Leaving School in Ireland: A Longitudinal Study of Post-School Transitions

Selina McCoy, Emer Smyth, Dorothy Watson, Merike Darmody

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Executive Summary

The Leaving School in Ireland Longitudinal Study

The recent global economic crisis has brought renewed attention to the difficulties faced by young people in securing stable employment. In addition, rising post-school educational participation has raised new challenges around ensuring a more seamless transition from one stage to the next. Thus, post-school transitions have assumed an increasing importance in the policy agenda. This report presents the findings of the *Leaving School in Ireland* study, a mixed methods study drawing on a survey of young people three to four years after completing the Leaving Certificate and in-depth interviews with a subset of this group. The study collected detailed information on post-school pathways and experiences among the cohort of young people who took part in the *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study*, which followed around 900 students from first year to Leaving Certificate year in 12 case-study schools selected to capture key dimensions of school organisation. Thus, the *Leaving School in Ireland* study is the first of its kind allowing us to link school experiences to post-school outcomes in the Irish context. In addition, it provides new evidence on how young people experience the transition from second-level education to further/higher education and the labour market. The study is set in the context of sociological and psychological theories to account for the complex set of factors that influence students' pathways after completing second-level education.

Key Findings

Young People's Main Pathways

Higher education was the dominant pathway pursued by Leaving Certificate leavers, with a minority engaged in further education or entering the labour market directly. Young people from working-class backgrounds were less likely than their middle-class peers to go on to higher education, a pattern that was largely related to their lower levels of Leaving Certificate performance. The findings show that school context and experiences made a significant difference to the pathways pursued upon leaving school and were particularly significant in influencing whether young people progressed to some form of post-school education and training and in the nature of education pursued. Young people who attended socially mixed schools and, even more strikingly, middle-class schools were more likely than those from working-class schools to go on to some form of post-school education and training. The results highlight the importance of a culture of high expectations and support in promoting successful post-school transitions for second-level students. In line with earlier research (McCoy *et al*., 2010a; Smyth and Banks, 2012), higher education assumed a more 'taken for

granted' status in middle-class school settings, enhancing the chances of successful progression for these students.

Guidance and Decision Making

Young people relied on both formal and informal sources of information, guidance counsellors and parents, in making decisions about what to do after leaving school. Middle-class young people were more reliant on their parents as a source of information while working-class students and immigrant groups were more reliant on school-based forms of guidance. Young people valued the detailed information offered and the personal qualities of the guidance counsellor, highlighting in particular the importance of one-to-one sessions. However, issues were raised by interviewees regarding constraints on time for guidance, particularly for more personalised, one-to-one discussion. Concerns were also expressed about the absence of information on options other than higher education and on the employment opportunities following from the courses in which they were interested. In making decisions about their post-school pathways, most young people highlighted the importance of intrinsic reasons – wanting to study a subject they were interested in, personal fulfilment and being able to get an interesting job. However, young people who had attended working-class schools were more likely to value extrinsic reasons – an income and a secure job, suggesting greater risk aversion among this group (McCoy *et al*., 2010a; Reay *et al*., 2005)

Realising Goals and Regrets about Pathways

Not all young people were able to realise their plans upon leaving school – one in six did not realise their plans at all while over a fifth only did so 'to some extent'. Leavers with lower grades or those who had taken the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme were much less likely to realise their goals than those with higher grades. Middle-class leavers, and those who attended middle-class schools, were less likely to regret the pathway taken than working-class leavers. Reflecting the onset of recession, young people who entered the labour market directly upon leaving school had disproportionately experienced frustrated goals and had more regrets about the pathway they had taken. For many young people, Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses appeared to have been a compromise rather than a specific goal, especially where they did not go on to further study on completion. There were a number of reasons underlying regrets among this group of school leavers: not being able to realise their desired goal, largely because of lower Leaving Certificate grades; courses not being what was anticipated, in some cases, resulting in non-completion; and completing a course before realising the specific field of study was 'not for them'. Looking to the future, while the majority of the young people surveyed expect to be in full-time

employment in the near future (five years from the time of interview), emigration also figured significantly on young people's horizons.

Transition to Post-School Education

A large majority of leavers reported significant differences in teaching and learning between their second-level education and their post-school course. They indicated particular difficulties in relation to the standard expected of them, the difficulty of the course and managing their workload. A key factor emerging from the in-depth interviews was the need to engage in self-directed learning in further/higher education, especially the challenges in managing deadlines, which was contrasted with the more directive approach adopted in school. Those who had experienced higher stress levels in sixth year experienced more academic difficulties over the transition as did those who had relied on studying at home as the most helpful way of learning while at school. The nature of the current course also made a difference, with greater difficulties reported among those on science/engineering courses and attending an Institute of Technology than among other students. Those who were working part-time reported greater academic difficulties than other young people, reflecting constraints on their time for studying. Social difficulties over the transition, in terms of making new friends, were greater among those who had felt more isolated in sixth year and who had relied on studying at home. Experience of the Leaving Certificate examination also made a difference, with greater social difficulties among higher performers, those who were disappointed with their results and those who felt put under pressure by others (parents and teachers). Support within the further/higher education institution played a key role in reducing the prevalence of both academic and social difficulties.

Employment and Unemployment

Levels of unemployment increased over the post-school period as young people left post-school education and/or lost temporary jobs. Overall 43 per cent of these young people had been unemployed at some point since leaving school, with higher levels among young men. Again educational qualifications mattered, with LCA leavers and those with the lowest Leaving Certificate Established (LCE)/Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) grades being more likely to experience unemployment than those with higher grades. Young people who had attended working-class schools were more likely to experience unemployment than those who had been in socially mixed or middle-class schools, even taking account of their grades, gender and individual social class.

Among those in employment, most were in lower sales and service occupations and routine occupations, that is, working-class jobs. Even among those who had completed higher education at the time of the survey, only one in six were engaged in the types of managerial and professional positions which might be considered commensurate with their qualifications, with the majority in sales and services jobs. In fact, half of the higher education graduates surveyed felt that they did not use the knowledge and skills acquired through their education in their current job and over half rated their job as 'not at all' appropriate to their level of education. These patterns should be interpreted with caution as many young people had not yet graduated from higher education but would be of concern if they became a longer term phenomenon.

Health and Well-Being

The majority of the young people surveyed rated their physical and mental health positively. Young people were largely positive about many aspects of their lives, including friendships, accommodation, their course/job, and workload. Those who were unemployed or economically inactive were less satisfied with their situation, their financial well-being and employment prospects. The young people reported considerable reliance on money from parents/family to fund their post-school studies. Just one-quarter indicated they used income from (part-time) employment; such employment was seen to create difficulties for some young people in terms of meeting the demands of higher education courses. Although young people were largely positive about their mental health, a significant minority reported relatively high stress levels, for example, losing sleep over worry or feeling constantly under strain. Stress levels were higher among those who were unemployed and those in higher education, in the latter case being related to preparation for final exams. Those who reported higher stress levels in sixth year had higher stress levels three to four years later.

POLICY ISSUES

The findings of this study have important implications for a broad range of policy issues across the domains of education, labour market and health. Here we focus on outlining the main implications for three key areas: the impact of school experiences on later outcomes; the role of guidance in young people's decision making; and the nature of the transition to post-school education.

The findings point to the necessity of providing a positive and engaging school experience for all students in order to enhance later education opportunities. The reform of the junior cycle involves a shift away from an exam-dominated mode of assessment, less detailed curriculum specifications, fewer subjects to be assessed

than currently, a focus on embedding key skills in teaching and learning, and a concern with more innovative approaches to teaching and learning (NCCA, 2011). Effective curriculum implementation will require a significant broadening of the repertoire of teaching and assessment methods used in the classroom in order to engage all groups of young people in learning. Our research also points to the importance of creating a positive climate as negative relations between teachers and students had deleterious long-term effects on student outcomes.

The study presents new findings on the impact of school social mix on young people's post-school outcomes, effects which were much stronger than the impact of individual family background. Strong parental support was found to be a crucial factor in working-class young people going on to higher education, but many young people point to the lack of detailed knowledge of the system among parents who had not themselves attended third-level education; they lacked the 'insider' knowledge of the higher education system which could help their children make choices about which course and which college to apply for. Furthermore, social class differences in aspirations to higher education were evident as early as junior cycle. The findings, therefore, point to the importance of a whole-school approach to guidance, in which advice from teachers on which subjects and levels to study keeps options open for the future and in which the expectational climate of the school encourages young people to have high aspirations. Young people also valued specialist guidance (especially on a one-to-one basis) which played an important role in providing detailed information on potential courses and jobs. Guidance counsellors emerged as a particularly strong source of support for young people from working-class backgrounds.

The findings highlight the mismatch in approaches to teaching and learning as young people moved from second-level to post-school education, with a shift in emphasis from teacher-directed to self-directed learning. Recent reforms may help provide a more seamless transition between the different stages of education. The junior cycle reforms aim to make young people more self-directed in their learning while work is currently underway examining whether the Leaving Certificate exam can be made less 'predictable' in an effort to reduce the strong incentives for rote learning in the present system. However, discussion could usefully focus on the potential role of project work and team work within senior cycle in equipping young people with the kinds of skills they need for lifelong learning and the labour market. Proposals to reduce the large number of higher education courses at entry may assist young people in making more informed choices about the kinds of courses which better match their interests and aspirations. The process should, however, not only be viewed as the need to prepare young people for the transition but also as the responsibility of post-

school educational institutions to integrate and support these young people. The availability of such supports was found to play an important role in reducing the prevalence of academic and social transition difficulties, thereby reducing early dropout and disengagement which are key policy objectives (HEA, 2014).

Alternative pathways are to be welcomed; the dominance of higher education in the Irish context has had important implications for young people in Ireland, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds (McGuinness *et al*., 2014). Reforms currently being discussed by the *Transitions Reform Steering Group* and the *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019*, recently published by SOLAS, have the potential to enhance the quality, status, relevance and impact of a wide diversity of post-school education and training opportunities for *all* young people.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Methodology

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The post-school pathways of young people have become of notable policy interest across Europe and elsewhere, particularly in the context of the recent global economic crisis which has brought renewed attention to the difficulties faced by young people after leaving school. Rising interest in the topic reflects a concern that youth unemployment rates in the OECD area continue to rise (OECD, 2010).

This study provides unique insights into the decision making of young people regarding their post-school pathways and the extent to which their transition processes are influenced by micro, meso and macro level factors. The study involved two phases. First, a survey of 753 young people who were part of the *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study* cohort was conducted. The *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study* had followed around 900 students from first year to Leaving Certificate year in 12 case-study schools selected to capture key dimensions of school organisation. Second, a series of qualitative interviews was conducted with 27 young people from the survey cohort, yielding valuable in-depth insights into the experiences and choices young people make. This cohort of young people is of particular interest given that they went through second-level education during a period of economic boom but left school in the early stages of the recession (2007 and 2008). The study was guided by the following over-arching research questions:

1. To what extent was post-school decision making about future pathways influenced by the socio-demographic characteristics of the student?
2. What influence did experiences within school and information received have on the pathways young people pursued?
3. What did the young people surveyed do immediately after leaving school and 3-4 years later? What were their perceptions of the transition process and to what extent were they satisfied with their chosen pathway?
4. How did young people rate different aspects of their well-being?

The study is framed in terms of the concept of pathways. According to Raffe (2003), 'pathways' is a metaphor, rather than a theory or analytical tool that has been particularly influential in cross-national policy debates and among national policymakers. Use of the pathways concept falls into three broad areas:

- to distinguish the main types of pathways beyond compulsory schooling and into the labour market, to compare their strengths and weaknesses, and to determine their relative size and role in an effective transition system;
- to examine the relationships and interconnections between pathways, and to determine how best to organise systems of pathways; and
- to analyse the relationship between pathways and the 'navigations' of the young people who use them; in particular, to consider how pathways can be organised to reflect the perspectives and priorities of individual young people and to enable them to manage and control their own itineraries (ibid, p. 5).

The concept has proved popular as "...pathways may be deliberately constructed to lead to particular destinations, and they may be designed to make some destinations easier to reach than others /.../ they can be reconstructed and modified" (ibid. p. 4). The concept of pathways has attracted some criticism for assuming that the post-school trajectory is linear, for focusing on economic rather than social outcomes, and for paying limited attention to the impact of social structure (see Evans and Furlong, 1997; Dwyer and Wyn, 1998; Cohen and Ainley, 2000). However, it can be a useful organising concept for looking at the steps young people take after leaving school and for linking policy with empirical research and with current theoretical debates (Raffe, 2003). It is important to bear in mind, however, that pathways can be fragmented by individual decisions or broader structural factors (Dearn, 2001).

The central focus of transitions research has been on the movement from initial education to further/higher education and training or employment. However, the diversity of pathways across European countries has attracted growing comparative research interest, reflecting the considerable heterogeneity in education systems and institutional arrangements as well as in the links between education and the labour market. For the purposes of this study, 'post-school pathways' are defined as 'options' chosen by Irish school leavers with regard to entry to higher education, further education or the labour market after completing second-level education. The pathway selected constitutes an important step in the lives of young people as it is associated with changes to environments, relationships, behaviours, routines, roles and expectations (Dwyer, 1995).

It is important to note that it is difficult to consider 'pathways' without talking about 'transitions', i.e., the process of moving towards a new pathway.[1] Rather than perceiving this as a single step from initial education to the labour market or further/higher education, it is a process that may not have an obvious starting or finishing point (Curtain, 2000; Dwyer, 1995, Dwyer and Wyn, 1998; Raffe, 2001). According to some authors, there has been a polarisation of transition experiences into fast versus slow transitions, with young people from less privileged backgrounds following the traditional fast track transitions characterised by early school leaving and family formation, while their more privileged peers are participating in higher education and prolonging the step into paid employment and family formation (Jones, 2002). It has also been argued that the concept of transitions needs to be expanded in order to capture the complexity and multi-dimensionality of young people's lives and that it needs to move beyond the exclusive policy focus on the two dimensions of study and work (Dwyer *et al*., 1999; Raffe, 2001).

The transition by young people from compulsory education to higher or further education, labour market or training presents a number of challenges. These challenges are associated with making a choice between available pathways and managing the transition process (Dietrich *et al*., 2012). While some young people follow their chosen pathway with relative ease, others encounter various barriers, sometimes resulting in dropping out of post-school education and training. The pathways are often seen to be shaped by background factors such as social class, gender, minority status, and special education needs. In addition, institutions establish a set of opportunities and constraints that impact on the decision making of young people. Recent socio-economic changes, especially changes in education and labour market opportunities, place increasing demands on young people's ability to navigate possible options and multiple demands (Evans *et al*., 2010). National policies are often framed in terms of 'pathways', but the experience of early school leavers can be considered as one of 'uncharted territory' (Dwyer, 1995). Structural changes in the labour market over the last two decades mean that the transition from school to post-school education or work has become an increasingly complex and unpredictable process for many young people (Smyth *et al*., 2001). These labour market changes have been associated with an increase in youth unemployment (Sweet, 1998). For those who fail to make a successful transition to full-time work or study, there is a risk that they will become "trapped in a cycle of unemployment, part-time work and labour market programs rather than constructive career development" (Sweet, 1998, p. 7). Heinz (2009) argues that economic recession makes more visible the

[1] Over time, the concept of *pathways* emerged to describe the longer and more complex transition processes that developed in the context of youth unemployment and educational expansion (Raffe, 2003).

distinctive linkages between education and labour market which reflect and reinforce inequalities and channel people into vastly different life courses.

Considering the complexities involved, not surprisingly, some young people may require considerable planning and preparation, as well as support in order to adjust to the process. To make effective decisions on pathways, the student, family/caregiver and teacher need to be well informed about the options available. Policymakers have long recognised the importance of addressing the barriers early on by devising various programmes to support young people (McVicar *et al*., 2000). However, the character and quality of these programmes differs between as well as within countries.

1.2 Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This section outlines some of the theoretical frameworks which have been used to understand the factors that impact on young people's decision making regarding their post-school pathways. In doing so, it draws on sociological and psychological theories to account for the individual factors, the contextual influences and structural factors that affect students' pathways after completing second-level education.

A number of international studies indicate that family background continues to affect students' educational performance and future life-chances. Social class hence remains a strong indicator in discussing differences in student outcomes. Leaving second-level education is a phase that presents significant risks for some groups of school leavers, whilst reinforcing opportunities for others. To understand this, sociological theories developed by Bourdieu and others are useful to consider. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) emphasise the influence of families' social, economic and cultural capital in shaping students' educational choices. The different forms of cultural capital, such as institutionalised capital (families' qualifications), embodied capital (the consciously acquired and the passively "inherited" properties of one's self), and objectified capital (physical objects that are owned), provide middle-class students with the resources required for effective decision making about education (Billet, 2010).

Another concept defined and developed by Bourdieu is a concept called 'habitus'. This concept is closely connected with class origin. It refers to the 'essence of being' of a person, including a person's inbuilt (socially acquired) disposition to behave, and think in a certain way, to have certain outlooks and opinions on life.

Bourdieu (1990) uses the analogy of the game to explain how habitus functions. He argues that 'the feel for the game' enables some people to effortlessly move within a certain (familiar) field, feeling at ease. The notion of habitus is helpful in understanding how middle-class families and their children find it easier to navigate within a formal educational system which transmits and reproduces middle-class values. Habitus is shaped by the way a person is socialised from a young age within his/her family, as well as by peers and by the education system (Sachill, 1993). It can be argued that for Bourdieu, habitus is the key to understanding the mechanisms that educational systems employ to reproduce existing social relations in students. The concept has been criticised for being "theoretically incoherent [with] no clear use for empirical researchers" and for its latent determinism (DiMaggio, 1979). However, others have found the concept helpful as a tool in 'reconciling dualisms' between agency and structure (Reay *et al*., 2005). In the context of this study, the concept is helpful in exploring the effects of students' social class background on their experiences at school and subsequent goal-setting. It also helps to explain the different cultures of expectation that middle-class parents may have regarding the career choice of their children.

Reay *et al.* (2001), taking Bourdieu's idea of 'habitus' as a point of departure, develop the concept of 'institutional habitus' in order to facilitate the understanding of social processes within educational institutions. The concept refers to school effects such as the ethos, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships among students and between students and teaching staff. Elsewhere, Reay (1998) argues that in educational institutions, institutional habitus and family background may produce a certain mismatch. She maintains that the more affluent and privileged middle-class students are more likely to experience congruity between these two worlds compared to working-class students. Considering the reproductive character of educational institutions perpetuating – in most cases, middle-class – values and code of behaviour, 'outsiders' find it harder to adapt to the new environment. In the context of making choices about entry to higher education, Reay *et al*. note that students from working-class backgrounds may consider some choices 'unthinkable' (e.g., entry to highly prestigious universities), and tend to opt for 'new' universities instead (Reay *et al*., 2001; 2009). The role of institutional habitus in transmitting middle-class values and expectations may help to explain the development of a culture of expectations within different types of schools that is likely to influence individual aspirations and may have marked implications for post-school pathway decisions.

Individual decision-making styles tend to vary from careful gathering of information and weighing up options to acting on intuition (Frigo *et al.*, 2007). A growing number of studies have contributed towards understanding the decision-making process regarding post-school pathways and career choice. Theoretical models which describe how young people make decisions about their futures include *economic/instrumental rationality models* (decision making as a rational process) and *structuralist models* (decisions viewed as the result of external forces). In the former, young people carefully consider the costs and benefits associated with a decision, whereas the latter deals with influences such as background, school, and the state of the economy (Frigo *et al.*, 2007). It is increasingly common to use 'hybrid' models which allow for both structural influences and personal agency (Frigo *et al.*, 2007).

The way in which social and cultural factors shape career-related decision making has been addressed by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), who argue that decision making results from the ways opportunities are structured differently for individuals depending on the availability of different types of capital. The authors extend this argument to career decision making ('careership theory') arguing that career decision making and progression have three overlapping dimensions, namely: the positions and dispositions of the individual; the relations between forces acting in the field(s) within which decisions are made and careers progressed; and the on-going longitudinal pathways careers follow. The authors also suggest that a person's routines prior to graduating and choosing a career may be *confirmatory*, in that they reinforce the person's decision to follow along a specified career trajectory; *contradictory*, in that they undermine the person's decision; *socializing*, in the sense that a person passively assumes a particular career trajectory; *dislocating*, in that a person is neither socialized into a path nor is able to transform their routine; or *evolutionary*, where the routine leads to personal growth. This differentiation is useful for understanding how young people navigate between different post-school pathways.

Harren (1979) focuses on the psychological aspects of career decision making. He identifies four parameters that either constitute decision making or influence how it progresses — *the process itself*, *characteristics of the decision-maker*, *characteristics of the developmental tasks driving career decisions*, and *the conditions under which decisions are made*. Harren specifically outlines how career decision making involves awareness of one's own options and self-confidence in choosing among career options, gathering information about different available options and comparing them to one's own internal criteria and self-concept, and then assessing the decision against the feedback of others. He pays special attention to the importance of identity and background in decision

making, arguing that both past experiences and sense of self play an important role in assessing the meaning of information gathered in the decision-making process.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) represents a broad framework for the study of human motivation involving both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. Intrinsic motivation refers to undertaking an activity for its inherent satisfaction, that is, doing something that is inherently interesting or enjoyable. Extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2000). The quality of experience and performance can be very different when one is behaving for intrinsic versus extrinsic reasons. Both types of motivations are important in the context of education, particularly in teaching and learning situations and in understanding the value of education (Ryan and Stiller, 1991).

