do reasonably well. (Barrack Street, staff, girls' school, working-class intake)

Despite the fact that some students had gone to college in previous years, concern was expressed about this particular cohort of students:

> A number of girls have gone to University, Institutes of Technology and Post Leaving, very, very good results. This year, as I say, I'm worried about going up in August to collect that envelope and looking at the results. (Barrack Street, staff, girls' school, working-class intake)

In Dawes Point, students were streamed at junior cycle and many of the students from the highest stream class in sixth year had plans to go to college and had applied for specific courses:

> I want to become a pilot.
>
> A teacher.
>
> A barrister.
>
> A teacher.
>
> Engineer. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

Interviewer: What do you think you might do after you finish school?

A business course in [name of IOT].

Social care in the [name of IOT] or [name of IOT].

Train as a mechanic I'm doing a course.

Mechanical engineering.

Multimedia in [name of IOT].

I don't know. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

Staff acknowledged that the number of students intending to go to college depended on the ability of the class in which they were placed. Students tended to apply for courses in 'applied computing, engineering, science … construction and engineering technology', with many students entering 'the professional trades' (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake). A staff member felt that students opted for either a national certificate or an apprenticeship and emphasised that they should have one or two 'fallback' options:

> [If] the apprenticeship doesn't come through then they pursue with the national certificate you know what I mean… So that they would all have… I would have impressed on them to have at least one two or three fallback positions… Do you know what I mean, so it might be the CAO, PLC course, apprenticeship, whatever. (Dawes Point, boys' school, working-class intake)

Students in other working-class schools, such as Lang Street, wanted to enter training programmes or apprenticeships where they could 'get a trade' and work with their hands. In Lang Street, the majority of students wished to enter the labour market or do an apprenticeship.

Interviewer: What do you think you might do after you finish school?

Just get a trade.

I'm trying for the army.

Just get a job and see after that.

Interviewer: So would you be trying to get a trade or?

No, no, a job.

Interviewer: And have you any ideas what you'd like to do?

Just see how I get on. (Lang Street, boys' school, working-class intake)

Just a trade….Or the fire brigade….

Just try and get a trade. (Lang Street, boys' school, working-class intake)

Interestingly, however, some students, males in particular, from the socially mixed and middle-class schools also sought to do apprenticeships. A staff member from Fig Lane, for example, noted this new trend which had developed in response to the booming construction sector at the time.

Other plans from students in working-class schools included travel, joining the army or getting a job. One student from a working-class school had plans to leave Ireland and work in Australia where there was 'good money':

I'm going over, I'm starting a trade over in Australia…

Interviewer: So you've got that planned then?

Yeah, my sister is my sponsor for over there.

My sister is over there, it's a good while, I researched it and she said it was good. Good money. (Lang Street, boys' school, working-class intake)

Similarly in Dixon Street, some students had plans to leave Ireland whereas others intended to study or work in beauty, childcare or get a trade:

Carpenter.

Going to Australia.

> *Interviewer*: And what about you?
>
> I want to be a beautician and go to college.
>
> *Interviewer*: Okay and you?
>
> Crèche teacher. (Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

Again, student choices varied from joining the army and hairdressing to college courses in teaching or business:

> *Interviewer*: What would you like to do after the Leaving Cert?
>
> Well I'm … going into the army.
>
> *Interviewer*: Okay, yeah?
>
> Business and accounting.
>
> *Interviewer*: Yeah.
>
> Yeah, hairdressing.
>
> Accountant or teaching. (Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

For LCA students in Dixon Street, the work experience component of their course appeared to heavily influence their career decisions and choices in post-school education:

> I went to one [work experience placement] in a beautician's and I went to one in a hairdresser's because I wanted to be a hairdresser. That's good that I know I don't want to be a hairdresser now that I worked in the beautician. So like being in the surrounding like. It was good. (Dixon Street, coed school, working-class intake)

School personnel in Dixon Street had noticed how many students wanted to work in beauty or hairdressing at the school:

> You know everyone wants to be a hairdresser or beautician at the moment (laughing). (Dixon Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

Other staff members had concerns, however, about how many students would actually secure one of these positions. Instead, they encouraged students to consider a business course which would complement their ambition to open businesses in hair or beauty in the future:

> I mean, you know, there wouldn't be enough jobs but now my take is – oh you want to run your own business? Okay so maybe it's a business course you could do in the mean time. (Dixon Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

In Hay Street, student plans included going to college, doing PLC courses and doing apprenticeships:

> I wouldn't like to be inside a classroom every day like trying to take notes, I'd prefer to be out doing a bit of hands on. (Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)

> College.

> PLC course.

> College.

> College.

> PLC course or go for an apprenticeship.