While the theories discussed above are useful for understanding decision making, it is also important to consider how young people fare once they have embarked on their chosen pathway. Persistence theories (Tinto, 1975; Bean and Metzner, 1985) attempt to explain student retention in higher education. Tinto's student integration model indicates that integration into the social and academic aspects of the institution allied with student commitment to academic goals and their institution leads to a greater likelihood of persistence through degree completion (Tinto, 1975; 1993). While Tinto's theory relies heavily upon students' social experience, Bean and Metzner (1985) posited that students' college persistence decisions are most directly determined by background variables (demographics, educational goals), academic variables (study habits, support, course availability), environmental variables (finances, workload, family influence), academic performance, psychological outcomes (goals, satisfaction), and intent to leave.

Much of the sociological research on youth transitions explores the influence of social structure and institutions on post-school pathways (Heinz, 2009). Fewer studies on post-school decision making acknowledge the importance of individual agency which operates in the context of a range of external factors (Foskett and Helmsley-Brown, 2001). The concept of agency reflects the capacity of individuals to act independently and their capacity for self-determination, especially their ability to enact or resist change and take responsibility for their actions (Barker, 2005). Billet (2006) argues that human agency operates relationally within and through social structures, yet is not always dominated by them. This helps to explain the educational resilience of some young people who succeed in the education system despite their disadvantaged background. It is a useful concept

in exploring young person's resources in negotiating their post-school pathways in an uncertain economic climate (Heinz, 2009).

Evidence from the British birth cohort studies (Schoon, Ross and Martin, 2009) suggests that the transition experiences of young people have remained highly structured by institutional or social forces. Evans (2002) has utilised a concept of 'bounded agency' whereby environments that are perceived to be highly structured may reduce the scope available to an individual to make desired choices. In highly structured environments opportunities are open only for those following clearly defined routes. Hodkinson (2004) stresses the importance of not over- or underemphasising the importance of either personal agency or deep-seated socio-economic inequalities. He also emphasises the importance of recognising that learning and career decision making extend over time and while schooling has a very significant impact, family and community influences are at least as significant.

Taken together, these theories are useful in explaining the mechanisms linking background characteristics (e.g., social class, gender, minority status, special education needs), interpersonal context (e.g., parents, peers, and teachers/guidance counsellors) and social structure (e.g., the educational system, the economic situation, labour market situation) to the pathways taken by Irish students after completing second-level schooling.

Existing Studies on Post-School Pathways

There is now an extensive body of research on post-school choices and decision-making processes. The different strands have explored progression to higher education by different groups of students (Reay *et al*., 2001; 2009), transitions to further education, training or employment (Ball *et al*., 2013; Gangl *et al*., 2003), along with aspirations and expectations (Beavis *et al*., 2004; Beavis, 2006). The processes involved in post-school decision making and career choice are complex, influenced by individual as well as structural factors. In addition, the lives of young people can be seen as fluid and their education and labour market activities and status can change quickly from one period to the next (Frigo *et al.*, 2007). Compared to rather linear post-school pathways in past decades, trajectories are now often characterised in terms of increased individualisation (Beck, 1992). Despite this, existing research indicates that inequalities persist in young people's attainment, aspirations and available choices when they leave school. The following sections provide a brief overview of the factors influencing students' post-school decisions and pathway choices.

Micro-Level Factors: Socio-Demographic Characteristics and Academic Ability

Research has indicated remarkable commonalities across countries in the relationship between social class background and educational attainment (see, for example, Müller, 1996), and in the way in which education mediates the association between class origin and destination (Ishida, Müller and Ridge, 1995). Research consistently indicates that students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to drop out of upper secondary school than their middle- or upper-income counterparts (Harding, 2003; Rumberger, 2001) and are less likely to participate in higher education (Parker *et al*. 2012; Horn and Berger, 2004; Orfield, Marin, and Horn, 2005; Rosenbaum, 2001). In Canada, a strong intergenerational transmission effect was found on access to higher education – students with university-educated parents were 4.5 times more likely to attend university. Participation in university was more sensitive to background characteristics than participation in college. James (2000) found that while a large majority of students was keen to succeed at school, those from isolated or lower socio-economic backgrounds were more attracted to the immediate returns that work would bring rather than the pursuit of further education. Some of these young people were described by James as 'marking time' at school until they could leave to find a job. Research in recent decades across jurisdictions shows that a significant proportion of disadvantaged young people fail to make a successful transition to work or further study. This is likely to have an adverse effect on individual lives, as well as on wider society.

While there is an abundance of studies on the impact of socio-economic background on young people's pathways, particularly focusing on access to higher education, other factors are considered less often. For example, Hannan *et al*. (1996) noted that there has been relatively little concern with the way in which post-school pathways may vary by ethnicity or nationality across different institutional contexts.[2] The growing literature on 'immigrant optimism' portrays immigrant parents as strongly encouraging their children to attend university (Louie, 2001). This can be explained by the fact that many immigrants see education, especially post-compulsory education, as an important pathway to future economic and social integration (Cheung, 2007). However, while the aspirations of immigrant youth are high, access to higher education depends on their previous academic achievement. In addition, there can be differences between first generation[3] and other immigrants. Significant differences can be found in cultural and socio-economic background among first-generation families and not all value higher education. Many see greater opportunities from direct

2 Within-country studies highlight the significance of ethnicity for such outcomes (e.g., Shavit, 1990).

3 The term "first generation immigrant" refers to all those who are born outside of the receiving country.

entry to the workforce (Sweet, Anisef, Brown, Walters and Phythian, 2010). The bases for these decisions are complex and include personal characteristics, family resources, and community support factors as well as the individual's school and classroom experiences (McAndrew *et al.*, 2009). There can also be considerable differences in school performance by national origins (Aydemir *et al.*, 2008; Corak, 2008; Levels and Dronkers, 2008; Fry, 2007). Studies consistently show considerable disparities in educational achievement levels across groups, whereby some immigrants outperform the native-born while others tend to have lower achievement levels. For example, Chinese, Korean, Indian, and Vietnamese students have been found to perform better than native-born Whites in the US, while children and youth from Mexico, Africa, and the Caribbean tend to perform less well (Glick and Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Glick and White, 2003).

While research on students with special educational needs (SEN) in compulsory and higher education is emerging, relatively little attention has been paid to the post-school pathways of these young people. Sweet *et al*. (2012) note that, although inclusive policies encourage students with SEN to continue their education, relatively few do so. While some of these students may prefer direct entry to the labour market, others have post-secondary aspirations for which they are not adequately prepared or supported. The existing research on college and university access suggests that students with SEN who aspire to post-school education face significant barriers. Many are not successful in completing post-school education programmes (Ferguson, 2008; Shaw, Madaus, and Bannerjee, 2009, Pumfrey, 2008; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey and Shaver, 2010). When compared to graduates without SEN, a higher proportion of students with SEN dropped out or went directly to the workforce (Sweet *et al.*, 2012).

Gender and educational pathways is a research strand that has received much greater attention. The research overwhelmingly indicates that there are major gender differences in educational participation, performance and outcomes (Collins *et al.*, 2000). More females than males enter higher education whereas more males than females proceed to technical education or apprenticeships (Marks *et al.*, 2011). Collins *et al*. (2000) in Australia explore gender differences in post-school outcomes, with a special focus on initial destinations. They emphasise the importance of attending to differences both between and within the genders.

In addition to these background characteristics, there are other factors that impact on post-school pathways. Having high aspirations is likely to motivate a young person to set higher goals after leaving school. Aspirations can become established at a relatively young age, as shown by an Australian study according

to which a young person's intentions to complete school and continue with further education, or not to complete, expressed at 14 or 15 years of age, were important indicators of actually doing so (Khoo and Ainley, 2005). James (2002) analysed survey data from over 7,000 Australian students and found that parental education was the most reliable predictor of the aspirations of young people to attend university.

Existing research has also linked academic ability and post-school pathways. Rothman and McMillan (2003) found that students who had high literacy and numeracy scores at age 15 planned to complete Year 12 and go on to university. However, in addition to academic ability, they found that social class also mattered – these students tended to be from higher socio-economic backgrounds and had higher satisfaction with aspects of their schooling life. Some authors have referred to 'talent loss' whereby some students who were doing well at school lowered their expectations regarding post-school pathways. These (predominantly male) students tended to come from a low socio-economic background, had poor perceptions of their academic ability and expressed dissatisfaction with school (Sikora and Saha, 2011). For students with low educational achievement, aspirations can play a critical role in helping them in setting goals for future pathways. For example, the study by Thomson and Hillman (2010) showed that for males with low numeracy proficiency, aspiring to do an apprenticeship was a good indicator of their later success in terms of working or studying, or a combination of these.

Meso-Level Factors: School Climate, Characteristics and Support

A key factor in educational outcomes for young people is the quality of the relationship between student and teacher, and student engagement with the school (e.g., Jensen, 2010). Semo and Karmel (2011) noted that Australian students with strong bonds to their teachers at age 15 were more likely to participate in education and training at age 17 than their peers with weak student-teacher bonds.

In addition, attitudes towards school also matter. Khoo and Ainley (2005) in Australia found that students with positive attitudes towards their school (including their general satisfaction with school, motivation, attitudes to their teachers, views on school provision of opportunities, and sense of achievement) tended to have higher educational aspirations and a corresponding increase in education and training participation. The range of subjects on offer at school is also likely to shape the options available to young people after leaving school. Existing research in the Irish context shows that schools vary in the range of

subjects they are able to provide for the students (Smyth *et al.*, 2004). In addition, the subjects provided vary by the gender and social class composition of the school (Darmody and Smyth, 2004). This is likely to reinforce differentiation in post-school options and outcomes.

Having access to career advisors while at school can help students transition from school to work or further study. McCoy *et al.* (2006) found that schools in Ireland were generally critical of the resources they had at their disposal to offer comprehensive guidance for students, with the majority of guidance counsellors feeling that some students are missing out on the service they need.[4] The study highlighted the need to provide a guidance service not only for Leaving Certificate groups but also for Junior Certificate students. In addition, career guidance tended to be heavily focussed on higher education options. Rothman and Hillman (2008) argue that the activities that constitute a school career advice programme should encompass a wide variety of post-school options so as to provide all students the opportunity to find a career they would like to pursue.

Qualifications continue to play an important role in the difference between individual trajectories. Higher educational achievement at school is associated with better outcomes (McMillan and Marks, 2003). Cirelli and Oliver (2012) in Australia note that higher achievers were more likely to be employed and have higher incomes, whereas lower achievers had a greater likelihood of experiencing higher unemployment rates in the early years after leaving school.

Macro-Level Factors: State of the Economy

Young people are especially vulnerable to changes in economic conditions, with the degree of impact varying by gender and education level (Anlezark, 2011). In her survey of the 2008-2010 economic downturn, Anlezark (2011) found that, although Australia experienced a relatively mild downturn, young people bore almost the entire weight of the full-time job decline (including apprenticeships), and a disproportionate share of the increase in unemployment. Those unable to find a job or made redundant were at risk of remaining unemployed for a significant time. Cirelli and Oliver (2012) note that rising educational participation may provide some protection for young people. However, full-time work opportunities for 15 to 19-year-olds, especially for males, have become even more concentrated in industries sensitive to economic conditions and structural change, most particularly construction.

[4] It should be noted that this research predated recent changes in the allocation of guidance resources to schools.

The Influence of Family and Friends

Family has a strong influence on the educational and career choices of young people (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). The research which documents young people's post-school planning decisions consistently identifies parents as a key source of information and influence. A longitudinal study in Scotland of young people preparing to leave school identified a number of levels of influence which were categorised as part of either the formal network (formal career guidance) or the informal network (family and friends) of career support. The study found that informal support networks had more influence on young people's career development, decision making and transitions than formal networks (Semple, Howieson and Paris, 2002). According to Hossler, Schmit and Vesper (1998), parental expectations and encouragement have the greatest impact on students' developing aspirations, particularly with respect to planning for further education. Parental support increases students' confidence to explore options, including options that they may previously have thought to be inaccessible, and to engage in career planning (Turner and Lapan, 2002).

Friends and relatives are also influential in helping young people to find employment, and when thinking about how to help young people find work (Cirelli and Oliver, 2012). Dockery and Strathdee (2003) found that informal networks are important for young job seekers, particularly males, and asking friends or relatives about employment was the most common job-search method used by young people.

Processes Shaping Post-School Pathway Choice: Research in the Irish Context

This study can be situated within two main themes within Irish education policy and research – processes shaping entry to post-school education and training, and labour market preparedness and outcomes among young people.

(i) Post-School Education

Much of the research in recent years has focused on access to higher education, the extent and nature of inequality and, more recently, the processes underlying that inequality. Much less attention has been given to entry to other post-school education and training pathways, particularly the Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) sector. The most recently published data show a higher education participation rate of over 55 per cent of the Leaving Certificate cohort (McCoy *et al*., 2010a), representing a dramatic expansion in higher education participation in Ireland (from just 20 per cent in 1980), with continuing expansion anticipated over the coming decade (McGuinness *et al*., 2012). While such rapid expansion is remarkable by international standards (OECD, 2013), it masks continuing social

inequality in access and entry to higher education in Ireland. Despite the increase in the overall number of young people entering higher education, there remains a persistent under-representation in higher education of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (O'Connell, Clancy, and McCoy, 2006a; O'Connell, Clancy and McCoy, 2006b; McCoy *et al*., 2010a). Analyses indicate that the higher professional groups benefitted most from the expansion in higher education places with this differential only declining as they reached near saturation levels, consistent with the thesis of Raftery and Hout (1993). Farm families also show a very rapid increase in participation over time. There is no evidence that the removal of tuition fees in the mid-1990s narrowed the social differential in higher education participation (McCoy and Smyth, 2011).

Until relatively recently, much less was known about what shapes young people's post-school choices and the decision to enrol in post-school education or training. McCoy *et al*. (2010a) and McCoy and Byrne (2011) in their analysis of the processes shaping low levels of higher education entry among young people from non-manual backgrounds showed that higher education entry must be viewed as the outcome of a longer-term process of educational engagement. Educational experiences, particularly in secondary school, play a central role in the longer-term educational trajectories of young people. These findings have some parallels in the UK context, where Raffe *et al*. (2006), for example, find that class differences in entry to higher education can largely be attributed to class differences in achieving the qualifications for entry to higher education. Overall, McCoy and Byrne (2011) show large differences in the second-level school experiences of young people from different social backgrounds which go some way towards understanding such wide differentials in the proportions achieving eligibility for entry into higher education. However, it would be misleading to argue that such differences emerge at secondary level, as research also clearly demonstrates that social differentiation in educational outcomes is evident at much earlier stages – early in primary level education, for example (see Smyth and McCoy, 2009).

McCoy and Byrne (2011) and Smyth and Banks (2012) also show that information and guidance play an important role. Even among young people who are eligible for higher education, notable differences emerge across groups in their patterns of post-school choices and progression to higher education. Information about the college application process, assistance with selecting from the range of choices on offer and critically assessing where their interests and aptitudes might best lie seem central not just to entry but to successful college engagement and completion. Lack of information about the financial aspects of college, the supports available and eligibility for these supports, and the likely costs of college

are especially problematic barriers for the children of working-class and lower non-manual workers. If anything, the financial barrier is likely to have become more pressing of late as recent economic conditions are likely to further restrict the ability of these and other students to fund their studies through part-time employment and summer work. The current economic situation is also likely to curtail the ability of their parents, situated in vulnerable economic sectors, to support their children through college and to increase the pressure on these young people to forgo college and seek employment.

Finally, an emerging body of research indicates the way in which the proportion of young people going on to higher education differs across individual schools, even taking account of individual background characteristics (Smyth and Hannan, 2007; McCoy *et al*., 2010a). In some schools, going on to college assumes a 'taken for granted' quality, partly but not wholly related to the social class mix of the school (Smyth and Banks, 2012). A school's orientation to higher education tends to be reflected in concrete practices, particularly the nature of access to higher level subjects and the level and nature of guidance provision. The proportion of students taking higher level subjects varies significantly across second-level schools, reflecting the complex interplay between school policy regarding access, teacher expectations and student expectations (Smyth *et al*., 2008, 2011b). Low levels of take-up of higher level subjects will set a ceiling on student achievement, thus constraining the likelihood of entering higher education. Schools with higher levels of guidance provision (as reflected in the number of guidance hours) have a greater proportion of students who apply for higher education (Smyth and Hannan, 2007). Even more important than the level of guidance provision is the nature of such provision. Formal guidance provision plays a more important role in the decision making of young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. However, in some instances, such guidance is directed at 'realistic' (that is, class-appropriate) options rather than encouraging young people to have high aspirations (McCoy *et al*., 2010a; Smyth and Banks, 2012).

(ii) Labour Market Outcomes

The relationship between educational qualifications and labour market outcomes has been perhaps *the* dominant theme in research on school to work transitions. The burden of unemployment in the current crisis has been borne disproportionately by young people compared to adults (Eurostat, 2013) but there is important variation between different groups of young people. Across European countries, level of educational qualifications tends to enhance the chances of obtaining employment, with higher unemployment levels found among those with lower secondary qualifications (Müller and Gangl, 2003).

Gangl, Müller and Raffe (2003) note that there are similarities as well as differences in European transition patterns due to specific education and institutional structures. Countries are commonly characterised in terms of their degree of differentiation (e.g., between academic and vocational tracks), their degree of standardisation (whether there are national standards in curriculum and qualifications) and the system of labour market regulation (whether existing workers are strongly protected, making employment access difficult for 'outsider' groups such as young people) (Gangl *et al.*, 2003). Thus, countries such as Germany and the Netherlands have early allocation to distinct academic and vocational tracks, with the latter providing training in specific occupational skills. On the one hand, this approach leads to strong social differentiation in educational outcomes; on the other hand, having specific occupational skills leads to a much smoother transition to employment for school leavers (Müller and Gangl, 2003). In contrast, in Ireland second-level education is general in nature rather than focused on the development of specific vocational skills, so that the process of labour market integration may be more prolonged. The standardised nature of the educational system in Ireland (through the existence of national curriculum and assessment) gives strong signals to employers regarding educational quality and has meant that the level of educational qualifications is highly predictive of employment chances and access to high quality employment, more so than in many other countries (Smyth *et al*., 2001; OECD, 2013). Over and above the effects of educational qualifications, exam grades received are strongly associated with labour market outcomes among young people in Ireland (Breen *et al*., 1995).

The relationship between education and the labour market must be regarded as dynamic in nature. In Ireland, there has been a growing gap between Leaving Certificate leavers and those with no qualifications in access to employment, even during the period of economic boom (Smyth, 2008; Smyth and McCoy, 2011). There is evidence that employers use somewhat different signals in times of boom and recession. In periods of employment growth, employers rely more on broader signals such as educational level since they are not required to sift out so many potential employees. In contrast, in periods of employment contraction, employers sift among job candidates in a very finely-grained way, using grades and even social background as an additional signal of employability (Smyth, 2008). Parental employment is found to have a strong association with employment chances, reflecting the way it enhances access to social networks which may have valuable information about job opportunities (Smyth and McCoy, 2011).

The Irish Educational System

In order to understand the complex factors shaping post-school decisions it is useful to consider the structure of the Irish education system. Second-level education in Ireland consists of five or six years of post-primary schooling, comprising three years of junior cycle and either two or three years of senior cycle. A small proportion of second-level schools (8 per cent) are private, with most students enrolled in publicly funded secondary (58 per cent), vocational (25 per cent), comprehensive or community schools (17 per cent) (Darmody and Smyth, 2013).

Second-level education is divided into junior cycle and senior cycle. The Junior Certificate Examination is taken at the end of junior cycle in post-primary schools. The junior cycle caters for students aged from twelve to fifteen years and students normally sit the exam at the age of 14 or 15, after 3 years of post-primary education. The senior cycle caters for students in the 15 to 18 year old age group. Depending on the school they attend, students may be offered a "Transition Year", an optional one-year programme that typically forms the first year of a three year cycle. The main objective of the Transition Year is to promote the personal, social, educational and vocational development of pupils and to prepare them for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society. Students may choose one of three Leaving Certificate Programmes within senior cycle, though the provision of these options varies across schools:

- The Leaving Certificate Established (LCE): This is the most widely taken programme (taken by 67% of the cohort in 2013) in which students must take at least five subjects, including Irish (with the exception of those entering the Irish educational system after 11 years of age). Those intending to pursue higher education at a third-level institution normally take this examination and access to third-level courses depends on the results obtained.
- The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), introduced in 1989, is broadly similar to the LCE. The programme was taken by 28 per cent of the cohort in 2013. Students take three ‘link modules’ on Enterprise Education, Preparation for Work and Work Experience and a specified set of LCE subjects. The LCVP is fully accepted as a basis for entry to third level.
- The Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA), introduced in 1995, is a two-year prevocational programme designed to prepare participants for adult and working life. LCA was taken by just 5 per cent of the cohort in 2013. While certification in the LCA does not qualify for direct entry to third-level courses, students who successfully complete the programme are able to proceed to many Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. The framework of the

LCA consists of a number of modules grouped under three general headings: General Education; Vocational Education and Vocational Preparation.

Retention to Leaving Certificate level stood at 90 per cent for the cohort entering second-level education in 2007 (DES, 2014).