> College. (Hay Street, coed school, working-class intake)

Staff also felt that in a 'school such as this', 'very few' students would progress to university but that many students went on to study at the Institutes of Technology or do PLC courses:

> Most of them would be going into Institutes of Technology, that would be the normal progression from a school such as this. The other ones then we have a large cohort of PLC students here in our school ... and a lot of those other students would be encouraged to continue into the PLC area. (Hay Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

Another teacher felt that about 'two-thirds' of students 'go on to some kind of further education' and did 'exceptionally well':

They do exceptionally well, that's what amazes me. (Hay Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

Many students were reported as opting for FETAC courses when they leave school as a way to overcome difficulties around Maths:

Some of them may use the FETAC to proceed further, you know, to go on. They'd be over that hurdle but then, you know, the case of a lot of courses they go to anyway, they are faced with the Maths problem anyway, when they get in there. If they chose anything like engineering or construction areas, which is the area they are interested in. (Hay Street, staff, coed school, working-class intake)

6.5 Still Don't Know What to Do

Only a handful of students (around 2 per cent) reported 'don't know' when asked about post-school intentions in the survey. The group interviews, however, revealed greater uncertainty about their chosen pathways, even among those who had already applied to college (see above). Some of the students interviewed had no clear idea what they wanted to do when they left school. Many seemed frustrated by this and felt pressurised by the CAO system to make up their mind:

I'm really confused, I don't really know what I want to do, I have loads of different ideas and different, even filling out the application, I put a bit of everything on it. (Dawson Street, coed school, mixed intake)

Many students spoke about changing their mind and some were influenced by their poor performance in the Mock exams:

I've no idea yet. No idea at all.

Interviewer: Have you applied for anything?

Oh yeah, I've a few business things in, but after the way the mocks went I have to change it.

Oh I'm changing mine as well. Changing it around.

It's just so hard like because I don't know what I want to do at all. (Fig Lane, coed school, middle-class intake)

Some students seemed overwhelmed that they had to make a decision that would influence the rest of their lives and were frustrated at the way in which they had to make such big decisions about their future at such a young age:

> But it's impossible to choose what you want to do first at 17 or 18. I just think it's very hard. (Argyle Street, coed school, mixed intake)

One of the teachers interviewed felt that some of the students had made few plans for their future, due mainly to their fear of not getting enough points in the exams:

> There's some lads, they're like cogs in the ocean, they're just bobbing whatever way the tide will take them or the current will take them … they have no concept maybe of, we say how well they do in exams, they're kind of maybe a bit iffy about applying for things that they're uncertain as to whether they get the points. (Dawes Point, staff, boys' school, working-class intake)

6.6 Conclusions

This chapter has examined student reflections on their years in school and their plans and expectations for when they leave school. Students were mainly positive about the contribution of their second-level education to their personal and social development. Furthermore, making friends was considered by students to be the most important benefit of school. Students were less positive about how school had prepared them for adult and working life, with many recommending the introduction of work experience to overcome this gap. Some students felt that their school simply prepared them for the academic aspect of life after school and neglected important life skills. It is worth noting that the lack of sufficient preparation within school for work and adult life were also highlighted as an important issue by the parents of the student cohort (see Byrne and Smyth, 2011).

A major focus of this report has been to examine the ways in which students form decisions about the future and the kinds of information and advice they draw upon in making these decisions. Higher education was by far the dominant intended pathway among sixth year students, with the remainder aiming to secure apprenticeships or enter further education

(Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses); only a small number of young people planned to enter the labour market immediately upon leaving school. In keeping with actual patterns of higher education entry (McCoy et al., 2010), there is a clear social gradient in the percentage who intend to go on to higher education, with significantly higher rates of intended participation among those from professional or farming backgrounds. Over and above the effect of individual social background, young people who attend working-class schools are less much likely to plan to go to higher education than those in mixed or middle-class schools, even controlling for prior achievement and other factors. Gender patterns are also evident with females twice as likely to plan to go on to higher education as males from similar backgrounds. The patterns in relation to other forms of post-school education are highly gendered too, with young men planning on entering apprenticeships and young women planning to do PLC courses.

Chapter One outlined potential explanations for class differences in higher education entry, contrasting theories which focus on differential access to cultural, social and financial resources (social reproduction theory; see, for example, Bourdieu, 1984) with theories which look at how young people assess the relative costs and benefits of the different post-school options (rational action theory; see, for example, Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). Both sets of theories provide insights to our findings but our study points to a number of factors which are not always considered within these frameworks, namely, the role of the school, the kinds of information and advice available to students, and students' own preferences and plans.

The study findings clearly show that sixth year students differ in the cultural and social resources necessary to support the transition to college, in keeping with social reproduction theory (see Bourdieu, 1984). Students in the more middle-class schools draw on the insider knowledge of siblings and other family members in finding out about colleges and courses. In contrast, working-class students, whose families have no history of higher education entry, are more reliant on advice from school personnel and on their friends in making a decision. However, some of these students reported that staff, including guidance counsellors, had

specific expectations of what they would do after school, focusing more on apprenticeships and PLC courses rather than higher education.

In keeping with previous research (McDonough, 1997; Smyth and Hannan, 2007), the case-study schools are found to differ in their orientation to higher education. In middle-class schools, going on to university assumes a 'taken for granted' quality, with student decision-making focusing on which college and which course rather than on whether to go to higher education. This school orientation is reflected in the nature of career guidance and in the encouragement to take higher level subjects (see also Chapter Two). However, this orientation is not only evident in middle-class schools, since some of the socially mixed case-study schools, such as Belmore Street, have very high proportions of young people who are intent on higher education entry. While individual social class and school social mix emerge as very important factors, it is also important to note variation within social class and school groups in the intended pathways. Young people emerge as active agents in the decision-making process, with their goals reflecting their interests, aptitudes and hobbies. In keeping with rational choice theory (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996), they make very clear calculations about their likely success in achieving certain goals (particularly whether they will achieve the required 'points'), but these choices are made within the parameters of 'what is possible' (see Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997).

Students draw on both formal and informal sources of advice in their decision-making. As in earlier years, young people are very reliant on their parents in deciding what to do after leaving school. However, the guidance counsellor assumes a more important role at this stage in their schooling, and for working-class students is as significant an influence as their mothers. The nature of guidance provision, particularly the relative emphasis on guidance classes or individual sessions, varies across the case-study schools. Students are broadly satisfied with the guidance they receive but at the same time would like more information on the jobs and courses open to them. A particular concern expressed by students relates to the timing of guidance. In the context of constrained resources, guidance provision is generally focused on sixth year students (see McCoy et al., 2006). Many students feel it would have been helpful to have had guidance at an earlier stage in the schooling process, with many young

people now regretting not having taken the subjects or subject levels necessary to access their preferred destination. The timing of guidance emerges as all the more important given our findings that higher education entry reflects the culmination of a long-term process. Prior achievement and the nature of teacher-student interaction at junior cycle level help to shape later pathways. Educational aspirations appear to be formed quite early, with aspirations in third year strongly predictive of later pathways. Thus, many young people reach sixth year with fairly firm views on their future destinations.

Chapter Seven

Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

The Post-Primary Longitudinal Study has followed a cohort of young people since their entry to second-level education. This part of the study has explored the experiences of students in their final year of school, focusing in particular on their preparation for the Leaving Certificate exam and their plans for the future. The analyses have drawn on both surveys and focus group interviews conducted with sixth year students in twelve case-study schools selected to capture key dimensions of variation in school organisation and process. The longitudinal nature of the study has allowed us to explore the way young people change and develop as they move through the schooling system. It also facilitates a more comprehensive analysis of sixth year experiences by placing them in the context of experiences earlier in junior and senior cycle. Together with a companion volume on the transition to senior cycle (Smyth and Calvert, 2011), the book provides a rich evidence base for current debate about senior cycle reform, allowing us to assess the impact of the Leaving Certificate exam on young people's learning and skill development. This chapter presents a summary of the main findings of the study and discusses some implications of these findings for policy development.

7.2 Main Findings of the Study

The study provides rich insights into the experiences of sixth year students and the way in which these are framed by the school they attend. In this section, we focus on a smaller subset of topics to highlight the main themes emerging from the study findings, specifically, the curriculum in

sixth year, perceptions of teaching, workload and exam stress, Leaving Certificate performance, guidance and student decision-making, and reflections on second-level education.

7.2.1 Curriculum in Sixth Year

The twelve case-study schools vary in the Leaving Certificate programmes they provide, with two-thirds of the study cohort taking the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), over a quarter taking the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) while 7 per cent take the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. The LCE and LCVP programmes attract a broad range of students while LCA entrants have quite a distinctive profile – they are predominantly working-class, have been in a lower stream class or received learning support during junior cycle, and have lower educational aspirations. Sixth year students are broadly satisfied with the programmes they are taking but are somewhat less positive than they were a year earlier. Students taking the LCA programme are more satisfied with their programme than their LCE/LCVP counterparts. In keeping with previous research (Banks et al., 2010), their higher satisfaction levels reflect their ability to cope with their more manageable schoolwork, the use of group-work and project-work, less emphasis on homework, and the work experience component. Students taking the Leaving Certificate Established or Leaving Certificate Vocational programmes are mainly satisfied with the programme because they are doing well academically, they are taking subjects they like and they are on a pathway which will lead them to their desired goal of higher education. At the same time, many LCE and LCVP students are critical of the workload involved in sixth year and of the reliance on a terminal examination as a measure of their merit, issues to which we return later in the chapter.

The vast majority of students had a choice of Leaving Certificate subjects on entry to fifth year, although those taking LCA were less likely to be offered such a choice. Having been able to focus on a set of subjects they had selected emerges as a source of satisfaction to students in their sixth year. Students generally like their subjects because they have intrinsic value (being interesting) or extrinsic worth (leading to desired educational or occupational pathways). However, many students have regrets about taking one or more subjects and would prefer to have

taken other subjects. These regrets appear to reflect lack of prior knowledge about the detailed content of the subjects selected and lack of awareness of the necessity of taking certain subjects in order to access particular post-school pathways. Students with lower prior achievement levels tend to be more dissatisfied with the subjects (and programmes) they are taking and are more likely to regret having taken certain subjects. It is worth noting that students who had taken Transition Year are somewhat less likely to express such regrets, indicating that being able to sample different subjects during the programme helps to facilitate more informed subject choice. In keeping with patterns at junior cycle, students are least likely to find languages (Irish, French and German) interesting and most likely to find these subjects difficult. Maths and Biology are also seen as difficult by over half of students but both subjects are seen as useful and students report high levels of interest in Biology.