In terms of post-school education and training, higher education has become the dominant destination (DES, 2013). Within higher education in Ireland, there are two main types of institutions: universities and institutes of technology. There are now eight institutions with university status while the university structure also encompasses recognised colleges, including colleges of education and art colleges. From the late 1960s, Regional Technical Colleges were set up to offer sub-degree courses in technical areas; these colleges were intended to cater to regional labour markets and promote economic development at the local level (Clancy 2008). Over the period 1992 to 2006, these colleges were redesignated as Institutes of Technology (IoTs), of which there are now thirteen, and their function has evolved considerably in that they now offer degree and postgraduate degree courses across a range of disciplines. In addition to universities and institutes of technology, there are several private colleges which provide degree-level courses. Other options open to school leavers include further education and direct labour market entry. Further education comprises Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses and apprenticeship (McGuinness *et al.*, 2014). PLC courses vary from one to three years and are located within second-level structures, being provided in further education colleges and second-level schools. Many PLC courses lead to FETAC level 5 or 6 qualifications and these qualifications can be used to access (some) higher education courses. The apprenticeship scheme is organised around competency-based standards with a modular structure. The on-the-job phases are funded by employers while the off-the-job phases are funded by the State. Apprenticeships are largely confined to traditionally male craft occupations, mainly in the construction sector; the number of new entrants to apprenticeships decreased significantly over the course of the recession.

1.3 Methodology

This study is based on a mixed methods approach, which is considered the 'gold standard' in educational research today. In adopting such an approach, the study combines the strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods to allow a much fuller understanding of the processes shaping post-school decision making and transitions among young people from different social backgrounds and different school contexts. The *Leaving School in Ireland* study follows the cohort of young

people who took part in the *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study* into the post-school period and was funded by ten educational organisations/ policy stakeholders.

The Post-Primary Longitudinal Study

The *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study* (PPLS) followed a group of around 900 students from entry into second-level education to completion of senior cycle, tracing how young people changed and developed as they moved through the school system. The study was based 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 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. 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 1.1). 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. As the study progressed, it became clear that the case-study schools varied in other ways, including the type of subjects provided, the programmes available at senior cycle, their retention rates, and levels of Junior and Leaving Certificate performance.

The study 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, 2008, 2011a, 2011b; Byrne and Smyth, 2010, 2011). In each year of their second-level education, students were asked to complete questionnaires on their experiences of school and groups of students were interviewed to explore these issues in greater depth. Information gleaned from the student survey and interviews was supplemented by in-depth interviews with key personnel in the case-study schools, allowing for a comprehensive investigation of school organisation and process.

TABLE 1.1 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

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

The most recent publication drawing on the study, *From Leaving Certificate to Leaving School* (Smyth *et al*., 2011b), reported the experiences of young people in preparing for their final school exam and explored their plans for the future. The *Leaving School in Ireland* study continues their story, allowing us to examine the extent to which this cohort of young people realised their initial goals and the way in which they experienced the transition to post-school life.

The Leaving School in Ireland Study

The survey component of the study follows the methodology first adopted for the *Annual School Leavers' Survey* in 2007. The *School Leavers' Survey* began in the early 1980s, with 24 surveys undertaken either on a yearly or bi-yearly basis since then. Its social and scientific value lay in increasing our knowledge of young people's experience while at school and their experiences of the transition from second-level education to labour force participation, education or economic inactivity. The survey proved to be a valuable instrument for educational policy-making. The *Leaving School in Ireland survey* differs from the *Annual School Leavers' Survey* in being based on the sample of young people who took part in the *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study*, rather than on a nationally representative sample. The longitudinal nature of this approach allows for an in-depth understanding of young people as they make this crucial transition. A multimode approach was taken to the fieldwork, an innovation first successfully introduced in the *School Leavers' Survey 2007*. School leavers were given the option to complete the survey by web, by post, by telephone or through face-to-face contact with an interviewer. For the telephone and face-to-face phases, trained interviewers, who were fully instructed on the survey, attempted to contact and

interview those school leavers who had not completed by web or post. An incentive was offered to encourage school leavers to participate in the survey in the form of entry in a raffle.

TABLE 1.2 Profile of the Respondents

	% (Weighted)	Unweighted N
Gender:		
Male	47.2	319
Female	52.8	434
School social mix:		
Working class	20.2	134
Mixed	53.8	296
Middle class	26.0	223
Special educational needs (SEN)	7.9	58
Immigrants	12.9	93
Surveyed in 6th year	87.2	657
Surveyed in 3rd year	67.8	510

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

The total target sample was 1,251 school leavers,[5] comprising 714 who sat the Leaving Certificate in 2007, with the remaining 537 doing so in 2008. In order to have sufficient numbers for studying variation across different pathways and by background characteristics, all young people who left the 12 schools were included in the sample, even if they had not been part of the original longitudinal cohort. The total target sample was differentiated into a priority group (young people who had been part of the longitudinal cohort) and a sub-priority group (those who had joined the cohort in senior cycle because they were in schools with optional Transition Year), with greater emphasis placed on contacting the priority sample in the telephone and face-to-face rounds of the survey. Overall, one-third of the completed sample used the first mode offered, self-completion on the web. The second most popular response mode was by telephone. In a small number of cases (33), where the school leaver could not be contacted, a shortened version of the questionnaire was completed by proxy (typically by a parent of the school leaver). This meant that the analysis could take account of information on the post-school destinations of a larger number of young people. The final sample size achieved was 753, representing a response rate of just over 60 per cent. Response rates varied across the 12 schools – ranging from 47 per cent in one school to almost 70 per cent in another school. The profile of the

[5] The target sample was larger than the cohort of 900 students who entered second-level education in the twelve schools because all senior cycle students were surveyed in schools where Transition Year was optional, meaning that additional young people joined the study at senior cycle level.

respondents in terms of key demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1.2.

The questionnaire covered key aspects of young people's transitions, including:

- Their status at the time of the survey, and at each quarter since leaving school;
- The Leaving Certificate programme they had taken;
- Whether they had a special educational need (SEN) and, if so, when the need was identified and what support they received;
- Their reflections on their school experiences, including what had helped them to learn, and their views on the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations;
- The sources of information they drew on in making decisions about life after school;
- Their initial plans and the extent to which these were realised; whether they would choose the same pathway again;
- The level and type of post-school education in which they participated;
- Perceived difficulties in the transition to post-school education (academic and social);
- Characteristics of their current job;
- Well-being, health and stress levels;
- Background characteristics, including social class, parental education and immigrant status.

Respondents to the survey were asked for permission to access their Leaving Certificate results. As a result, detailed exam information was matched to the dataset for 94 per cent of the respondents. In order to facilitate longitudinal analysis, data from each of the seven waves of the *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study* were matched to the LSI survey data, providing a comprehensive record of young people's trajectories (see Table 1.2 for the numbers on whom there were data at junior and senior cycle).

In analysing the survey findings, data are reweighted in terms of school, gender and Leaving Certificate performance to reflect the profile of all leavers from the 12 case-study schools. As indicated above, these schools were chosen to reflect key dimensions of school organisation and process rather than to be nationally representative. We cannot, therefore, infer from the LSI findings on the level of, for example, unemployment to the national population. However, the longitudinal nature of the data means that we can explore in significant detail the relationship between prior experiences and subsequent outcomes.

The report draws on both descriptive and multivariate analyses, the latter being used to disentangle the factors simultaneously influencing young people's experiences and outcomes. Because young people were clustered within schools, and therefore could be assumed to share some common experiences, we use multilevel modelling techniques to take account of this clustering. In the modelling, cases where data are missing on a particular characteristic are still included to maximise the use of available information, with a dummy variable used to indicate missing data.

Qualitative Research: Interviews with School Leavers

In order to gain a better understanding of the trajectories of young people after school, life course interviews were conducted with 27 of the school leavers who had responded to the survey; this is, by any standard, a large-scale qualitative study providing rich insights into the lives of young people today. Life course interviews focus on the present situation and aim to capture the life 'in-process' (Biesta *et al*., 2004), attempting to obtain insights into the interaction between the unique life (biography) and the context within it is located (structure) (Henderson *et al*., 2007). While asking the respondents to reflect on their present situation, they are also encouraged to reflect on their past experiences and future plans (ibid.). While the questions that were put to the interviewees were relatively open, the young people were prompted on a number of topics. Such an approach has previously been successfully utilised in other similar studies (see McCoy *et al*. 2010a), and allows the respondent to identify the key processes shaping their decisions and pathways. The interviews in this study touched upon the current situation of young people (work, study, unemployed), their living arrangements, educational and occupational aspirations, career planning and decision making, experiences at school and plans for the future.

The study sample comprises 27 young people (15 females and 12 males) between the ages of 21 and 23. The sample was drawn from those who responded to the survey of school leavers. Because we were interested in comparing and contrasting young people taking different post-school experiences, the selection of interviewees was based on information from the survey on the main pathways they had pursued on leaving school (see Table 1.3). Five main pathway groups were distinguished on the basis of survey information: those who entered the labour market directly, those who entered an apprenticeship programme, those who pursued a PLC course, those who entered higher education following completion of a PLC course, and direct entrants into higher education. The five pathway groups were used to specify approximate target numbers for young people within each category, allowing where possible for a gender mix. Because of the large number of young people in higher education, sub-categories were

created relating to type of institution (University or Institute of Technology) and field of study (science/engineering/health v. arts/social science/business) to allow for variation within this group. Because of the importance of school factors, invitations to be interviewed were issued to leavers from eight of the case-study schools, which captured different aspects of school social mix and school organisation. Over 80 young people were invited to interview by letter, with follow-up phone calls to encourage participation where possible. This yielded 27 interviews in total. The interviewees captured variation in schools attended, post-school pathways, family background and gender. Only a small number of young people in the cohort had taken the LCA programme. Invitations to interview were sent to all of these young people but despite repeated attempts, no young person with LCA qualifications agreed to be interviewed.

The one-to-one in-depth interviews were conducted by three of the study team; they lasted approximately 50 minutes and were digitally recorded. The study followed strict ethical guidelines: the interviewees signed a consent form and were assured of the anonymity of their responses. The interviews were later transcribed and analysed using NVivo software.

Throughout the report, the analyses presented combine information from the survey and the qualitative interviews to provide a more comprehensive picture of the experiences of the school leaver group. This approach yields richer insights into the processes involved, particularly around complex topics such as decision making.

1.4 Structure of the Report

Chapter 2 looks at the young people's situation immediately after leaving school, placing the patterns in the context of national data on the youth labour market. Chapter 3 looks at the main pathways taken by school leavers, relating these pathways to their background characteristics and school experiences. Chapter 4 explores career planning and decision making among young people, assessing how young people made decisions about their post-school destinations. Chapter 5 examines the extent to which young people actually realised the goals they had formulated in their final year of school and whether they have regrets about the pathway they took. Chapter 6 provides new insights into how young people experience the transition to post-school education, especially their extent of preparation and the degree to which teaching and learning differs from that at second-level. This chapter also explores the academic and social difficulties experienced by young people in their first year of post-school education, relating these difficulties to background characteristics, school experiences and college context. Chapter 7 considers the labour market experiences of young people,

including whether they have had any spells of unemployment and the quality of the jobs they have obtained. Chapter 8 examines the well-being of young people, including their living arrangements, their physical and mental health, stress levels and satisfaction with key aspects of their lives. Finally, Chapter 9 presents a brief summary of the study findings and highlights some key policy issues emerging from the research.

TABLE 1.3 Interviewee Profiles

Interviewee	School Social Mix	School	Category Based on Survey	Position at the Time of the Interview
Brendan	Working class	Lang St	Unemployed after initial spell in employment	Unemployed
Clodagh	Mixed	Belmore St	Unemployed with early experience of unemployment	Unemployed
Niamh	Mixed	Belmore St	Unemployed after initial spell in employment	Unemployed
Brian	Working class	Dawes Point	Employed	Unemployed
Moira	Middle class	Harris St	Employed	Employee
Rosemary	Middle class	Harris St	Employed	Employee
Shane	Middle class	Fig Lane	Apprentice	Employee
Patrick	Mixed	Park St	Drop-out from PLC	Employee
Bridget	Working class	Barrack St	PLC	Employee
Deirdre	Middle class	Harris St	PLC	Employee
Catherine	Middle class	Harris St	PLC	PLC completed
Ronan	Mixed	Park St	PLC and higher education	Postgraduate course completed
Seamus	Middle class	Fig Lane	PLC and higher education	Undertaking postgraduate course
Siobhan	Mixed	Belmore St	PLC and higher education	Undertaking undergraduate course
Karen	Mixed	Belmore St	PLC and higher education	Undertaking undergraduate course
Robert	Working class	Lang St	Drop-out from third-level	Unemployed
Anthony	Mixed	Park St	University completed/on-going, Arts/Business	Undertaking undergraduate course
Brigid	Middle class	Harris St	University completed/ on-going, Science/Engineering/Health	Graduate
Conall	Working class	Lang St	University completed/ on-going, Science/Engineering/Health	Undertaking undergraduate course
Fiona	Working class	Barrack St	University completed/ on-going, Science/Engineering/Health	Undertaking undergraduate course
Sandra	Mixed	Belmore St	University completed/ on-going, Arts/Business	Undertaking undergraduate course
Thomas	Mixed	Park St	University completed/ on-going, Science/Engineering/Health	Undertaking undergraduate course
Denise	Middle class	Harris St	IOT completed/ on-going, Arts/Business	Graduate. Now on internship
Dermot	Working class	Dixon St	IOT completed/ on-going, Arts/Business	Undertaking undergraduate course
Carol	Middle class	Harris St	IOT completed/ on-going, Science/Engineering/Health	Deferred college; employee
Elaine	Mixed	Belmore St	IOT completed/ on-going, Science/Engineering/Health	Graduate
Gerard	Mixed	Park St	IOT completed/ on-going, Science/Engineering/Health	Undertaking undergraduate course

Chapter 2

Young People's Post-School Pathways

2.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the pathways taken by young people after leaving school. The second section places the findings of the *Leaving School in Ireland* study in the national context by drawing on *Quarterly National Household Survey* (*QNHS*) data for the same period. These data provide the national picture of the educational attainment and labour market situation of young people. The remainder of the chapter draws on our survey of school leavers from 2007 and 2008. In this latter analysis, we outline young people's initial situation after leaving school and then trace their situation over the next 2-3 years. These analyses provide the back-drop to Chapter 3 which focuses on the main pathway young people have taken since leaving school.

2.2 Young People's Pathways: The National Context

The Irish labour market has seen very major changes in recent years, with unprecedented employment growth during the boom period followed by a sharp rise in unemployment as recession set in. International research has shown that across European countries young people tend to be the hardest hit by changing economic conditions, with school leavers taking much longer to find (stable) employment during recessionary periods (Gangl, 2002). Recent research in the Irish context has shown a sharp rise in unemployment, particularly among those aged 15-24, in the wake of the recession (McGinnity *et al.*, 2014). As well as an overall increase in youth unemployment, there has been a growth in the proportion of young people who are long-term unemployed (that is, unemployed for twelve months or more), with transition into long-term unemployment more frequent among those with lower levels of educational attainment and poorer literacy levels (Kelly *et al.*, 2012).

This section presents contextual information on young people's labour market situation in 2011, around the time of the survey of the leaver cohort, drawing on data from the *Quarterly National Household Survey* (*QNHS*), which is Ireland's labour force survey. Information for the QNHS is collected continuously throughout the year by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), with 3,000 households surveyed each week to give a total sample of 39,000 households in each quarter. Households participate in the survey for five consecutive quarters. For the

purpose of this report, data from Quarter 1 of the 2011 QNHS were used to correspond with the timing of the survey of school leavers. This dataset consists of a sample of 57,169 individuals; however, the data were grossed-up to ensure that they were representative of the population in Ireland in Quarter 1 2011.

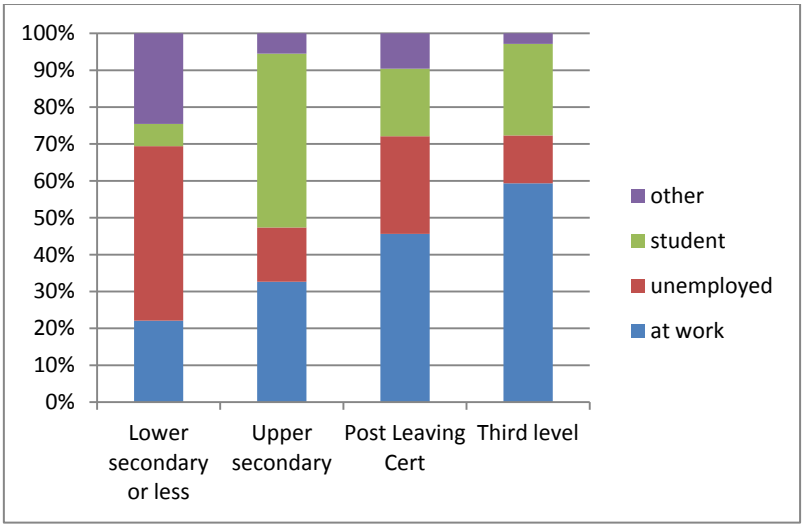
As well as including information on a person's economic status, the QNHS also contains information on a range of demographic factors (e.g. gender, age, nationality, country of birth, marital status, year of residence in Ireland, educational attainment, geographic location, etc.), job characteristics (e.g. occupation, industry, job type, trade union membership, working patterns, etc.) and unemployment information (e.g. month last worked, job search methods). The QNHS includes two measures of a person's economic status: the International Labour Organisation (ILO) measure, which is the official measure that is used in the published QNHS report to identify the numbers in employment, unemployment and inactivity, and a self-defined Principal Economic Status (PES) measure. For the purposes of the analysis undertaken in this section, the PES measure was used as it contains more detailed information on a person's economic status; specifically whether a person is i) at work, ii) looking for their first regular job, iii) unemployed, iv) a student, v) on home duties, vi) retired or vii) other. The educational attainment measure that is included in the QNHS consists of five separate categories: i) primary or less, ii) lower secondary, iii) upper secondary, iv) Post Leaving Certificate, and v) third level. The age information that is contained in the QNHS is banded: given that the focus of this report is on young people, we conduct our analysis on those aged 20 to 24 years of age, a stage when many young people are likely to have completed post-school education/training courses.

Overall, young males are found to be more likely to enter the labour market, with two-thirds of men aged 20-24 in the labour force, relative to just over 62 per cent of their female counterparts. This reflects greater levels of entry to further study among young women, with females particularly dominant among entrants to Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. The economic status of young people also varies considerably by the educational pathway taken and highest qualification pursued, with many young people completing undergraduate higher education, and more particularly, those enrolling in post-graduate study, delaying their entry to the labour market. Figure 2.1 illustrates these patterns, with nearly half of 20-24 year old young people whose highest qualification is the Leaving Certificate found to be enrolled in further study. This compares to just 6 per cent of those who left school prior to Leaving Certificate (or equivalent) standard – reflecting the fact that the Leaving Certificate is a minimum requirement for most post-school education opportunities, leaving early school leavers with fewer options.

Among those with Post-Leaving Certificate qualifications, just under one-in-five are enrolled in further study – some having successfully progressed to higher education. However, among higher education graduates, levels of further study (in many cases, post-graduate study) are considerably higher, with one-quarter enrolled in further study, perhaps a higher level of progression than would normally arise given the economic context.

Figure 2.1 also clearly shows the role of educational qualifications in securing employment and the signal they serve to potential employers. Levels of unemployment decline with successive qualification levels – with an unemployment level of nearly half among pre-Leaving Certificate school leavers comparing poorly to one-quarter among Post-Leaving Certificate qualification holders and just 12 per cent among higher education graduates. Similarly, levels of inactivity (those who are economically inactive, neither engaged in the labour market or further study) are strongly differentiated according to educational level, with one-quarter of those who did not complete second level economically inactive relative to just 3 per cent of higher education graduates. Conversely, levels of employment are substantially higher among those with post second-level qualifications and particularly among those who have completed higher education. In total, just under half of graduates in the 20-24 year age bracket are in employment in 2011, relative to just under one-third of those with the Leaving Certificate and just 22 per cent of those who did not complete second level.

FIGURE 2.1 Principal Economic Status by Qualification Level (20-24 Year Olds)



Source: CSO, *Quarterly National Household Survey*, Quarter 1 2011.

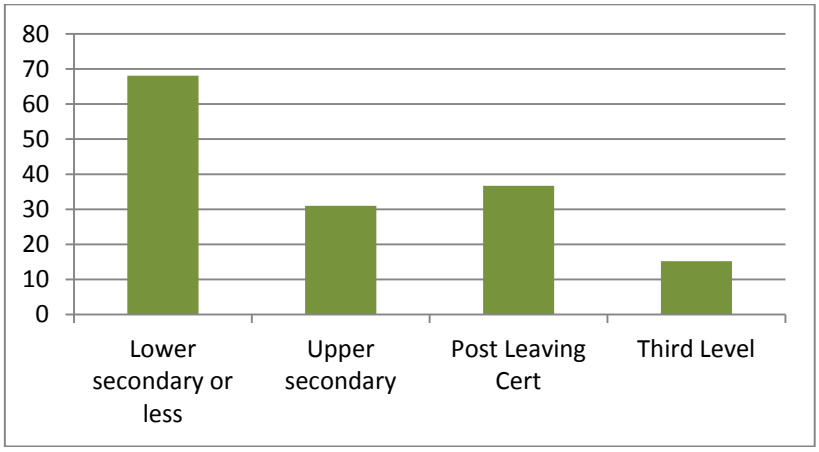
While young males have higher levels of entry into the labour market (at least among this 20-24 year age-group), they are also more likely than young women to be unemployed (Figure 2.2). Of those in the labour market, one-third of males are unemployed, compared to less than one-in-five females, presumably reflecting the greater likelihood of men pursuing jobs in economic sectors that experienced greater contraction, like the construction sector. It is also important to note from Figure 2.2 that while the youth unemployment rate stands at 26 per cent, this compares poorly to an overall unemployment rate of 14 per cent; in line with patterns elsewhere in Europe, young people are more vulnerable in the context of economic decline.

Further, as noted earlier, unemployment risk is strongly associated with educational attainment, with young people who leave school prior to completion of the Leaving Certificate or equivalent particularly vulnerable. As illustrated in Figure 2.3, nearly 70 per cent of early school leavers in the labour market are recorded as unemployed, a stark statistic. This compares to 31 per cent of those whose highest qualification is the Leaving Certificate, 37 per cent among those with Post-Leaving Certificate qualifications and 15 per cent among higher education graduates. The benefits of pursuing post-school education, particularly higher education, are clearly apparent.

FIGURE 2.2 Unemployment Rates by Age-Group and Gender

Source: CSO, *Quarterly National Household Survey*, Quarter 1 2011.

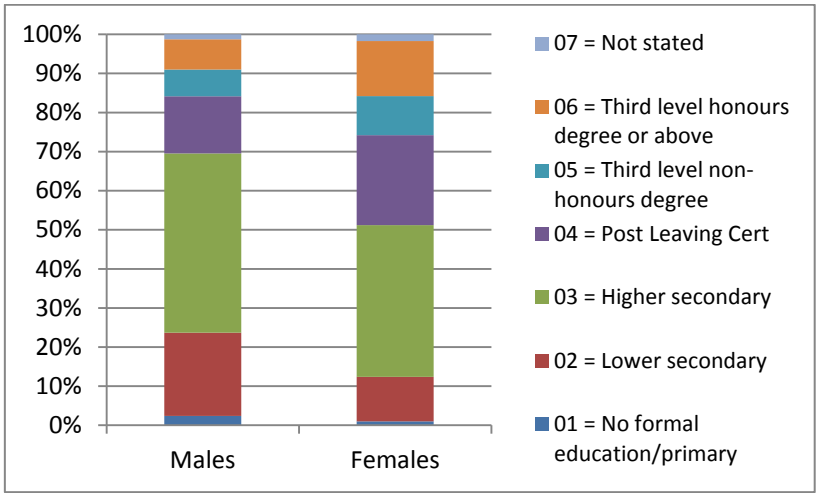
FIGURE 2.3 Unemployment Rates of 20-24 Year Olds in the Labour Market, by Qualification Level



Source: CSO, *Quarterly National Household Survey*, Quarter 1 2011.

Finally, Figure 2.4 further explores the gender patterns in labour market integration, showing the educational attainment of all young people 20-24 years of age who are unemployed at the time of the QNHS survey. While we have seen that young males are more likely to be unemployed, at least in this early career stage, the educational profile of these unemployed males is quite distinct to their female counterparts. A large proportion of young males who are unemployed have not progressed beyond the Leaving Certificate examination – 70 per cent of unemployed males have not progressed to post-school education and training. The remaining 30 per cent of the male unemployed have various post-school qualifications, both PLC qualifications and higher education. Unemployed females, in contrast, have much more diverse qualification levels, with school leaver entrants to the labour market accounting for just half of the unemployed. The bulk of the remaining unemployed are comprised of those who completed a range of Post-Leaving Certificate courses (23 per cent) and higher education qualifications (nearly one quarter).

FIGURE 2.4 Educational Profile of the Unemployed (20-24 Year Olds)



Source: CSO, *Quarterly National Household Survey*, Quarter 1 2011.

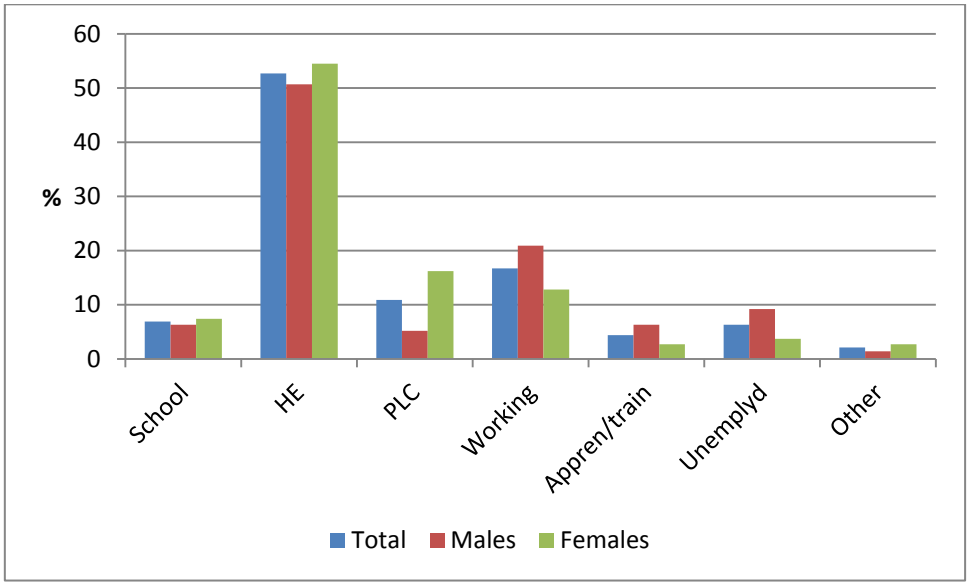
2.3 Young People's Initial Post-School Pathways

Patterns from the QNHS data provide a very useful backdrop for considering the pathways of the young people included in the *Leaving School in Ireland* survey. The LSI survey focuses on one group of school leavers, those who had completed the Leaving Certificate, rather than on the more disadvantaged group who left school before the end of second-level education.[6] However, the LSI survey has a number of advantages over QNHS data in providing more detailed insights into young people's social background, post-school pathways and reflections on their experiences. In particular, we are able to relate what happens to young people after leaving school to their experiences as they moved through the schooling system.

This section examines the main status of school leavers in the October of the year they first sat the Leaving Certificate examination or equivalent. Figure 2.5 illustrates that a total of 7 per cent of the school leavers have not in fact left school at this stage – but rather are enrolled in school again the next academic year, presumably repeating the Leaving Certificate examination. Higher education has become the dominant pathway for young people leaving second-level education in Ireland (DES, 2013). This is reflected among our cohort where a majority of school leavers are found to have progressed directly to higher education – accounting for 53 per cent of our school leaver sample. In line with other research (McCoy *et al.*, 2010a), a greater proportion of females are enrolled in higher education – 56 per cent as compared to 51 per cent of males. Females also outnumber their male counterparts in terms of PLC participation, with 16 per cent of females taking this option relative to just 5 per cent of males. It is interesting to note that just under one-in-ten males progressed to apprenticeship training on leaving school in 2007/2008, a time when recruitment to apprenticeships was slowing significantly and a number of apprentices were laid off due to the contraction in the construction industry. An additional 27 per cent of male leavers had entered the labour market shortly after leaving school, considerably greater than the 16 per cent of female leavers.

[6] It should be noted that previous research explored the profile and experiences of early school leavers among this cohort of young people (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Even before the recession, this group had very poor labour market outcomes and was unlikely to return to further education and training.

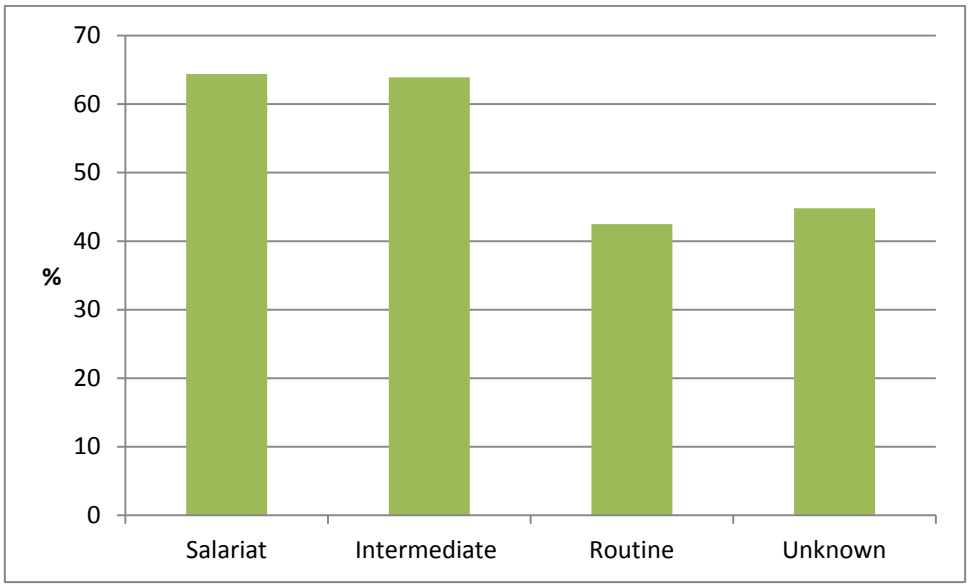
FIGURE 2.5 Main Status in October After Leaving School



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

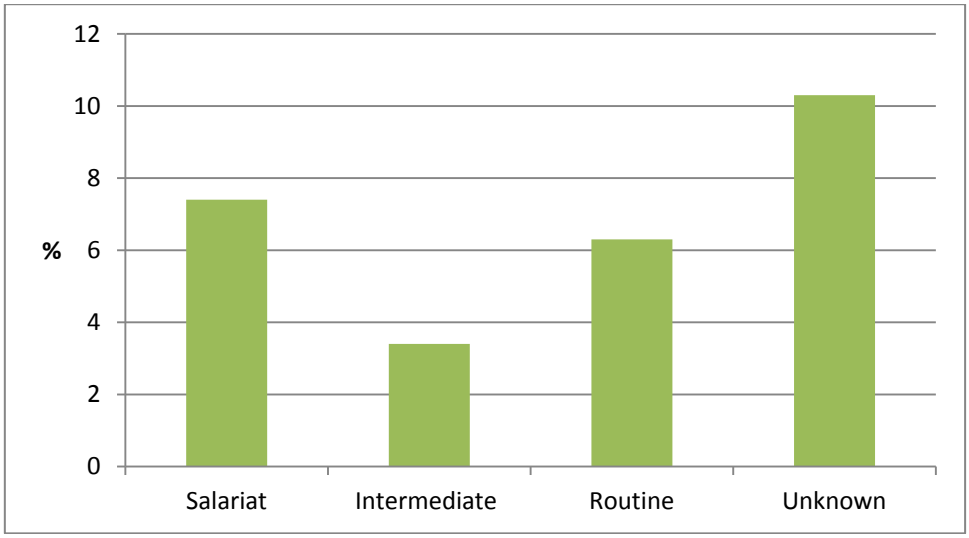
Earlier research has shown that much of the social differentiation in educational outcomes occurs during the primary and post-primary years (Smyth *et al.*, 2011b; McCoy *et al.*, 2010a). However, even among this cohort of young people, all of whom sat the Leaving Certificate examination, we find social class differences in their post-school pathways. For the purposes of this study, the social class classification used was the nine-category European Socio-Economic Classification (ESEC) which has a strong theoretical basis and has been tested across European countries (Rose and Harrison, 2010). The social class of the family was based on the occupation of the father or mother, depending on which was higher. In order to have sufficiently large groups, the initial nine categories were regrouped into three categories: salariat (professionals, managers and employers with large firms), intermediate (intermediate non-manual, small employers and supervisors) and routine (working-class and less skilled white-collar jobs). In the analyses, a separate category is shown for those whose social class is unknown; this group is often from non-employed households and tends to have a distinctive profile. Immediate progression to higher education is found to be somewhat higher among school leavers from professional (salariat) backgrounds and less prevalent among those from routine/working-class backgrounds and those for whom social class is unknown (Figure 2.6). Conversely, as shown in Figure 2.7, unemployment in the immediate post-school period is somewhat higher among school leavers who do not report their parents' occupation, many of whom are economically inactive, though this difference is not statistically significant. These findings partly reflect variation in performance in the Leaving Certificate examination across social class groups.

FIGURE 2.6 Percentage Enrolled in Higher Education in October After Leaving School by Social Background (Highest Parental Occupation)



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 2.7 Percentage Unemployed in October After Leaving School by Social Background (Highest Parental Occupation)



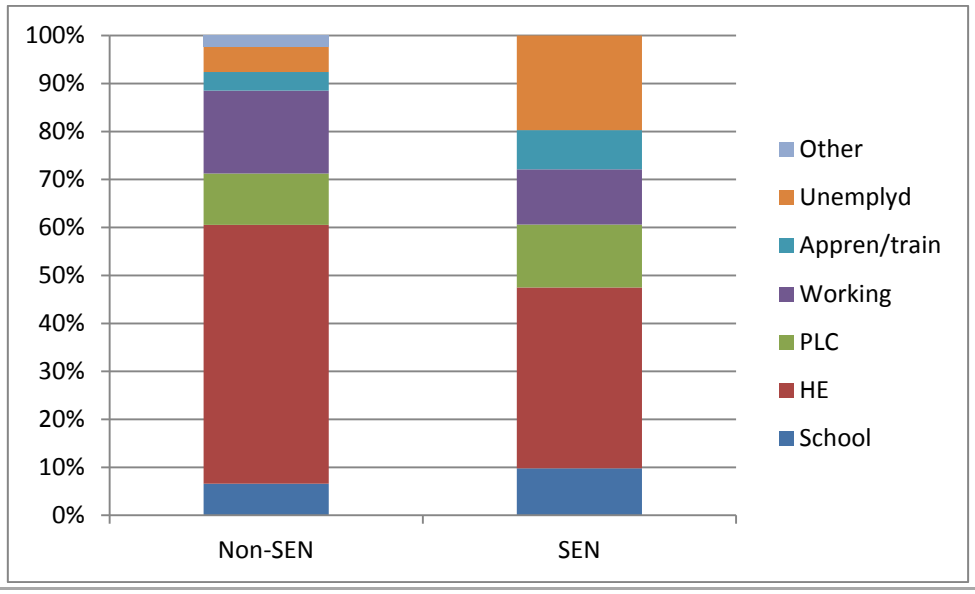
Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

The *Leaving School in Ireland* survey collected detailed information on young people's experience of special educational needs while at school and the nature of supports received both at school and in any post-school education setting. The proportion of school leavers for whom a special educational need was identified (which may or may not have been 'assessed') stands at 8 per cent, with a slightly higher level among female school leavers (9 per cent). These figures are somewhat lower than estimates for the prevalence of SEN among the school-

going population more widely (see Banks and McCoy, 2011 for a more detailed discussion), reflecting SEN prevalence rates peaking in the mid-primary years, and higher levels of early school leaving among those with SEN (see Watson and Nolan, 2011). Over half (59 per cent) of the young people with SEN in the LSI sample reported having a specific learning disability with a further 13 per cent having a physical disability. Four-fifths of young people with SEN had received additional support while at school, most typically learning support or resource teaching and exam accommodations. Young people with SEN were more likely to have taken the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme (14 per cent compared with 5 per cent), though it is noteworthy that the majority of the group in our sample did not take LCA. While the number of young people with SEN in the LSI survey is relatively small, analyses reveal interesting findings on how these young people fare in the post-school period as compared with their peers.

Even at this early time point, levels of unemployment are found to be substantially higher among young people with special educational needs, with one-fifth indicating they are unemployed a number of months after leaving school as compared to 5 per cent of other school leavers (Figure 2.8). This is consistent with recent research examining employment access among people with a disability more widely (Watson *et al.*, 2011). The study concludes that working-age people with a disability were less than half as likely to be active in the labour market and had a considerably higher unemployment rate (22 per cent compared to 16 per cent of other adults) than those without a disability. Among the LSI sample, rates of progression to PLC courses are broadly similar for young people with SEN and other school leavers. The school leaver cohort is somewhat

FIGURE 2.8 Main Status in October After Leaving School and Whether Special Educational Need Identified

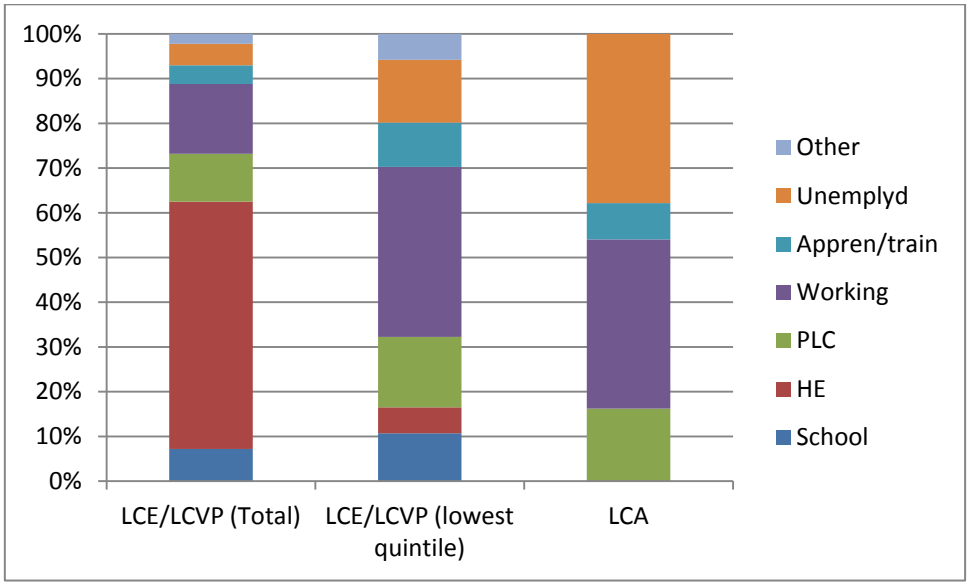


Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

distinct in showing higher levels of entry to training programmes; school leavers who report a special educational need are twice as likely to enter training programmes as their peers without such additional needs, though overall rates of participation in training are low (8 per cent compared with 4 per cent). Perhaps the most striking finding is that school leavers with special educational needs are substantially less likely to progress to higher education (just 38 per cent progress compared to 54 per cent of other school leavers); later analyses will examine the extent to which such lower progression reflects performance in the Leaving Certificate examination.

Of our sample 6 per cent of school leavers participated in the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, with the remainder taking the established Leaving Certificate or Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme. In line with the objectives of the programme, school leavers who participated in the LCA programme have distinct trajectories – being substantially more likely to enter the labour market than pursue post-school education and training (Figure 2.9). Of those LCA leavers enrolled in the labour market, over half failed to gain employment within a number of months of leaving school; this compares poorly to an unemployment rate of less than one-quarter for other leavers. LCA school leavers are twice as likely to enrol in apprenticeship programmes on leaving school, while they also have higher levels of progression to PLC courses (although none of the LCA leavers in this sample who enrolled in PLC courses subsequently progressed to higher education). At first glance, these findings show little change in the relative experiences of LCA school leavers over recent years (Banks *et al.*, 2010). However, unemployment levels appear to have risen disproportionately among LCA leavers, a situation which cannot be captured by other data sources such as the QNHS. This worsening situation may well be at least partly explained by the traditionally strong reliance on construction sector employment among males completing the LCA programme (Banks *et al.*, 2010). Young people who take LCA differ from those taking LCE/LCVP in important respects, including social background, prior achievement and attitudes to school (Banks *et al.*, 2010). It might be argued, therefore, that it is more appropriate to compare LCA leavers with those with low levels of performance within the LCE/LCVP exam. Even this comparison shows worse outcomes among LCA leavers, with higher levels of unemployment than those in the lowest quintile (fifth) of LCE/LCVP achievement. Rates of progression to further education (PLC and apprenticeship) are similar for LCA and low-performing leavers. Overall, the findings raise concerns over the large proportion of LCA leavers facing difficulty integrating into the labour market.

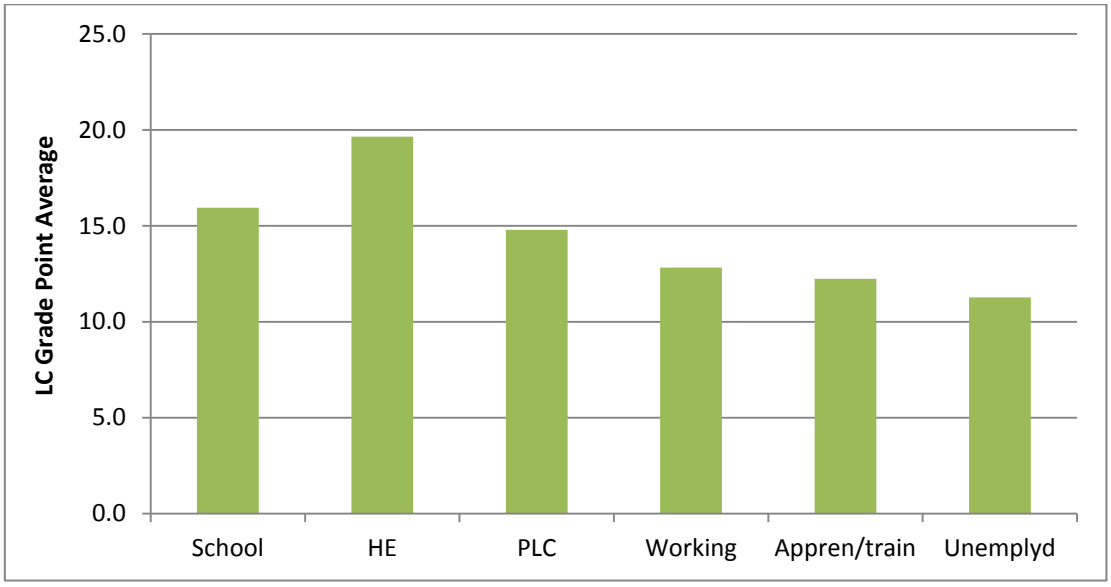
FIGURE 2.9 Main Status in October After Leaving School for LCA and Other School Leavers



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

School leavers' post-school decision making is strongly structured according to performance in the Leaving Certificate examination (Figure 2.10). For the purposes of these analyses, 'points' were assigned on the basis of the level taken and grade received, ranging from 1 for a D3 on a foundation level paper to 28 for an A1 on a higher level paper. These scores were averaged across all exam subjects taken to give a grade point average. As expected, the highest performing group are those who progressed to higher education, with those who returned to school the next highest performers. Many of these young people repeated the Leaving Certificate with the objective of increasing their 'points' to secure a place on a preferred higher education course the subsequent year. Almost two-thirds of those repeating the Leaving Certificate subsequently enrol in a higher education course, while 12 per cent enter a PLC programme and the balance enter the labour market, perhaps failing to improve on their initial performance and/or failing to secure a place on a chosen course. The PLC group are the next highest group in terms of LC performance levels, with little distinguishing the labour market groups – those employed, in apprenticeship programmes and unemployed.