The case-study schools were found to differ in the degree, timing and flexibility with which students were allocated to different subject levels in fifth year (Smyth and Calvert, 2011). Significant variation is found across schools, across individual students within schools, and across subjects, in the proportion taking higher level subjects in sixth year. In many cases, the subject levels taken are not simply a result of choice, but the long-term outcome of the interaction between school policy and practice, teacher expectations and student aspirations. Between-school variation in higher level take-up is greater for lower-achieving students than their counterparts with higher Junior Certificate grades, indicating that some schools appear to actively encourage a broad spectrum of students to at least attempt higher level. For many students, the subject level taken is seen as following on naturally from that taken at junior cycle, with the consequence that students attending working-class schools and those who had been in lower stream classes are much less likely to take higher level subjects than others. Differences are evident in the take-up of higher level across subjects, with much lower proportions of students taking higher level Maths than was the case in English. The majority of students were likely too to 'drop down' from higher level Maths at junior cycle to ordinary level at senior cycle, with a further significant fall-off in the numbers taking higher level Maths in the final months of sixth year.

7.2.2 Student Perceptions of Teaching

Marked differences are found across programmes in the kinds of teaching methods adopted by teachers in both fifth and sixth year. LCA classrooms are characterised by an emphasis on group-work and project-work and greater interaction with teachers and classmates. In contrast, sixth year LCE/LCVP classrooms are characterised by more teacher-led instruction, an emphasis on 'practising' past exam papers, and the importance of homework. There is evidence that teachers not only adapt the methods used to the programme being taught but also to the group of students in the school. More active teaching methods, including the use of ICT, students giving presentations and the use of project-work, are more prevalent in working-class schools and in boys' schools. This is consistent with findings from other national contexts which indicate a greater use of didactic methods with higher-achieving and female students and more constructivist approaches being more commonly used with male and low-achieving students (Smerdon et al., 1999).

Sixth year students expressed very clear views about what constitutes good teaching: they wanted teachers who came prepared to class, and who were patient and willing to explain things clearly, using other approaches if students did not understand initially. These features are highly consistent with student accounts from a range of international studies (see, for example, Noguera, 2007; Osler, 2010). In keeping with the views they expressed during junior cycle (Smyth et al., 2007), students generally favoured more active learning approaches and lessons which were 'fun' and relevant to their lives. Again, sixth year students' views are in keeping with those presented in a range of international studies which highlight the way in which young people favour experiential learning (EPPI, 2005; Gorard and See, 2010; Lumby, 2010).

A new dimension evident in our research, however, was the emerging instrumentality of certain groups of students. Very little attention has been paid internationally to the impact of 'high stakes' exams, like the Leaving Certificate, on student perspectives on learning (see Chapter One). Our research shows that the looming presence of the Leaving Certificate exam shapes student views on what helps them to learn, particularly for young people who aspire to the high 'points' needed for their preferred higher education course. This group of students are found to

act rationally in choosing to pursue the kind of learning which is rewarded in the assessment system. In contrast to the views expressed earlier in their school career, many middle-class and high-aspiring students expressed impatience with, and were critical of, teachers who did not focus on 'what would come up in the exam'. For them, good teaching constituted practising exam papers and focusing precisely on the kinds of knowledge and skills needed to do well in the exam. In this context, an emphasis on broader educational development or on life skills was seen as irrelevant. Indeed, some students negatively contrasted teaching at school with the more narrowly focused approach to exam preparation characteristic of private tuition ('grinds').

Across their entire schooling career, students were vocal about the teachers who treated them with respect and care, and those who they felt treated them unfairly (see, for example, Smyth et al., 2006, 2007). Thus, respect and care were seen as part and parcel of good teaching by students (for similar examples internationally, see Hallinan, 2008; Gorard and See, 2010). For sixth year students, their emerging adulthood brought the issue of respect into sharper relief. Many students felt that teachers treated them increasingly as adults, responsible for their own learning, and characterised interaction as one of 'mutual respect'. However, for some students, especially those in working-class schools, negative interaction with teachers at junior cycle spilled over into senior cycle and a cycle of teachers 'giving out' and students 'acting up' in response was still apparent.

7.2.3 Workload and Exam Stress

On making the transition to fifth year, most students reported that schoolwork had become more demanding, highlighting the detailed content and increased difficulty levels of the subjects taken. In sixth year, most students report a further escalation of the demands of schoolwork, finding schoolwork more difficult in sixth year than in fifth year. In response to this challenge, sixth year students invest more time than previously in homework and study. This increased workload is evident across different groups of students, in terms of gender, social class and prior achievement. The only exception to this pattern is found among LCA

students, who generally view sixth year as 'about the same' as fifth year. The time spent on homework is significant among sixth years, with four in ten female students and three in ten males spending four or more hours per night. The majority of sixth years report finding it difficult to balance time spent on homework and study. Homework and study are not the only investment of time, with just under half of sixth year students taking private tuition ('grinds') outside school, a pattern which is sharply differentiated by social class background.