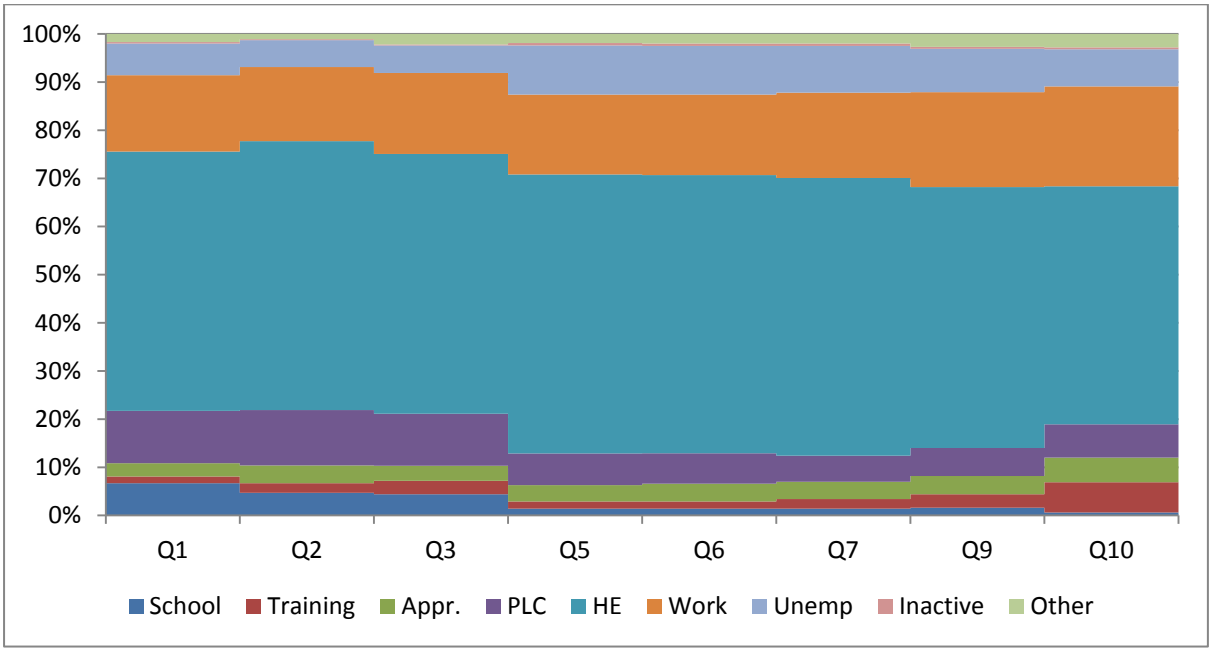
FIGURE 2.10 Mean Leaving Certificate Grade Point Average and Status in October After Leaving School



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

The analyses presented so far have shown young people's immediate status after leaving school, that is, in October of the year they left school. However, the status at this time point may not reflect their ultimate destination; some young people may take a 'gap year' before going on to higher education, some may experience a short spell of unemployment before finding a job, others may lose their job and so on. For these reasons, research on post-school transitions generally looks at the trajectories young people take over the initial period after leaving school. The LSI survey collected information on young people's status in each quarter of the first two to three years after leaving school. Figure 2.11 depicts the pattern found; information is not reported for quarters 4 and 8 as these reflect the summer period where many higher education students reported their status as 'working', which could be somewhat misleading. Being on a higher education course accounts for the largest proportion across the whole period. The proportion increases somewhat one year after leaving school, reflecting delayed entry (because of resitting the Leaving Certificate or a gap year) and transition from a PLC course to higher education. The proportion on PLC courses declines after quarter 3, indicating that a significant percentage of the group took a one year course. Over time, the proportion in the labour market increases slightly as young people complete or leave education and training. As a proportion of those in the labour market, the unemployment rate increases from 29 per cent to a maximum of 38 per cent in the middle of the period before dropping to 27 per cent. The proportion of those who are inactive increases somewhat around a year after leaving school.

FIGURE 2.11 Main Status Over the Post-School Period, by Quarter



Source: Leaving School in Ireland study.

The analyses indicate several 'main' pathways which can be identified among the leaver cohort: higher education (the dominant route), taking a PLC course (with or without progressing on to higher education), taking an apprenticeship and entering the labour market directly. The profile of those taking these pathways in terms of background and school experiences forms the focus of Chapter 3.

2.4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has shown that entry to post-school education and training, particularly higher education, is the dominant route taken by those who complete second-level education (see also DES, 2013). Data from the *Quarterly National Household Survey* indicate that educational qualifications serve as an important protection against unemployment, with the highest unemployment rates found among early school leavers. The *Leaving School in Ireland* study focuses on the pathways of Leaving Certificate leavers from twelve case-study schools. The survey findings indicate that the pathways young people pursue after leaving school differ by gender, social background, special educational needs and prior achievement.

The majority of young women and men go on to higher education. Entry to further education is highly gendered, with males entering apprenticeships and females disproportionately going on to PLC courses. In addition, young men are

more likely to enter the labour market directly upon leaving school than their female peers. Young people from middle-class (salariat and intermediate) backgrounds are much more likely than their working-class peers to go on to higher education. Working-class young people are more likely to be unemployed than their middle-class peers immediately after leaving school. The extent to which this social class differentiation in post-school pathways reflects differences in prior achievement or other aspects of school experiences will be explored in Chapter 3.

Although the findings should be interpreted with some caution due to the relatively small size of the group, the study yields new insights into the post-school trajectories of young people with special educational needs. Two features are worth highlighting. First, young people with SEN are significantly less likely than their peers to go on to higher education, while having broadly similar levels of participation in further education. Second, unemployment levels are much higher for young people with SEN in the immediate period after leaving school.

The type of Leaving Certificate programme taken is significantly predictive of post-school outcomes. LCA leavers have significantly worse outcomes than their peers, having much higher unemployment levels. Even compared to LCE/LCVP with the lowest exam grades, LCA leavers are seen to have greater difficulties in accessing paid employment.

Chapter 3

Individual and School Influences on Post-School Pathways

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 has explored the young people's destinations immediately after leaving school. Their situation at this time point may not be wholly indicative of their ultimate destination. As a result, young people's trajectories were categorised on the basis of the main pathway they followed over the three to four years after leaving school. These pathways were constructed primarily on the basis of the kinds of education/training courses taken by young people. As a result, labour market entrants refer to the group of young people who had not taken part in a further or higher education course at any stage over this period. To take an example, young people may take a job as part of a 'gap year' and go on to third-level education in the following year; in this instance, they would be recorded as a labour market entrant in the immediate post-school period but their dominant pathway would be higher education. This chapter distinguishes between labour market entrants, those who entered apprenticeships, higher education entrants and those who took a PLC course (with or without progressing to higher education subsequently). It examines the way in which post-school pathways differ by young people's background and the extent to which destinations after leaving school are related to experiences while at school. Section 3.2 looks at variation in post-school pathways by gender and social class background. Section 3.3 looks at how school leavers taking different post-school pathways reflect on their school experiences three to four years after leaving school. The fourth section uses information collected while young people were at school to analyse the relationship between attitudes to school and later outcomes.

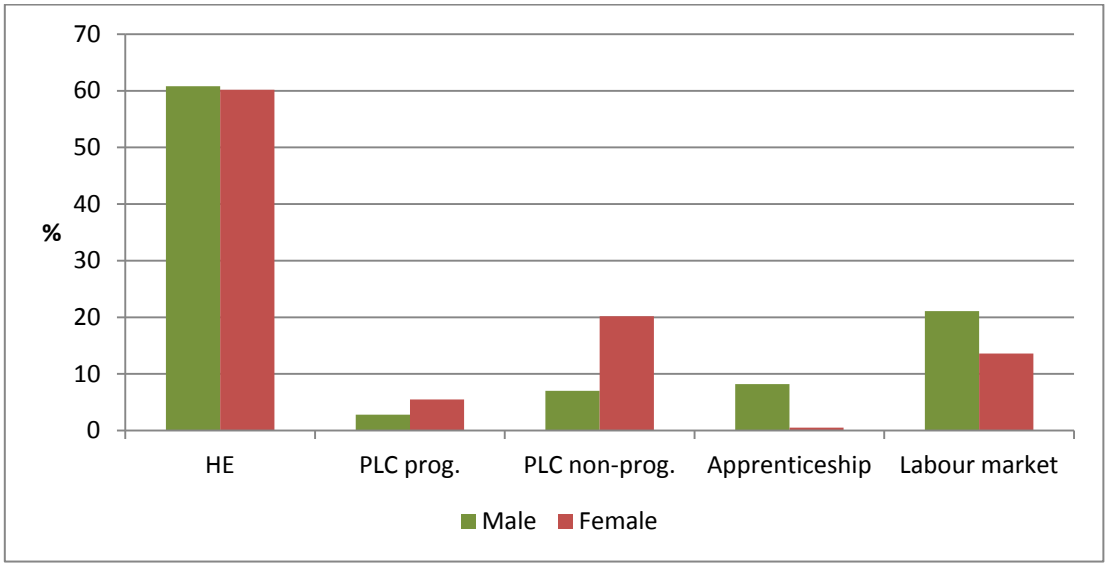
3.2 Individual Background and Post-School Pathways

The dominant post-school pathway among the cohort was higher education entry, with 61 per cent of young people in the sample taking this route. Over a fifth (22 per cent) of the group took part in further education (a PLC course or apprenticeship training) while one in six (17 per cent) entered the labour market.[7] None of this group of Leaving Certificate leavers were inactive (outside the labour market) for reasons other than participation in education/training. Young women and men are equally likely to go on to higher education but other

[7] None of this group of Leaving Certificate leavers were unavailable for work due to illness/disability or childcare throughout the whole of the post-school period. This contrasts with higher levels of inactivity found among early school leavers (Byrne *et al.*, 2009).

pathways are highly gendered (Figure 3.1). Young men are significantly more likely to enter the labour market than young women (21 per cent compared with 14 per cent). Within further education, males are over-represented among apprenticeships (8 per cent compared with 0.5 per cent) and under-represented on PLC courses (10 per cent compared with 26 per cent).

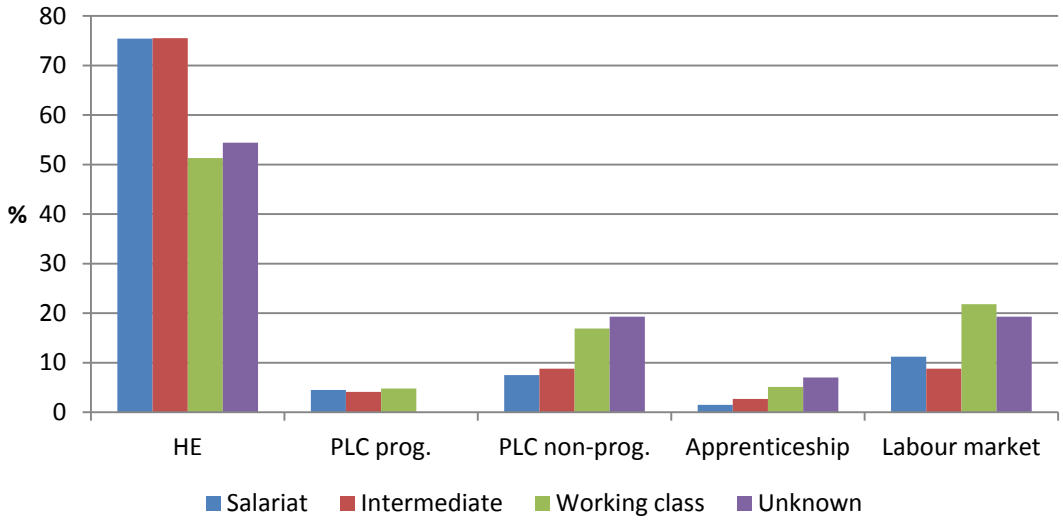
FIGURE 3.1 Main Post School Pathways by Gender



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Significant social class differences are found in the main pathways taken after leaving school (Figure 3.2). Higher education entry is significantly more prevalent among those from salariat and intermediate background than among those from working-class backgrounds and those whose social class is unknown. Direct labour market entry, apprenticeship and taking a PLC course without progressing to higher education (the latter termed 'PLC non-progression') are all more prevalent among working-class young people.

FIGURE 3.2 Main Post School Pathway by Social Class

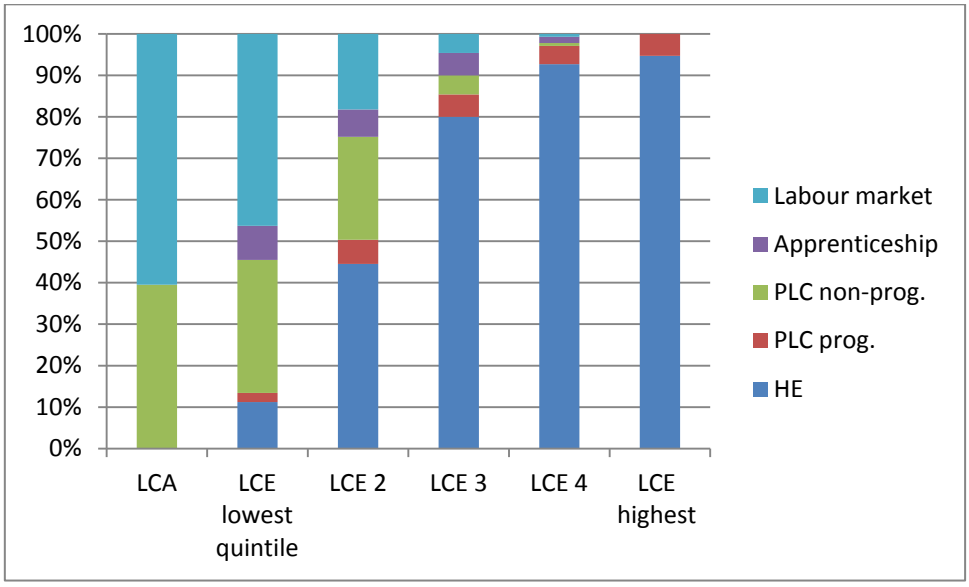


Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Post-school pathways differ by whether a young person has special educational needs or not. Young people with SEN are less likely to enter higher education (49 per cent compared with 62 per cent of their peers) and are more likely to enter the labour market (31 per cent compared with 16 per cent).

As might be expected, there is a very strong relationship between Leaving Certificate performance and the main post-school pathways taken. Figure 3.3 groups young people into quintiles (fifths) on the basis of the grades received at Leaving Certificate level; an additional column indicates the group of young people who had taken the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. Almost all of the highest-performing groups go directly to higher education, with most of the remainder going to third-level via a PLC course (the 'PLC progression' group). In contrast, labour market entrants are disproportionately found among those with the lowest Leaving Certificate grades or those who had taken LCA. PLC courses also represent an important pathway for LCA leavers and those with low grades. Educational performance may reflect both background characteristics and school experiences. In the following sections, we disentangle the processes shaping young people's pathways upon leaving school.

FIGURE 3.3 Main Post School Pathways by Leaving Certificate Performance



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

3.3 ATTITUDES TO SCHOOL AND POST-SCHOOL PATHWAYS

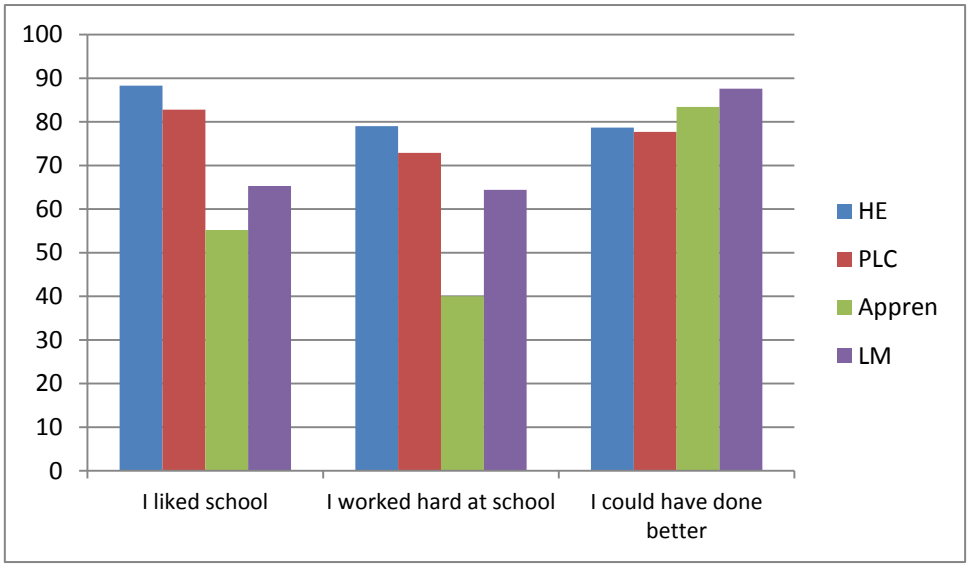
This section examines young people's retrospective views on school and whether these views vary by background factors (such as gender, social class and having a special educational need), school factors (school social mix) and by their post-school pathways.

Among the young people in our sample, the majority reported that, looking back, they had liked school and felt schoolwork was worth doing, a pattern which applied for both men and women and across social classes. Those who attended working-class schools were somewhat less likely to have liked school (78 per cent compared with 83 per cent in mixed schools and 85 per cent in middle-class schools), but this difference is not statistically significant. Young people with a special educational need were somewhat less likely to report liking school than their peers (72 per cent compared with 83 per cent). Young women were more likely to report having worked hard at school than young men (80 per cent compared with 66 per cent). Having worked hard at school also varied by social class, being highest among the salariat group (83 per cent) and lowest among those whose social class is unknown (57 per cent). Clear differences emerge between the different pathway groups in terms of their levels of engagement while at school (Figure 3.4). School leavers who progressed to further study (either PLC or HE) were considerably more likely to report that they liked school and they worked hard at school. Almost 90 per cent of higher education participants indicate that they liked school and four out of five indicate that they

worked hard while at school. Conversely, just 40 per cent of those participating in apprenticeship programmes indicate that they worked hard while at school and just over half report that they liked school.

Across each of the school leaver groups, on reflection the majority of young people felt that they could have done better in the Leaving Certificate examination. While this view is somewhat more prevalent among young people who entered the labour market on leaving school, it accounts for in excess of three-quarters of each of the pathway groups. Close to 80 per cent of higher education entrants indicate that 'they could have done better', while nearly 90 per cent of labour market entrants hold this view. Young men were more likely than young women to say that they could have done better in the exam (89 per cent compared with 73 per cent). In addition, those who had attended working-class or socially mixed schools were more likely to feel they could have done better, though there was no significant variation by individual social class. Young people with special educational needs were somewhat less likely to feel they could have done better in the exams, but differences from their peers were not marked. Perceptions of the Junior and Leaving Certificate exams are explored in greater detail in Chapter 6, when we explore the extent to which approaches to teaching and learning in post-school education differs from that in the second-level system.