Sixth year students see the Leaving Certificate as a very high stakes exam for them, with significant implications for the pathways open to them upon leaving school. As a result, students reported significant levels of stress at the time of the survey (January of sixth year), with many feeling 'constantly under strain'; stress levels were much higher among female than male students, a result in keeping with previous Irish research in the 1990s (Hannan et al., 1996). Students saw stress as reflecting the constant reminders from teachers about the impending exams, their parents' expectations and, most importantly, their own desire to do well in the exams. The detailed content of many Leaving Certificate subjects and the concern that they had not 'finished' the course in all subjects fuelled this feeling that there was 'too little time' in which to prepare. Feeling under pressure to combine studying with a significant amount of homework, many students reported curtailing extracurricular and social activities in sixth year, further exacerbating the 'hot-house' climate of exam preparation. Sixth year involves not only preparation for the Leaving Certificate exam but being faced with making decisions about post-school pathways. The decision-making process itself appears to influence stress levels, with students who consider it too early to decide what to do with the rest of their lives reporting greater strain.

While stress levels undoubtedly reflect the myriad factors at play in individual students' lives, certain aspects of the school context are found to exacerbate or ameliorate stress. Student stress levels are lower where students experience positive interaction with teachers, where they are happier about the subjects they have chosen and where they participate in extracurricular sports. Conversely, their stress levels are higher where they were being bullied by their peers, where they have been in serious trouble for misbehaviour (being suspended), and when they would like

(but do not receive) additional help with their schoolwork. While interviews with key school personnel indicate an awareness of exam-related stress, teachers are not perhaps aware of the high levels of stress among some students and of the potential for schools to help reduce these levels.

7.2.4 Leaving Certificate Performance

The case-study schools are found to differ significantly in their Leaving Certificate exam performance, with students attending working-class schools achieving lower grades than those in mixed or middle-class schools. While prior differences in terms of social class and reading/numeracy levels at intake are predictive of longer term performance, certain aspects of school organisation and process emerge as crucial in shaping student outcomes.

Leaving Certificate performance reflects engagement over the span of second-level education, with junior cycle experiences having a key influence on later achievement. In particular, second year experiences are found to set the tone for student engagement with learning. Many students find the new subjects in first year demanding and the transition process involves a certain degree of turbulence for most. Those who still have difficulties coping with their schoolwork in second year go on to achieve lower grades subsequently. At this stage in the schooling career, certain students, particularly male and working-class students, appear to disengage from school, with a cycle emerging of negative teacher-student interaction and student misbehaviour. These students underperform academically at Junior Certificate level and do not regain the ground lost when they reach senior cycle.

Earlier findings from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study have shown the significant effects of ability grouping on student outcomes (Smyth et al., 2006, 2007; Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Students allocated to lower stream classes on entry to first year become more disengaged with school than other students and achieve lower Junior Certificate exam grades, even controlling for their initial ability levels. Students from lower stream classes are also more likely to drop out of school than other students, all else being equal. Furthermore, being allocated to a higher stream class is found to have no net benefit to students in terms of

achievement or retention. Of those who remain in school, many lower stream students transfer to the LCA programme rather than taking LCE or LCVP. Among the small number who do take LCE/LCVP, having been allocated to a lower stream class is found to have a direct and substantial negative effect on Leaving Certificate performance, even controlling for Junior Certificate grades. This longer term underachievement appears to reflect more restricted access to higher level subjects from early on in junior cycle coupled with these young people experiencing a climate of low expectations and more disruptive behaviour within lower stream classes.

As would be expected, Junior and Leaving Certificate exam grades are very highly correlated. This pattern reflects the fact that they measure many of the same kinds of skills and knowledge. More importantly, it relates to the way in which the subject levels taken and grades achieved at Junior Certificate level can act as a channel to subject levels at senior cycle.

Experiences at senior cycle further influence Leaving Certificate performance. Many students report a gap in standards between what is expected of them at junior and senior cycle (Smyth and Calvert, 2011). Having difficulty coping with the more demanding schoolwork experienced in fifth year is found to result in lower grades in the Leaving Certificate. Student social and work activities outside school can operate as an impediment to later achievement. Not surprisingly, students who spend more time on homework and study in sixth year achieve higher grades. What is interesting is that the group who are spending considerable amounts of time on homework (over four or five hours) do not achieve an advantage over those spending moderate amounts of time on homework.

7.2.5 Guidance and Student Decision-Making

Sixth year students are faced with making important choices about their future during the course of the year. Earlier findings from the study indicate that information and advice from informal sources, particularly parents, play a very important role in young people's decision-making about what programmes to choose, which subjects to take and what subject levels to select (Smyth et al., 2007; Smyth and Calvert, 2011). Similarly,

parents of the student cohort report spending considerable amounts of time discussing options with their children throughout their schooling career (Byrne and Smyth, 2011). In sixth year too, students regard their parents, particularly their mothers, as important sources of advice in terms of their post-school plans.

Formal guidance emerges as having a more important role in sixth year than previously; not surprisingly, given that in the context of constrained resources, schools tend to target provision towards senior cycle, especially sixth year, students (see McCoy et al., 2006). The role of formal guidance was found to vary across the case-study schools at junior cycle (Smyth et al., 2007). Variation across schools is evident too in the amount of guidance and the way it is provided to sixth year students. The most common pattern involves several classes devoted to career guidance coupled with one or two individual meetings with the guidance counsellor. Classes were seen as providing information on a broad range of options, which was particularly useful where students were unclear about what they wanted to do. The use of aptitude tests, having guest speakers and attending college open days were also seen as useful sources of information. In some cases, guidance counsellors tailored the class content to reflect student preferences, and many students commented on the personal commitment and enthusiasm of their guidance counsellor. However, students were generally more positive about individual sessions than guidance classes, since it allowed them to ask questions and access information relevant to their own specific interests.

Students were broadly positive about guidance provision but at the same time expressed the desire for more information on the possible courses and jobs open to them. Criticisms centred on the lack of time for guidance, particularly for individual meetings with the guidance counsellor. Time was seen as constrained by the dual role of guidance counselling and classroom teaching, and, in some cases, this dual role was seen as affecting the level of trust students had about issues remaining confidential (see McCoy et al., 2006, for similar findings in Irish second-level schools).

In terms of the content and focus of guidance, many students were critical of the way in which guidance provision focused on higher educa-

tion, particularly on the completion of the CAO forms. An important issue emerged in relation to the timing of guidance provision. Some students felt that the provision was 'too late' in sixth year as they had already chosen their subjects and often their subject levels. The high proportion of students who regret taking particular subjects would also appear to point to a lack of sufficient guidance at the time of the transition to senior cycle.

A large body of research in Ireland and internationally has focused on the factors which influence young people's post-school plans, with some theorists emphasising differential access to cultural and social resources (Bourdieu, 1986) while others focus on the rational assessment of the costs and benefits attached to different options (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). Other research has gone further by tracing the way in which the school can shape student decision-making (see, for example, McDonough, 1997). Research in Ireland has shown the complex interaction of school experience, family background and student aspirations in influencing the trajectories taken by young people from non-manual backgrounds (McCoy et al., 2010). The Post-Primary Longitudinal Study provides a unique opportunity to capture the views of young people while they are making these decisions, rather than retrospectively as is usually the case, and these views can be located in the context of their entire second-level pathways as well as the nature of guidance provision in the school.

Higher education was by far the dominant intended pathway among sixth year students in our study. In keeping with actual patterns of higher education entry (McCoy et al., 2010), the proportion intending to go on to higher education is strongly structured by social class background and by gender. Over and above the effect of individual social background, young people who attend working-class schools are less much likely to intend to go to higher education than those in mixed or middle-class schools, even controlling for prior achievement and other factors. This study indicates clear differences in the resources and information upon which young people from different social classes can draw. Middle-class students have access to the insider knowledge of siblings and other family members in finding out about colleges and courses. In schools with a more middle-class population and in more academically oriented schools

with a socially mixed intake, there is a taken for granted quality about going on to higher education, with decisions focussing on the specificities of course and college choice. In contrast, working-class students, whose families have no history of higher education entry, are more reliant on advice from school personnel in making a decision. Indeed, the guidance counsellor is as an important an influence for those in working-class schools as their mothers. However, some of these students reported that guidance counsellors and other school staff held low expectations of them, seeing apprenticeships and PLC courses as a more 'suitable' route for them than higher education.

It is worth pointing out that while social class differentiation is clear, there is variation within social groups in young people's intended pathways. Sixth year students are active agents in the decision-making process, rationally weighing up the different options open to them. But these choices are made within the parameters of 'what is possible' (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1993) and prior choices about programmes, subjects and subject levels are found to limit the possibilities for many students.

The study findings clearly highlight how the decision to go on to higher education is the culmination of a much longer term process. Prior achievement and the quality of teacher-student interaction at junior cycle level help to shape later pathways. Educational aspirations appear to be formed quite early; students who aspire to degree-level qualifications in third year have higher aspirations and higher achievement levels in sixth year. However, the extent to which students report receiving guidance about future options at junior cycle level varies across schools.

7.2.6 Reflections on Second-Level Education

There is on-going debate about the kinds of skills and competencies young people need to prepare them for a changing world. Sixth year students were asked to reflect back on what they felt they had gained from their second-level education. They were most positive about the personal and social development aspects of their education, about 'the education' they had received and about the development of 'learning to learn' skills. However, students were more critical about the extent to which school had prepared them for adult life and for the world of work. They also

identified gaps in the development of skills for their future lives, including ICT skills, reading for pleasure, an appreciation of art and music, and involvement in sports. Interestingly, the reported lack of preparation for work and adult life echoes the reports of school leavers interviewed as long ago as 1987 (see Hannan and Shortall, 1991). The lack of preparation for work and adult life was also a concern among many of the parents of the student cohort (see Byrne and Smyth, 2011).