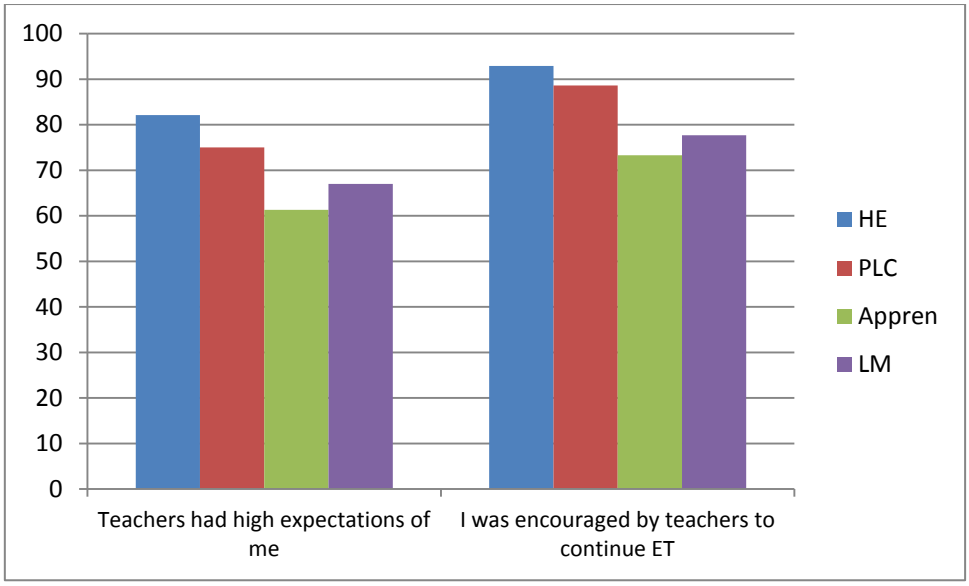
FIGURE 3.4 Views on Engagement in School; Percentage Who Agree



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Some differentiation emerges in terms of the extent to which school leavers feel teachers encouraged them and held high expectations for them. The majority of young men and women described their teachers as having high expectations for them, but teacher expectations were seen as varying somewhat by social class (with 82 per cent of the salariat group reporting high expectations compared with 64 per cent of the class unknown group). This variation occurred in terms of individual social class background with little variation in perceived teacher expectations by school social mix. However, the extent to which young people reported that their teachers encouraged them to continue their education/training did not vary by social class or by the social class mix of the school. There was no difference by special educational needs in perceived teacher expectations, though the numbers are not large enough to assess the extent to which differences were evident within individual schools. Participants in further study (both PLC and HE) were more likely to feel that teachers held high expectations for them, while those who progressed to the labour market were less likely to have such positive reflections on school. It is interesting to note PLC entrants were somewhat less likely than higher education entrants to perceive that teachers held high expectations for them, but were equally likely to report that teachers encouraged them to progress to further study.

FIGURE 3.5 Views on Teacher Expectations; Percentage Who Agree



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Additional analyses were undertaken to explore the simultaneous impact of social background, prior academic performance and school experiences on young people's main post-school pathways. For the purposes of these analyses, retrospective attitudes to school were combined into two scales: engaged in

schoolwork, which includes items such as 'I liked school' and 'I worked hard at school' (the scale has a reliability of 0.73); and finding the Leaving Certificate demanding, which includes items such as 'I put myself under too much pressure' and 'I found the exam schedule too demanding' (the scale has a reliability of 0.73). A multilevel multinomial model is presented, examining the probability of participating in an apprenticeship programme, PLC course or higher education course as compared to entering the labour market (Table 3.1). Positive coefficients indicate that factors are associated with an increased likelihood of taking a particular pathway while negative coefficients indicate a reduced probability.[8] Gender differentiation is clearly evident in the post-school pathways of school leavers – males are significantly more likely to enrol in apprenticeship courses with females more likely to participate in PLC courses. These differences persist when prior academic performance is included in the models, which is in line with earlier research (Byrne *et al.*, 2009; McCoy *et al.*, 2010a). Interestingly, males are somewhat more likely to enrol in higher education than females of similar prior performance. Social class differences are evident in the probability of enrolling in higher education, with higher participation among those from salariat and intermediate class groups. The analyses indicate that differences operate indirectly through earlier academic performance. In other words, working-class young people are less likely to go to higher education than their middle-class peers, largely because they achieve lower exam grades at Junior Certificate level. Thus, the patterns found reflect the way in which socio-economic disadvantage is reflected in second-level outcomes. Young people who record that they were identified with some form of special educational need while at school are significantly less likely to progress to higher education. This pattern is found to be due to their lower levels of achievement at Leaving Certificate performance (compare models 1 and 2 in Table 3.1).

In line with earlier research (McCoy *et al.*, 2010a; Smyth and Banks, 2012), school context has an additional impact on the likelihood of progression to further study and training; young people attending schools with a socio-economically mixed and, in particular, a predominantly middle-class intake are significantly more likely to progress to apprenticeship training, a PLC course or higher education course than those attending schools with a working-class intake, all else being equal. This has important implications for broader policy, particularly school enrolment policies – an area that has been identified by the Minister for Education and Skills as requiring new legislation.

8 The coefficients are additive but can be transformed into odds ratios.

TABLE 3.1 Multilevel Multinomial Regression Model of the Main Post-School Pathway Taken (Compared Against Labour Market Entrants)

	Apprenticeship			PLC			Higher Education		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	-4.904	-3.255	-2.200	-0.025	0.303	-3.236	-0.145	0.909	-2.033
Male	3.073***	1.788***	2.784***	-1.100***	-1.189***	-1.073***	0.094	0.413±	0.569*
Social class:									
Salariat	-0.883	-0.813	-0.389	-0.219	-0.335	0.086	0.664**	0.271	0.271
Intermediate	-0.167	-0.292	-0.219	0.050	-0.055	-0.112	0.710**	0.397	0.547
Missing	0.651	0.318	0.542	0.060	0.030	0.118	0.385	0.532	0.706
SEN	0.241	0.101	0.054	-0.581	-0.349	-0.301	-0.870**	-0.237	-0.344
Newcomer	-0.065	-0.248	-0.251	0.489±	0.474	0.317	-0.163	0.102	0.052
School social mix:									
Mixed	1.696***	1.367**	1.746***	1.050***	0.730±	0.751*	2.056***	0.495	0.870**
Middle class	2.952***	1.587**	2.975***	1.407***	0.517	0.904±	2.870***	1.277*	1.537**
LC Grade Point Average (centred on mean)		-0.024	0.042		-0.006	0.015		0.327***	0.432***
Attitudes to school:									
Schoolwork engaging			-1.337**			0.707*			0.611*
School demanding			0.507			0.525*			0.452*
Between-school variance	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.175	0.181	0.044	0.046	0.039
N	752 young people within 12 schools								

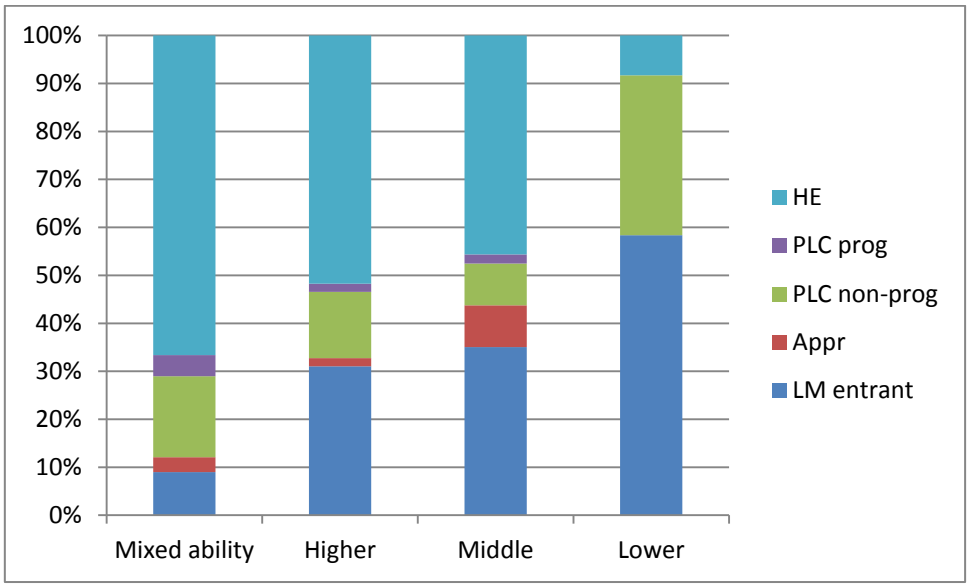
Note: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ± p<.10.

Finally, how young people reflect on their experiences of school is also related to their progression to post-school education and training. Those who reported being more engaged in school, including liking school, working hard and finding subjects interesting, were more likely to enrol in both PLC and higher education courses and less likely to enter apprenticeship programmes than enter the labour market. School leavers who found school demanding, including putting themselves under pressure for the Leaving Certificate, finding the exam schedule demanding, feeling nervous and indicating there was too much to remember, were more likely to progress to either PLC or higher education courses than enter the labour market.

3.4 School Experiences and Post-School Pathways: A Longitudinal Analysis

The previous section has shown that retrospective perceptions of school, three to four years after leaving school, vary markedly by the kind of post-school pathway pursued. The longitudinal nature of the study means that we can also analyse young people's attitudes and experiences while they were at school and the relationship between their perceptions and their post-school outcomes. This section focuses on the relationship between attitudes to school and post-school destinations, rather than on variation between different groups of students in terms of gender, social class or having a special educational need. The multivariate analyses presented later in the section does, however, take account of these background variables in looking at the factors influencing post-school pathways.

Figure 3.6 Main Post-school Pathway by Ability Grouping in Junior Cycle



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Earlier waves of the *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study* showed that ability grouping at junior cycle level had very clear effects on student experiences, with greater disengagement, lower performance and higher rates of early school leaving found among those allocated to lower stream classes (Smyth *et al.*, 2008; Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Analyses of the current survey show that ability grouping is also strongly predictive of post-school pathways (Figure 3.6). Young people who had been in mixed ability classes are more likely than those who attended streamed schools to go on to higher education, a pattern that partially reflects the fact that streamed schools were disproportionately working-class in profile. Among those who attended streamed schools, over half of those allocated to the higher stream classes went on to higher education compared with 8 per cent of those allocated to the lower stream classes. Young people from middle stream classes were more likely to enter an apprenticeship than other leavers. Those who were in lower stream classes were the group most likely to enter the labour market directly upon leaving school, with over half doing so. Among labour market entrants, unemployment rates are found to vary markedly by ability group, with the highest unemployment rates found among lower stream groups (75 per cent) and the lowest rates found among those who had been in mixed ability (48 per cent) or higher stream (43 per cent) classes. Chapter 7 provides further analyses on the labour market experiences of young people, in particular looking at the relationship between their social background and Leaving Certificate performance and their risk of unemployment. Importantly, the analysis also considers whether school social mix influences unemployment risk, even after taking account of young people's own social and educational background.

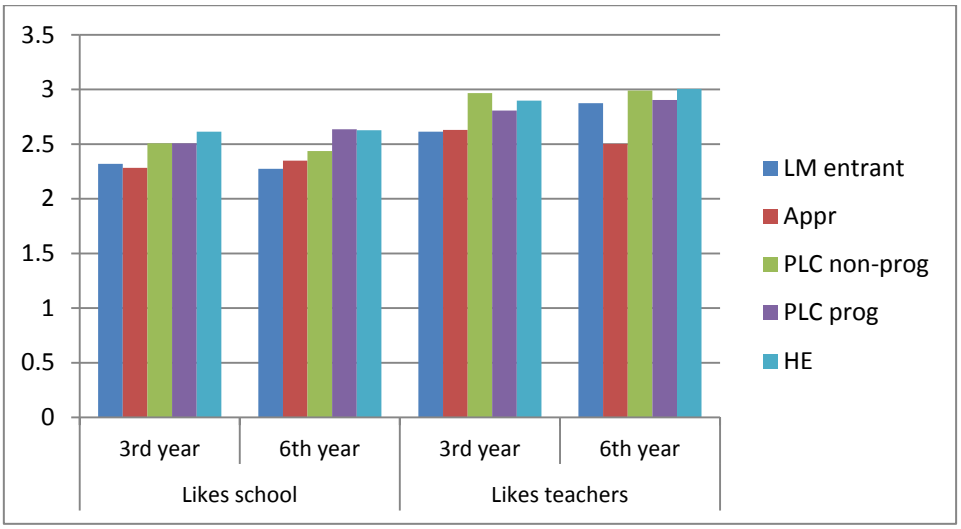
Information on student attitudes to school and to teachers was collected on an annual basis throughout their second-level education. Analyses showed that attitudes to school were more positive among middle-class students and females while working-class males were more likely to experience negative interaction with their teachers and had higher levels of misbehaviour (Smyth and Calvert, 2011a; Smyth *et al.*, 2011b).[9] Figure 3.7 shows variation in 'liking school' and 'liking teachers' by the pathway taken on leaving school.[10] In third year, those who went on to higher education had the most positive attitudes to school, with more negative attitudes among labour market and apprentice entrants. By sixth year, those who went on to higher education (either directly or indirectly through a PLC course) had the most positive attitudes to school. In relation to attitudes to

[9] Unfortunately, the *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study* did not collect information on whether young people had a special educational need. This information was collected in the *Leaving School in Ireland* study but separate analyses are not presented on attitudes while at school by SEN because the numbers for some years are quite small.

[10] The 'liking school' scale is derived from six statements on attitudes to school while the 'liking teachers' scale is based on five statements. Both scales range from 1 (very negative about school/teachers) to 4 (very positive about school/teachers).

teachers, higher education and PLC entrants held the most positive attitudes in third year; attitudes to teachers did not vary as much in sixth year, but those going on to apprenticeships had somewhat less positive attitudes than the other leavers. Among those in the labour market at the time of the survey, those in employment had been somewhat more positive about school and their teachers than the unemployed, but these differences are not statistically significant.

FIGURE 3.7 Main Post-school Pathway by Attitudes to School and Teachers

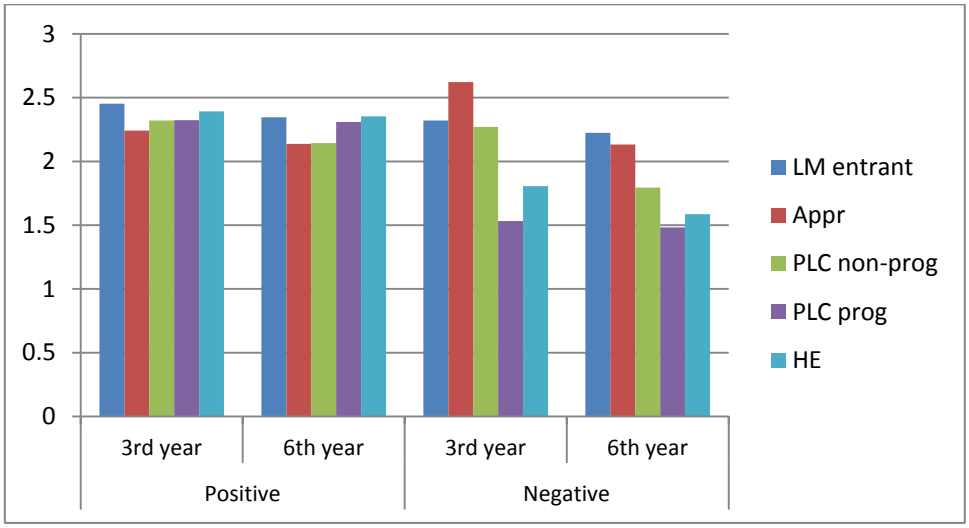


Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

As well as being asked about their attitudes to their teachers, young people were questioned about the frequency of positive interaction (e.g., praise or positive feedback) and negative interaction (e.g., being reprimanded) with their teachers.[11] Students who go on to higher education or the labour market report somewhat higher levels of positive teacher-student interaction in both third and sixth year than other leavers (Figure 3.8). Between-group differences in the frequency of negative teacher-student interaction are more marked, with labour market entrants and apprentices having higher levels of negative interaction than higher education entrants (including the PLC progression group).

[11] The positive interaction scale is based on the frequency of five types of interaction with teachers while the negative interaction scale is based on the frequency of two kinds of behaviour. Both scales range from 1 to 4.

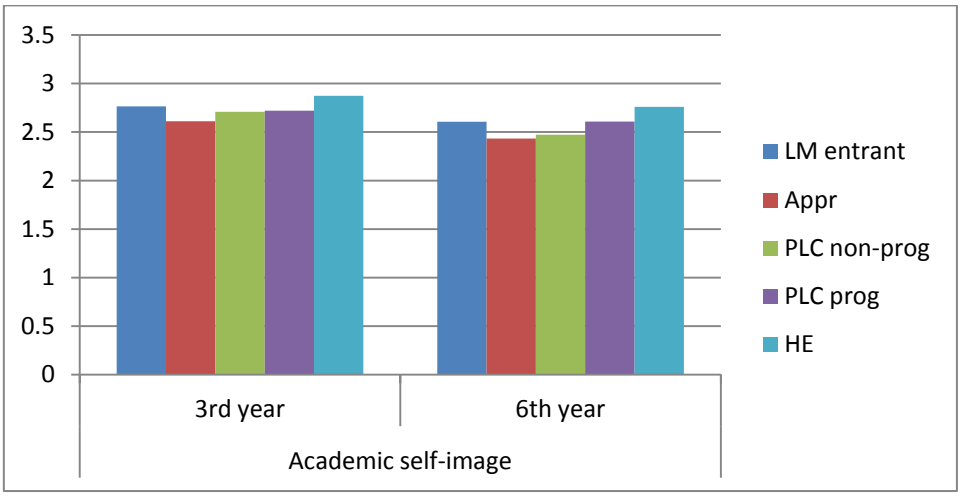
FIGURE 3.8 Main Post-school Pathway by Positive and Negative Teacher-Student Interaction



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Young people were asked about their perceived capacity to cope with schoolwork (academic self-image[12]), which was found to be highly predictive of actual performance (Smyth *et al.*, 2011b). Academic self-image was also predictive of the post-school pathways pursued, with those who went on to higher education more positive about their ability to cope with schoolwork at junior and senior cycle levels than other groups (Figure 3.9).

FIGURE 3.9 Main Post-School Pathway by Academic Self-image

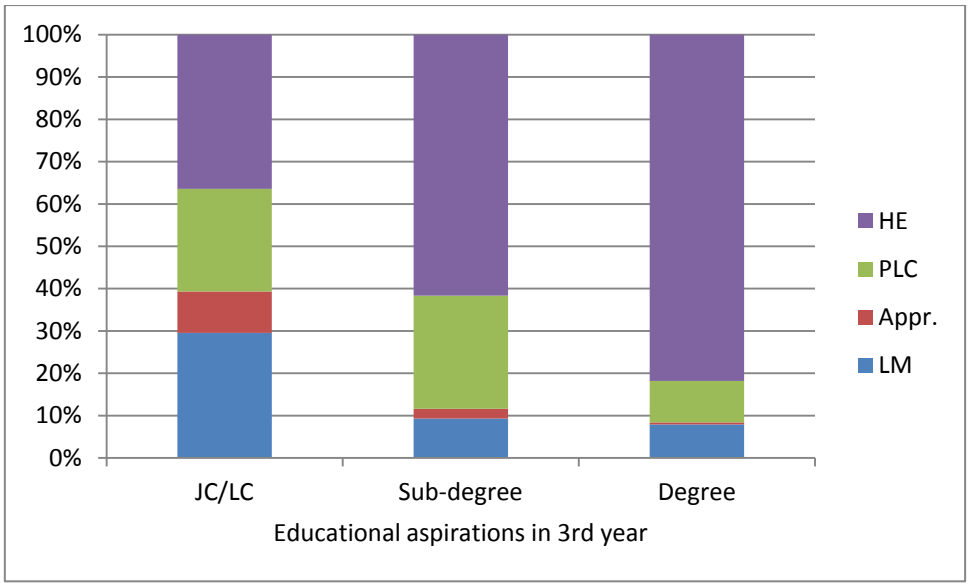


Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

[12] The scale is based on responses to seven items reflecting perceived ability to cope with schoolwork; the value ranges from 1 to 4.

The longitudinal nature of the study yields insights into the way in which educational and occupational aspirations develop during the course of second-level education. Educational aspirations in third year are found to be highly predictive of the actual pathway pursued upon leaving school (Figure 3.10). Over four-fifths (82 per cent) of those who had aspired to a degree-level qualification went on to higher education compared with 36 per cent of those who expected to go no further than second-level education. Young people with lower educational aspirations were much more likely to enter the labour market directly upon leaving school or to enter further education (PLC or apprenticeship). Among labour market entrants, those with lower educational aspirations are found to have higher levels of unemployment three to four years after leaving school than those who had higher aspirations; 53 per cent of those with second-level aspirations were unemployed compared with 41 per cent of those who aspired to a sub-degree and 38 per cent of those who aspired to a degree.

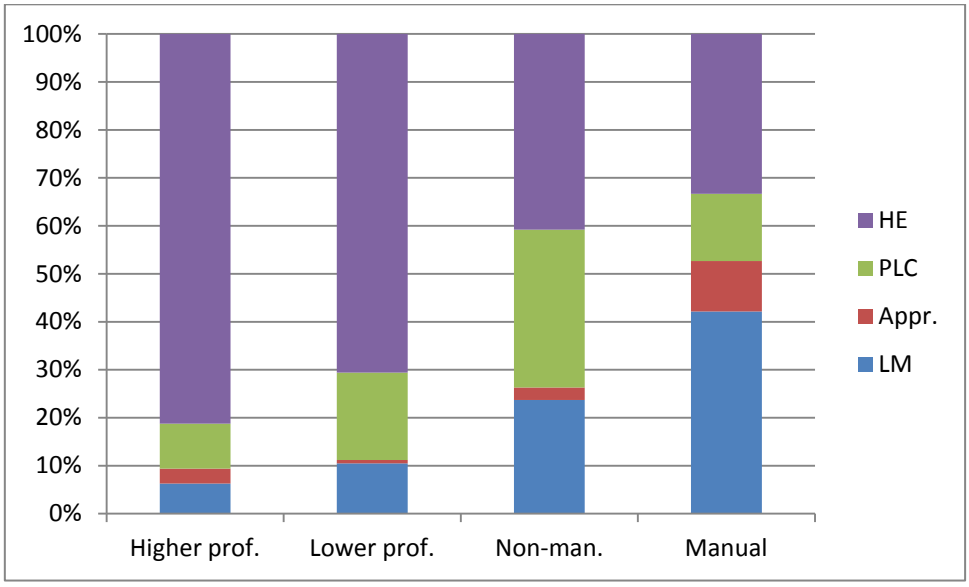
FIGURE 3.10 Main Post-School Pathway by Educational Aspirations in Third Year



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

The pattern for occupational aspirations is broadly similar to that for educational aspirations. Young people who aspired to a professional job, especially a higher professional job, were much more likely to go on to higher education than other groups (82 per cent compared with 41 per cent of those who aspired to other non-manual jobs and 34 per cent who aspired to manual jobs). A significant proportion of those who aspired to other non-manual jobs went on to further education (Figure 3.11), perhaps not surprising given the nature of education and training typically offered in further education settings.