7.3 Implications for Policy Development

Potential reform of senior cycle education has been on the policy agenda for some time. The Commission on the Points System (1999) reviewed potential bases for entry to higher education and found 'strong support for the continued use of a certificate of student achievement at the end of second-level education as the determinant of entry to third-level education for school leavers' (p. 48). The advantages of the Leaving Certificate were seen as its 'transparency, impartiality and efficiency' as well as 'the lack of an alternative mechanism which could command credibility' (p. 151). A review of senior cycle education started with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's publication of *Developing Senior Cycle Education: Consultative Paper on Issues and Options* in 2002, which was followed by a consultation process. A subsequent document from the NCCA (2003a) indicated a number of potential options for change and placed such changes in the broader context of changes in schools as institutions. It pointed to the potential for a different school culture for senior cycle students, a restructured learning experience, a rebalanced curriculum, and a variety of assessment methods. Consultations following from the publication of this document raised a number of issues around the content and structure of the curriculum as well as assessment and certification (NCCA, 2003b). Many of the stakeholders consulted pointed to the fact that the Leaving Certificate 'assesses a very narrow form of learning' (p. 23) but 'how it should change is contested' (p. 24). The subsequent period has seen the development by the NCCA of new subjects and transition units, and work on the development of key skills and flexible learning profiles. The Key Skills framework is designed to integrate into the curriculum a set of skills,

including critical and creative thinking, information processing, communicating, being personally effective and working with others, which will better equip senior cycle students for their future lives. Work on flexible learning profiles (NCCA, 2008) has focused on providing students with a more flexible and personalised combination of learning areas, assessment and certification. The recent NCCA document on senior cycle education, *Towards Learning*, is informed 'by a vision of creative, confident and actively involved young people prepared for a future of learning' (NCCA, 2011, p. 3).

The Post-Primary Longitudinal Study findings provide a rich evidence base to inform any changes in senior cycle education and highlight a number of crucial issues for policy development. Most importantly, they show that experiences at senior cycle are formed and influenced by experiences at junior cycle level, and even earlier in the schooling system. A significant minority of young people still fail to reach the end of senior cycle education and early school leaving is shaped by prior school experiences, including difficulties with schoolwork, relations with teachers and with peers (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). For those young people who sit the Leaving Certificate, junior cycle experiences are found to set the tone for their engagement with learning and their relations with the school community. Thus, the findings suggest strongly that any reform at senior cycle must be linked to changes at junior cycle level.

A number of aspects of the junior cycle experience influence later student outcomes. Firstly, it is clear that being allocated to a lower stream class has significant negative consequences for school retention and student performance at Junior and Leaving Certificate levels, without any corresponding gains for those allocated to higher stream classes. Moving towards more flexible forms of ability grouping is therefore likely to enhance student outcomes. Being in mixed ability base classes does not always translate into mixed ability teaching, with setting (dividing students between higher and ordinary or foundation levels) often used in certain subjects. Schools, however, vary in the timing at which setting takes place and it appears that allowing students to postpone decisions about whether to take higher level or not facilitates subsequent exam performance.

Secondly, second year emerges as a key phase in shaping student engagement with learning. It is often regarded as an 'in-between' year by school staff but many second year students struggle with their schoolwork and fail to recover the ground lost at later stages. A significant proportion of students, who fall above the criteria for formal learning support, state that they would like additional help with their schoolwork. There appears therefore to be a case for targeting support towards students experiencing difficulties at this stage of their schooling. More broadly, there would appear to be the potential to build upon NCCA work on flexible learning profiles to allow students to take subjects, or subsets of subjects, at a variable pace (see NCCA, 2011).

Thirdly, the quality of relations between teachers and students is highly predictive of engagement in learning, school completion and educational performance. However, in some contexts, a negative cycle of interaction emerges, which culminates in disengagement from learning and sometimes early school leaving. It is clear that promoting a school climate of respect between teachers and students, including a more positive discipline policy, will enhance student outcomes. Promoting such a climate should therefore be built into whole-school development planning and behaviour management techniques could usefully be a focus of initial and continuing professional development for principals and teachers. Curriculum reform is unlikely to be successful unless it is underpinned by a change in the culture and climate of schools.

Young people's decisions about the future are shaped and reshaped by a series of seemingly minor choices about what subjects or programmes to take and which subject levels to study. Many young people reach senior cycle, having chosen subjects they feel do not suit and finding themselves excluded from certain post-school pathways because of the subject level, subject or programme they have chosen. The study findings again point to the focus of guidance provision on senior cycle students, especially on applications for higher education (see McCoy et al., 2006). However, views about which pathway to take are often formed at a much earlier stage. The findings suggest a need for targeting guidance activities towards junior cycle students; this could take place within the context of a whole-school approach to guidance, since many young people rely on subject teachers for information and advice about

their choices. Expectations also play a crucial role, since for many middle-class young people their school views higher education as the 'natural path', while some working-class students expressed frustration concerning the assumptions being made about their capacities. It is important that guidance be used to counter low expectations and encourage young people to consider a range of options. Parents emerge once again as key sources of advice in young people's decision-making (see Byrne and Smyth, 2011). The targeting of user-friendly information towards, and school contact with, parents is therefore likely to enhance the ability of parents to support their children's pathways.

International research has highlighted the way in which high stakes testing can lead to unintended but negative consequences, such as 'teaching to the test' and narrowing young people's learning experiences (see, for example, Au, 2007). The Leaving Certificate examination is a very high stakes test, since performance has significant implications for access to post-school education, training and employment. Students themselves are very aware of what is at stake for them, especially given the 'points' system for higher education entry. The study findings clearly indicate the way in which the presence of the Leaving Certificate colours student experiences of fifth and sixth year. On making the transition to senior cycle, young people report an escalation of demands and more challenging schoolwork, highlighting a significant 'gap' in standards between junior and senior cycle. Although finding many of their subjects (particularly optional subjects) interesting and useful, they emphasise the significant amount of material to be covered across the subjects they study. Moving on to sixth year involves a further escalation of workload for students, with many spending a very significant number of hours on homework and study in the evenings and taking private tuition ('grinds') in an effort to prepare for the exams. The workload attached to preparing for the Leaving Certificate exam is associated with high levels of student stress, and many young people are critical of the almost complete reliance on these exams as *the* assessment of their performance.

The presence of the impending exams is found to shape young people's experience of teaching and learning in sixth year. LCE and LCVP classes are characterised by teacher-led instruction, assignment of sig-

nificant quantities of homework, and frequent practising of previous exam papers. Many students, especially those with lower levels of prior achievement, find the pace of instruction in class much too fast. Furthermore, the difficulty in 'completing', or totally covering, subject syllabi within class, and revising this material outside class, before the exams is a significant source of stress for students. The teacher-centred techniques and fast pace of instruction in LCE/LCVP classes contrast sharply with students' perceptions of good teaching as involving more active participation in learning and with the value placed by LCA students on group-work and project-work as a means of re-engaging them in schoolwork. Even more strikingly, by sixth year, for many students, particularly those with high aspirations, their identity as learners has changed and they have come to see 'good teaching' as 'teaching to the test', expressing impatience with teachers who seek to provide them with a broader set of educational experiences. At the same time, reflecting back on their schooling, young people point to the lack of sufficient preparation for adult and work life and the absence of certain skills, such as ICT and a foundation in cultural and sports pursuits.

The study findings raise important questions about the current impact of the Leaving Certificate exam on young people's experiences of learning and their skill development. While elements of oral and aural assessment and project-work have been incorporated into some Leaving Certificate subjects, the dominant mode of assessment for LCE/LCVP students, and the one which looms largest in student accounts of their experience, is the terminal examination. This mode of assessment, combined with the very detailed content of many subjects, has meant that teachers often move through material quickly in order to 'cover' the course and classes focus on preparation for the exam rather than broader learning outcomes. Student learning outside school, as reflected in the considerable time spent on study and the take-up of grinds, similarly reflects the need to 'cover' a large volume of material and is likely to lead to shallow, rote learning rather than deeper, more authentic learning experiences. The impact of the assessment mode is reinforced by the use of Leaving Certificate grades as a gate-way for higher education entry, with students astutely aware of the 'points' available for particular grades and

subject levels, and in many instances, choosing programmes, subjects or subject levels because of the points they can yield.

The study findings therefore point to a number of elements which should be considered in any future curriculum reform: ensuring continuity between junior and senior cycle in the standards expected of students; moving away from the very detailed content of many senior cycle subjects, which currently appears to contribute to a pace of instruction not always conducive to student learning and to a more teacher-centred approach rather than the kinds of active teaching methods which students find most engaging; the need to embed key skills, such as critical thinking, learning to learn and ICT skills, in the curriculum in order to equip young people for the future; a consideration of the possibility of making work experience available to all students, regardless of the programme they take; the crucial role of school climate, especially positive teacher-student relations, in student engagement; and the need to move to a broader range of assessment modes, which reflect the full range of skills and knowledge developed within schooling. Such a shift in approach is likely to enhance student engagement and provide young people with richer educational experiences as a preparation for adult life.

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Current debates about senior cycle education in Ireland have raised a number of crucial questions: What effect does the Leaving Certificate exam have on young people's learning experiences? What helps students to do well in the Leaving Certificate exam? How do young people make decisions about their future life after school? This book provides an important evidence base for answering these questions by examining the experiences of young people in their final year of second-level education. It explores how the impending exam colours student experiences of teaching and learning, and raises important questions about the current Leaving Certificate model. It provides crucial insights into the kinds of information and advice young people use in planning for the future, placing their decisions within the context of their overall schooling career.

From Leaving Certificate to Leaving School is part of a series about the lives of young people as they move through the schooling system. It should be of interest to principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, higher education institutions, policymakers, parents, teacher educators, and the wider academic community.

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