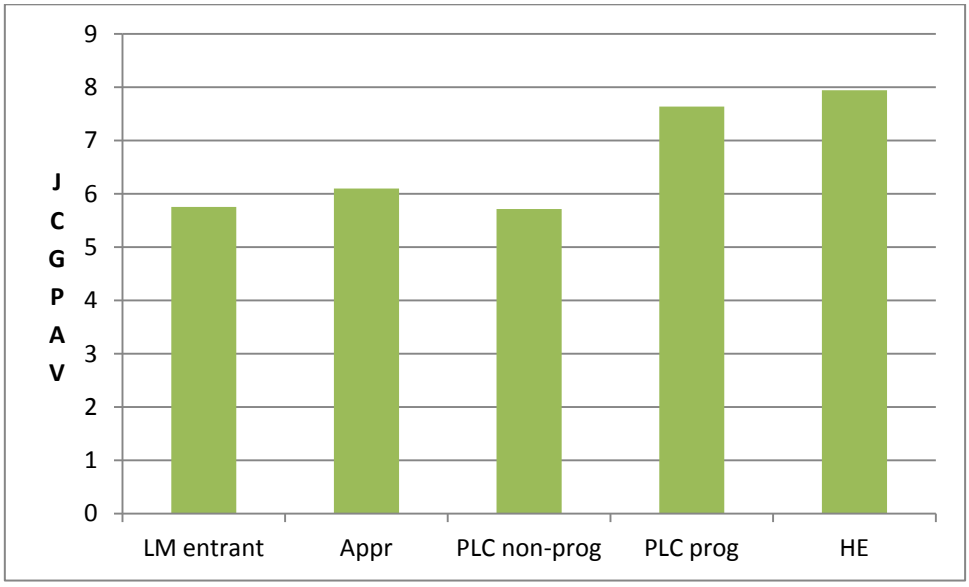
FIGURE 3.11 Main Post-School Pathway by Occupational Aspirations in Third Year



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

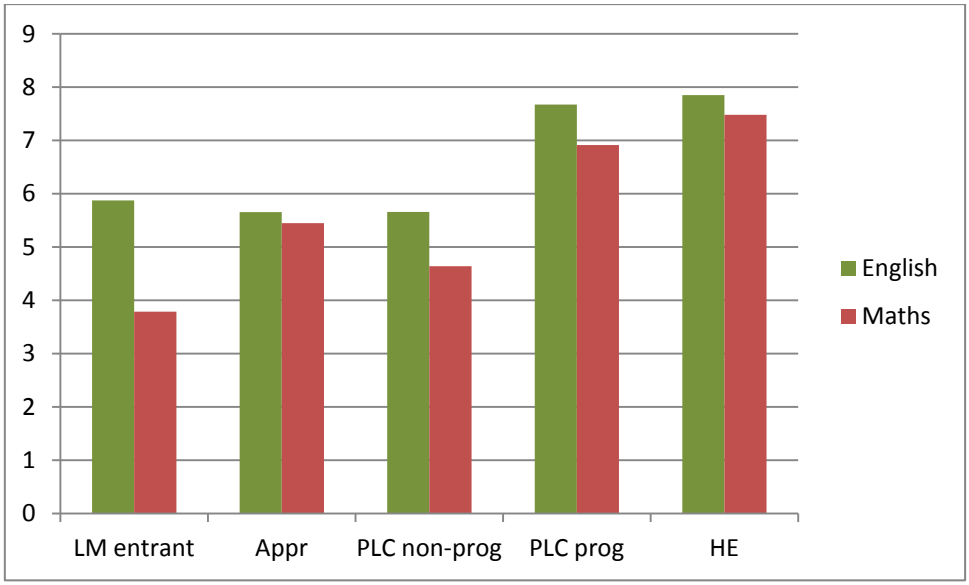
Previous sections of this chapter have shown that the main pathway taken after leaving school is strongly related to the Leaving Certificate grades achieved. Achievement at an earlier time point, the Junior Certificate, is also predictive of later outcomes. Figure 3.12 shows a clear Junior Certificate performance advantage among those who later go on to higher education, either directly or indirectly through a PLC course. Those who enter the labour market directly resemble further education entrants in their Junior Certificate grades. A similar pattern is evident in terms of the English grade obtained at Junior Certificate level, with the higher education entrant group having the highest grades (Figure 3.13). The pattern for Maths shows clearer differentiation in post-school pathways; once again higher education entrants had the highest grades but, in this case, labour market entrants achieved much lower Maths grades than other groups. Among those in the labour market three to four years after leaving school, the unemployed were likely to have obtained lower Junior Certificate grades than those in employment, with the performance differential especially marked for Maths (Figure 3.14).

FIGURE 3.12 Junior Certificate Grade Point Average (JCGPAV) and Main Post-School Pathway



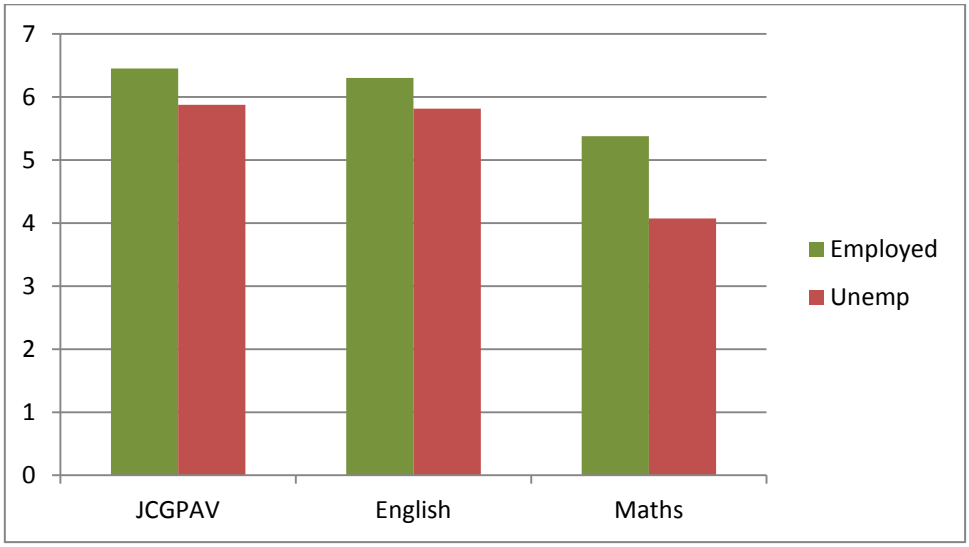
Source: Leaving School in Ireland study.

FIGURE 3.13 Junior Certificate English and Maths Grade and Main Post-School Pathway



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

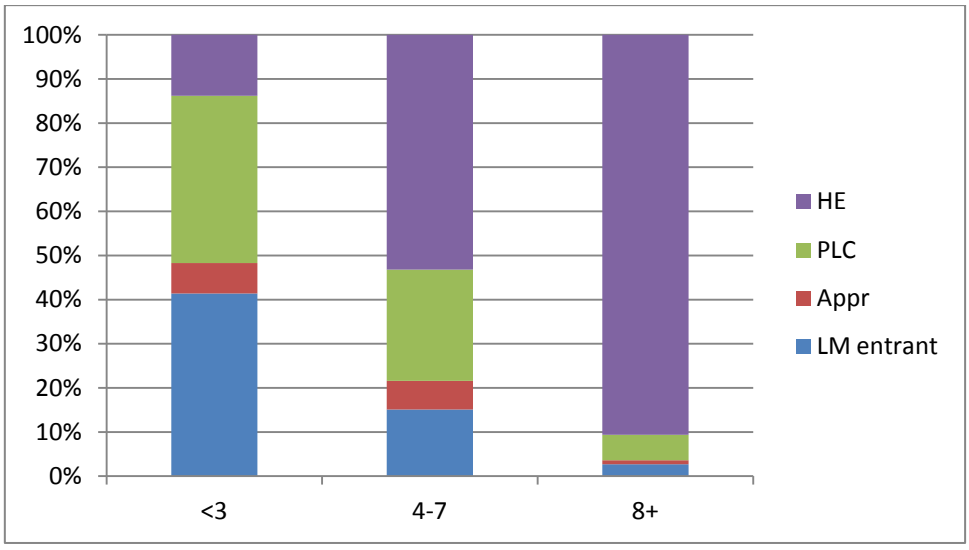
FIGURE 3.14 Junior Certificate Grades and Current Status among Labour Market Entrants



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Figure 3.15 illustrates the strong relationship between the number of higher level subjects taken at junior cycle level and the subsequent post-school pathway. The vast majority (91 per cent) of those who had taken 8 or more higher level Junior Certificate subjects went on to higher education compared to 53 per cent of those who took 4-7 higher level subjects and just 14 per cent of those who took 3 or fewer higher level subjects. Young people who took very few higher level subjects are much more likely to enter the labour market directly upon leaving school and are also over-represented in the PLC sector.

FIGURE 3.15 Main Post-School Pathway by Number of Higher Level Junior Certificate Subjects



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

A series of multilevel multinomial regression models were conducted to look at the simultaneous impact of experiences while at school on post-school outcomes. Table 3.2 shows the effect of background and school variables on the likelihood of taking the apprenticeship, PLC or higher education pathways compared with entering the labour market directly. Model 1 is similar to the analysis presented earlier, showing how post-school pathways vary significantly by gender, social class, and having a special education need. It is worth noting that there are significant differences between individual schools in the pathways of their students, even taking into account differences in intake. School social mix is not included in the model as it is strongly related to the key aspects of school process being investigated here (see Smyth, 1999). The quality of teacher-student interaction is highly predictive of completing second-level education and of exam performance (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Smyth *et al.*, 2011b). School climate also emerges as an important factor in post-school outcomes. Students who reported more frequent negative interaction with their teachers in third year are much less likely to go on to higher education or PLC courses than other students. Young people who reported coping well with their schoolwork in third year (that is, had a more positive academic self-image) were more likely to go on to higher education and less likely to take an apprenticeship, all else being equal. While at a descriptive level ability group at junior cycle is related to later outcomes and post-school pathways, these effects are largely mediated by other factors and ability group does not have a direct effect once gender, social background and attitudes to school are taken into account. In other words, the influence of ability group on later outcomes is largely due to the way in which it fosters more negative engagement to school among a disproportionately working-class group of young people (see Smyth *et al.*, 2008). The analyses show that educational aspirations are formed as early as junior cycle, with a very strong effect of aspirations reported in third year on actual outcomes upon leaving school. Those who aspired to a sub-degree qualification in third year were 3.6 times[13] more likely than those who aspired to a second-level qualification to go on to higher education; the differential was even greater for degree-level aspirations (being 7.2 times as likely). Young people who aspired to a degree were much less likely than others to enter an apprenticeship.

Table 3.2 examines whether the influence of these junior cycle factors is mediated by Junior Certificate exam performance and by experiences of school during senior cycle. As might be expected, Junior Certificate grades are significantly related to later pathways, with those with higher grades being much more likely to go on to higher education and, to some extent, apprenticeships. Controlling for Junior Certificate grades, there is some evidence that those who

[13] The coefficient for sub-degree aspirations (1.273) can be transformed into an odds ratio (3.6).

had been in a higher stream class were less likely to enter an apprenticeship than other students but differences by ability group are not generally marked. The effect of negative interaction with teachers in third year is mediated by the quality of interaction in sixth year; in other words, interaction patterns established in junior cycle appear to set the tone for the quality of interaction in senior cycle. Young people who report being given out to or reprimanded by their teachers in sixth year are significantly less likely to go on to any kind of post-school education and training, with this negative interaction operating as a particular discouragement for higher education entry. The effect of academic self-image in third year is mediated by Junior Certificate performance; in other words, those better able to cope with schoolwork are more likely to go on to higher education because they do better academically. Being able to cope with schoolwork in sixth year does not have a marked effect on post-school pathways; however, those who have more positive academic self-images are less likely to enter PLC courses than other students.

Other aspects of attitudes to school are found to make a difference to post-school pathways. Young people who were more positive about school while in sixth year were much more likely to go on to some form of post-school education/training. Attitudes to teachers did not make a difference over and above perspectives on school (though the two measures are closely related). There are some indications, however, that young people with more negative attitudes to their teachers were more likely to go on to apprenticeships, all else being equal. It is noteworthy that the effect of early educational aspirations remains strong, even taking account of Junior Certificate performance and school experiences at senior cycle. This pattern indicates that aspirations regarding higher education are formed at a relatively early stage and remain fairly stable throughout senior cycle.

TABLE 3.2 Junior Cycle Factors and the Main Post-School Pathway Taken (Compared Against Labour Market Entrants)

	Apprenticeship			PLC			Higher Education		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	-4.273	-2.687	-3.045	0.763	1.550	1.369	0.960	0.172	-0.017
Male	3.639***	3.916***	4.070***	-1.387***	-1.191***	-1.171***	0.380	0.515*	0.707**
Social class:									
Salariat	-1.291±	-1.282±	-1.389±	-0.217	-0.172	-0.108	0.558*	0.502*	0.492±
Intermediate	0.143	0.314	0.192	0.328	0.219	0.262	0.885***	0.743**	0.816**
Missing	0.545	0.512	0.289	-0.049	0.211	0.327	0.248	0.416	0.475
SEN	0.019	-0.331	-0.521	-0.758±	-0.691±	-0.762*	-1.038**	-1.150***	-1.339***
Newcomer	0.322	0.503	0.172	0.364	0.365	0.368	-0.124	-0.063	0.159
Ability group:									
Higher stream		-1.358	-1.447		-0.238	-0.134		0.921±	0.684
Middle/lower stream		0.040	0.285		-0.654±	-0.580		0.395	0.378
(Ref. Mixed ability)									
Negative interaction with teachers in 3rd year		0.091	0.163		-0.287±	-0.213		-0.610***	-0.515***
Academic self-image in 3rd year		-0.761±	-0.624		-0.018	-0.073		0.585*	0.153
Educational aspirations in 3rd year:									
Sub-degree			0.428			0.116			1.273***
Degree			-2.266±			0.177			1.979***
(Ref.: JC/LC)									
Between-school variance	2.338±	1.722±	1.915**	0.324	0.313	0.309*	1.912*	2.973*	2.501*
N	752 young people within 12 schools for Model 1; 510 young people within 12 schools for Models 2 and 3								

Note: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ± p<.10.

TABLE 3.3 Senior Cycle Factors and the Main Post-School Pathway Taken (Compared Against Labour Market Entrants)

	Apprenticeship		PLC		Higher Education	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	-4.361	0.335	0.957	2.567	-1.192	-0.355
Male	4.303***	2.954***	-1.463***	-1.045***	0.558*	0.635**
Social class:						
Salariat	-1.654	-0.659	-0.264	-0.147	0.226*	0.590*
Intermediate	0.004	-0.235	0.040	-0.256	0.337±	0.342
Missing	0.177	-0.372	0.413	-0.055	0.603	0.092
SEN	-1.178	-0.655	-1.002	-0.405	-1.801***	-1.097***
Newcomer	0.458	-0.658	0.186±	0.536±	0.018	0.229
Ability group:						
Higher stream	-1.251±	-2.208*	-0.231	0.103	-0.276*	-1.158
Middle/lower stream	1.044	-0.045	-0.472	-0.369	0.664	-0.286
(Ref. Mixed ability)						
Negative interaction with teachers in 3rd year	0.257	0.422	-0.202	-0.045	-0.307	0.055
Academic self-image in 3rd year	-0.567±	-0.667	0.047	-0.297	-0.037	-0.649*
Educational aspirations in 3rd year:						
Sub-degree						
Degree	0.460	0.422	0.350	0.463	1.439***	1.343***
(Ref.: JC/LC)	-2.375±	-2.049*	0.313	-0.074	1.415***	1.225***
Junior Certificate Grade Point Average (centred on mean)	0.526*	0.470*	0.308	0.113	1.281***	1.045***
Liking school in 6th year		0.692±		1.144***		0.752***
Liking teachers in 6th year		-0.943*		-0.217		-0.151
Negative interaction with teachers in 6th year		-0.573±		-0.676***		-0.825***
Academic self-rating in 6th year		-0.408		-0.800**		0.334
Between-school variance	2.813±	0.0	0.460±	0.053	1.827*	0.143
N	752 young people within 12 schools					

Note: *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ± p<.10.

3.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has shown that the main pathways taken by young people reflect their gender, social class background and prior educational outcomes. Their pathways are also shaped by their school experiences and attitudes to school, as measured both at the time they were at school and three to four years after leaving school. As might be expected, educational success in terms of Junior and Leaving Certificate performance plays a strong role in channelling young people towards higher education. The underrepresentation of working-class young people and those with special educational needs in higher education is found to be largely related to their lower exam grades, a finding which has significant implications for policies designed to enhance equity of access to third-level education. Over and above the effect of individual social background, school social mix is found to have a very significant impact on post-school outcomes, with those who attended middle-class schools having particularly high levels of participation in higher education. This is consistent with higher education assuming a 'taken for granted' quality in middle-class schools (see Smyth and Banks, 2012). In contrast, young people who had attended working-class schools are much more likely than those in middle-class or socially mixed schools to enter the labour market directly upon leaving school, even taking account of their Leaving Certificate grades.

Other aspects of school experiences are found to affect the pathways young people pursue. Participation in post-school education and training is more prevalent among those who had more positive experiences of second-level education in terms of liking school. School climate plays an important role too, with negative relations with teachers serving to discourage young people from remaining on in education/training. Educational aspirations are formed as early as junior cycle, remaining relatively stable thereafter, and are highly predictive of the actual routes taken two to three years later. This is a key finding from a policy perspective as it highlights the importance of fostering high expectations among students from early on in junior cycle. The kinds of information and supports that influence young people's aspirations will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Career Planning and Decision Making

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 has shown how the pathways young people take upon leaving school vary by their social background, gender and prior achievement, among other factors. This chapter explores the sources of advice and information which inform young people's decision making and choice processes. Section 4.2 looks at the kinds of information on post-school options young people had access to while at school, highlighting the sources of information they found most helpful. Section 4.3 draws on the survey data and in-depth interviews with school leavers to explore their satisfaction with the information and guidance they had received at school, placing this in the context of the level and nature of guidance provision in the school they attended. Section 4.4 examines how young people decided on the specific pathway they would take. The extent to which young people were able to realise these goals will be discussed in Chapter 5.

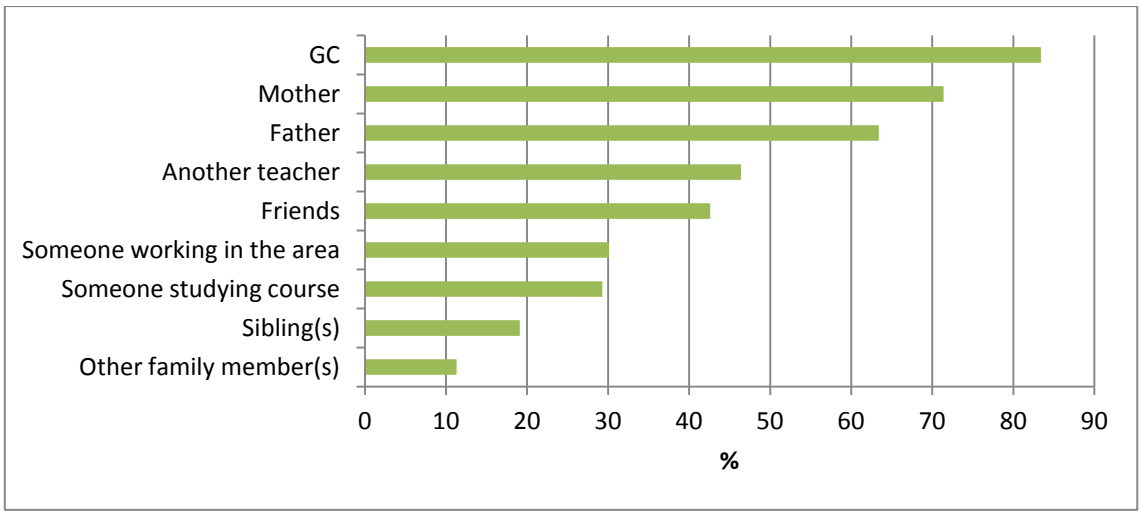
4.2 Sources of Information and Advice

Respondents were asked about the sources of advice they drew upon in their last year of school when thinking about their plans after leaving school. Figure 4.1 shows that the school guidance counsellor (83 per cent) was the most frequently mentioned source of advice, followed by mothers (73 per cent) and fathers (61 per cent). Friends and other teachers were mentioned as sources of advice by almost half of the group. Interestingly, only a minority of students obtained advice from someone studying the course or working in the area. The patterns found are slightly different to those reported while the young people were in their final year of school; at that stage, parents were seen as a somewhat more important source of advice than the school guidance counsellor (Smyth *et al.*, 2011b).

Guidance counsellors (GCs) were the most frequently mentioned source of advice across all social groups, for both male and female leavers, and for leavers with and without special educational needs. Overall, young people with special educational needs do not differ from their peers in the sources of advice they draw upon. Immigrant students were somewhat more likely to mention the guidance counsellor than Irish students (91 per cent compared with 82 per cent), probably reflecting less insider knowledge of the education system on the part of

immigrant families (see Darmody *et al.*, 2011). Other teachers were less frequently mentioned than guidance counsellors, but were key sources of advice for some groups of young people. In particular, LCA students were much more likely than LCE/LCVP students to mention other teachers (71 per cent compared with 45 per cent), most likely reflecting the holistic role adopted by the LCA coordinator in relation to work experience placements and career planning (see Banks *et al.*, 2010). Male leavers were also somewhat more likely than their female counterparts to mention other teachers (51 per cent compared with 42 per cent), a pattern that is related to the distribution of males and females across schools rather than gender differences within schools. While there was no marked variation by individual social background, those who had attended schools with a concentration of working-class students were somewhat more likely than others to mention other teachers as a source of advice. This difference is evident even controlling for taking LCA or LCE/LCVP, suggesting that at least some working-class schools adopt a more whole-school approach to providing advice and guidance for their students.

FIGURE 4.1 Sources of Advice in Sixth Year, As Reported at the Time of the Survey



Note: The figures total to more than 100 per cent because respondents could mention multiple sources.
Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

While siblings were much less frequently mentioned than parents, they emerged as a common source of advice for some groups of young people. Working-class leavers, those whose mothers had only primary education were more likely to mention their siblings than other leavers. LCA leavers were also more reliant on advice from siblings (42 per cent compared with 18 per cent). Furthermore, young women were more likely to receive advice from their siblings than young men (22 per cent compared with 15 per cent).

Young people received advice from informal sources other than family. The use of advice from friends did not vary by gender or social background but did appear to be slightly higher for immigrant leavers. The extent to which young people received advice from someone involved in a related course or job varied by social group, with consequences for access to detailed 'insider' information on what particular options were actually like. Those who attended working-class schools were less likely to draw on information from someone studying the course as were those whose mothers had only primary education and immigrants. Those who attended middle-class schools were more likely to receive advice from someone working in the area, while this was less frequent for those from working-class households. These patterns suggest that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have less access to networks which provide career advice than their more middle-class peers.

Parents were frequently mentioned as sources of advice across all types of leavers but some differences were evident between groups. Women were more likely to mention their mothers than men (76 per cent compared with 67 per cent) but there was no indication that men were more likely to mention their fathers than women. Interesting differences were also apparent in the relative influence of fathers and mothers by social group. Mothers were somewhat more likely to be mentioned by middle-class (salariat) leavers than by working-class young people (80 per cent compared with 69 per cent) but the class difference was even greater for frequency of advice from fathers (80 per cent compared with 60 per cent). Overall, students from middle-class households, those with more highly educated parents and those who attended mixed or middle-class schools more frequently mentioned their parents as a source of advice, most likely reflecting the greater knowledge of the available educational options in these families.

In keeping with the survey findings, almost all of the young people interviewed had discussed their choices and decisions with their parents. The most common pattern was one of young people describing their parents as being supportive of whatever route they wanted to pursue.

> I don't know, I don't think they'd mind if I was just getting straight into an office job, I mean they just want me to be happy and do whatever I want to do. (Moira, Harris Street, employed)

> They didn't really know, well it was kind of up to myself what to do. (Karen, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

However, on closer investigation, several young people highlighted an underlying expectation on the part of their parents that they would pursue post-school

education. For these young people, going on to further or higher education was seen as a natural progression from school, meaning that decision making focused on what college or which course to attend rather than *whether* to attend college (see Smyth and Banks, 2012, which highlighted similar findings when this group were in their Leaving Certificate year; and see Reay *et al*., 2005, for similar findings in the British context). Denise, who had attended a middle-class school, Harris Street, described how her parents 'one hundred per cent' thought she should go on to higher education. For her, this decision was 'expected ... just kind of like routine ... I mean my older brothers did it and stuff'.

> I think they'd [parents would] like to see me, you know, go do a course or do a course and have something. (Siobhan, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

These parental expectations were reflected in and reinforced young people's own aspirations to go on to higher education:

> All I knew is that definitely college was an option. There was no way that I'm not going to college, like I did want to go to college no matter what it was. I never saw it as like okay, this is the end of the road, once I've done my Leaving Cert I can now start working, it was always college. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

Although discussing educational choices with their parents was common across social groups, several young people highlighted the lack of detailed parental knowledge on the process since their parents had not themselves gone on to higher education and, in some cases, had not reached Leaving Certificate level.

> But they [parents] didn't really know a lot about it like, like the college process and CAO forms. Like I told my Mam I wasn't filling one out and she didn't even know what it was, you know. She didn't think it was a big deal that I wasn't filling one out. ... They [my parents] never did their Leaving Certs. (Deirdre, Harris Street, PLC)

> Like my Mum didn't even do her Leaving Cert, my Dad just got through his Leaving Cert, never went to college or anything so they just don't know. I don't think there's enough knowledge out there. Maybe there should be more information for parents ... that could help, because a lot of parents of ... my parents' generation wouldn't have went to college. (Carol, Harris Street, higher education)

Dermot did not discuss going on to higher education with his parents because he felt that his parents would not understand what was involved:

> I never even discussed college with me parents or anything like that, never, because they're real old fashioned. ... They left school when they were fourteen, fifteen, messenger boy trying to bring home to support the family and stuff like that. So ... they're happy I'm in college but they don't really understand what college is all about or they know it's obviously good and, you know like, but I don't think they know what it takes. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

Thus, young people had access to differential resources depending on the educational background of their parents.

Parents were a key source of advice in the decision making process but were rarely a decisive influence. In a small number of cases, however, parents were more directive about the pathway or even the course that they expected their children to take. Although in many cases going to college was taken for granted on the part of parents, in Karen's case, her mother was very explicit that post-school education was the only option:

> Well I think my Mam just had it in her mind that I was going to college and that was that. ... probably because you'd get a better job then at the end with a degree. (Karen, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

Similarly, Carol described how there was 'pressure to go to college, definitely it was to do with my family' (Harris Street, higher education). Only in one case was there strong parental encouragement to take a particular field of study:

> My mother, I suppose, wanted me to do, kind of do commerce anyways because she done commerce as well, she was happy with that ... she wanted me to do that as well. ... I don't think they [parents] would have been happy with [me not to go to college], to be honest with you. I think they would have been always kind of interested in me getting an education so I don't think they would've been very happy with at all with it to be honest with you. (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education)

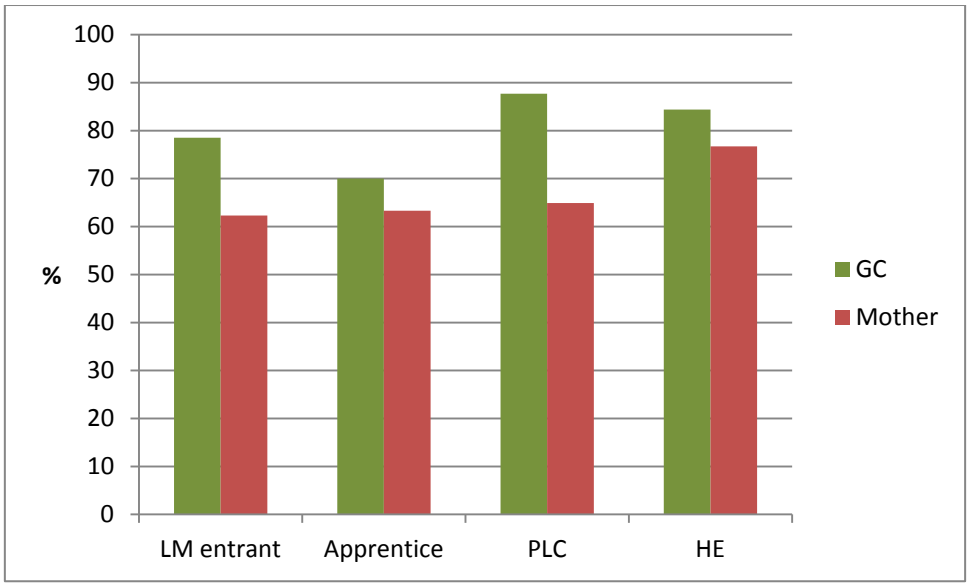
In two cases, uncertainty about their future direction meant that young people relied more strongly on their parents as role models and, as a result, applied for courses in the same domain.

> My mum is a science teacher ... she didn't push it on me or anything like I just did science and the career guidance in school and looking at colleges. So that's why I decided it. (Brigid, Harris Street, higher education)

> After my Dad said 'why don't you try nursing', you know, 'I would like you to do a good profession, just try it and see how you get along and if you don't like it you can come out of it', you know. So I tried it and I did like it and even

my sister is following in my footsteps, she has just done her Leaving Cert and she wants to do it as well like. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

FIGURE 4.2 Frequency of Advice from Guidance Counsellor and Mother by Main Post-School Pathway



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

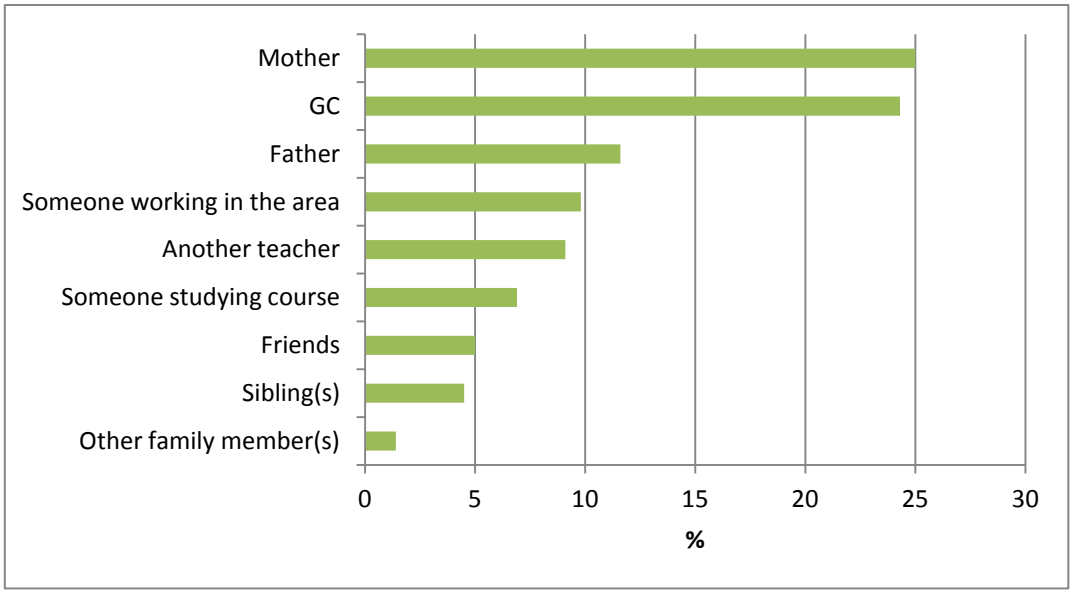
The frequency of different kinds of advice was found to vary by the main pathway young people pursued upon leaving school (Figure 4.2). Those who went on to higher education were more likely to receive advice from both formal and informal sources (guidance counsellors and mothers). In contrast, those entering the labour market and those pursuing apprenticeships received less advice from these sources regarding post-school plans. The PLC group frequently mentioned the school guidance counsellor as a source of advice but advice from their mothers was reported less frequently than for the higher education group. These patterns may reflect the fact that many of these young people reported a strong emphasis, and sometimes an over-emphasis, on advice regarding CAO applications rather than other post-school routes when they were in sixth year (Smyth *et al.*, 2011b), an issue which is also discussed in the following section.

4.3 PERCEPTIONS OF INFORMATION AND ADVICE

As well as exploring the kinds of advice available to young people, it is important to know how helpful that advice is. Respondents were asked to identify the single most helpful source of advice on post-school options. Mothers and guidance counsellors were seen as the most useful sources of advice (24 per cent and 25 per cent respectively) (Figure 4.3). Fathers were much less frequently mentioned than mothers, with only 12 per cent of young people citing them as the most

helpful source of advice. Gender patterns are evident not only in the frequency of receiving advice (see above) but also in its perceived usefulness. Young women are much more likely to report receiving advice from their mothers (see above) and also more frequently mention their mothers as the most useful source of advice (32 per cent compared with 17 per cent of males). Young men are no more likely than young women to mention their fathers as a source of advice but they are more likely than young women to find such advice useful (17 per cent compared with 7 per cent). Young men are somewhat more likely to mention the guidance counsellor (26 per cent compared with 23 per cent) or another teacher (11 per cent compared with 7 per cent) as the most helpful source of advice than young women, but these gender differences are not marked. LCA leavers are more likely to mention another teacher and less likely to mention the guidance counsellor than LCE/LCVP leavers, most likely reflecting the role of the LCA co-ordinator and the small team of LCA teachers in providing advice and information for this group of young people. Those with highly educated parents and from middle-class (salariat) families are somewhat less likely than other leavers to mention the guidance counsellor as the most helpful source of advice. Leavers with special educational needs were more likely than other leavers to mention their mothers as the most helpful source of advice (42 per cent compared with 24 per cent) and somewhat less likely to mention the school guidance counsellor (15 per cent compared with 25 per cent).

FIGURE 4.3 Most Helpful Source of Advice



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Figure 4.4 clearly shows how young people who attended working-class schools found the guidance counsellor most helpful while those who attended middle-class schools found maternal advice more helpful. Furthermore, leavers from

working-class schools were less likely to find advice from someone working or studying in the same area the most helpful. There was also variation by individual school: 59 per cent of those who had attended Dawes Point, a working-class boys' school, mentioned the guidance counsellor as the most helpful source of advice, much higher than for any other school. This pattern is consistent with sixth year students' positive reports on the helpfulness and personal commitment of the guidance counsellor and their willingness to tailor the content of guidance classes to student preferences (see Smyth *et al.*, 2011b). Immigrant students were somewhat more likely than Irish students to mention the guidance counsellor as the most helpful source of information (31 per cent compared with 24 per cent), reflecting less insider knowledge of the educational system among immigrant families and the need to rely on more formal sources of advice. This pattern is consistent with the greater reliance of immigrant students on school-based advice regarding choice of subjects and subject levels throughout their second-level education (Smyth *et al.*, 2011a).

Looking at the pathways young people pursued upon leaving school, the perceived importance of guidance counsellors and mothers was similar across groups. The only distinctive group was those pursuing apprenticeships who were much more likely to mention someone working in the area (32 per cent) or their father (23 per cent), suggesting that access to apprenticeships may be facilitated by social networks.

FIGURE 4.4 Most Helpful Source of Advice by School Social Mix

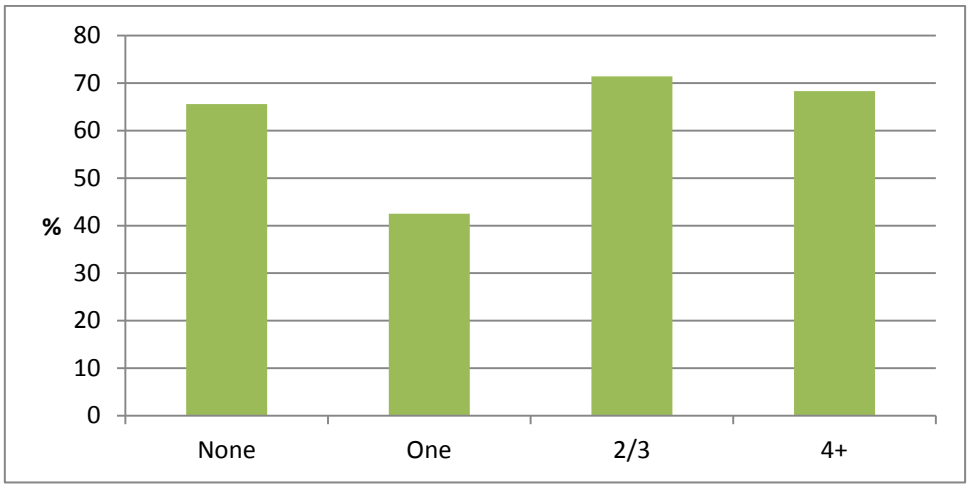
Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

The majority of respondents were found to be satisfied with the information they received at school regarding potential options after leaving school: 13 per cent were 'very satisfied' while 52 per cent were 'satisfied'. At the same time, it should be noted that a significant minority expressed dissatisfaction with the guidance and information they received: 24 per cent were 'dissatisfied' while 11 per cent considered themselves 'very dissatisfied'. Satisfaction with school-based information does not vary systematically across groups of leavers in terms of gender, social background or ethnicity.[14] Instead, satisfaction was found to reflect the Leaving Certificate programme taken and the specific school attended. Young people who had taken the LCA programme had significantly higher satisfaction levels than those who had completed the LCE or LCVP programmes (90 per cent compared with 62 per cent). In terms of individual schools, satisfaction levels were highest (at 83 per cent) in Dawes Point, a working-class boys' school whose students saw their guidance counsellor as being the most helpful source of information (see above), and lowest in Hay Street (39 per cent), a working-class coeducational school, and Barrack Street (49 per cent), a working-class girls' school where many students felt that the guidance counsellor held low expectations for them (see Smyth and Banks, 2012). Thus, there is no clear-cut relationship between satisfaction and school social mix, with some working-class schools being praised in terms of guidance provision and others criticised.

Information on student experiences while in sixth year can yield further insights into the role that frequency and type of guidance provision play in shaping later satisfaction. In February of sixth year, young people were asked about the number of classes and individual appointments they had had with the guidance counsellor over the school year up to that time point. Figure 4.5 shows that after leaving school, those who had had two or more guidance classes were more likely to report satisfaction with the information they received than those who had only one guidance class. The pattern for those who received no guidance classes should be interpreted with caution as it is a very small group and may include students who received career information from other teachers (such as the LCA co-ordinator). In contrast to the pattern for guidance classes, there is much less variation in satisfaction by number of individual appointments with the guidance counsellor, though those who had two or more individual sessions were more satisfied than those who had only one (Figure 4.6).

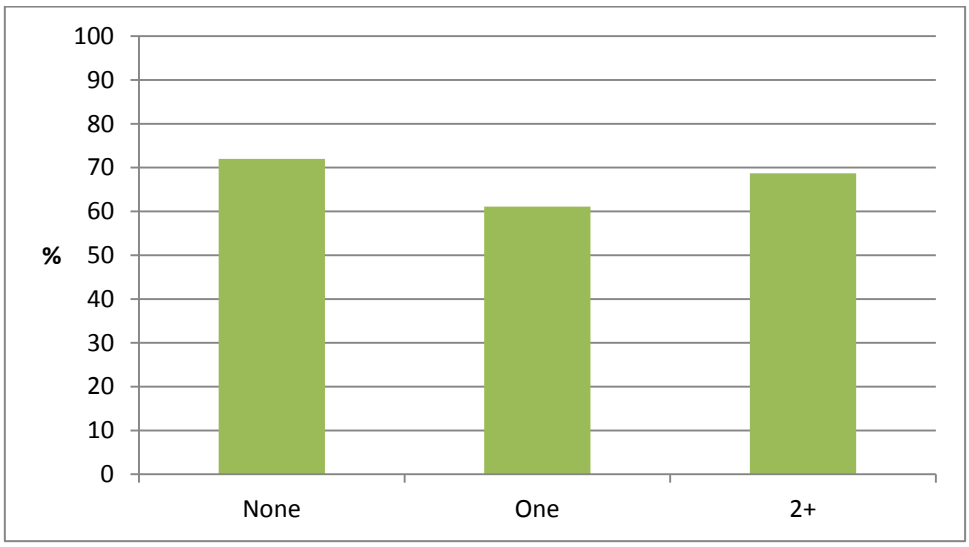
[14] Leavers with SEN were somewhat more dissatisfied with the information they received than other leavers (44 per cent compared with 34 per cent). However, this difference is largely driven by the somewhat higher dissatisfaction levels found among young men with SEN who had attended working-class schools, a group who are less likely to have accessed post-school education and training, rather than reflecting differences between SEN and other leavers who had attended the same school.

FIGURE 4.5 Satisfaction with Information by Number of Guidance Classes between September and February of Sixth Year



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 4.6 Satisfaction with Information by Number of Individual Guidance Appointments between September and February of Sixth Year



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Students had been asked about their satisfaction with guidance classes and individual sessions while they were in sixth year. Responses are quite consistent with the answers given three to four years later; those who had been satisfied with guidance in sixth year tended to be satisfied at the later time-point while the majority of those who had been dissatisfied while at school remained dissatisfied after leaving school. However, a significant minority of young people changed their opinion on the information they had received. This discrepancy may reflect whether they had realised their goals or regretted the pathway pursued, issues which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Interviews with a subset of the cohort of young people provide more detailed insights into the reasons underlying satisfaction or dissatisfaction with guidance provision. As might be expected, their responses were more nuanced than the survey responses, with young people carefully weighing the positive and negative aspects of the guidance they received. Those who were positive about school-based guidance generally emphasised the amount of information they were given on different options.

> There were three options so I could have done either when I wanted but she [GC] went into detail with me on what each one and what job that would lead into for me, which was good, explained it better to me before I made my choice then. (Bridget, Barrack Street, PLC)

> I got enough [information] in the sense that they told me what courses were available. They suggested courses firmly based on my subject and based on how I performed in those subjects, what might be a suitable area for me to get into, be it science or art or stuff like that. (Conall, Lang Street, higher education)

For some young people a perception that the guidance counsellor was responsive to the expressed needs of the students and their own individual interests was seen as important and as being a key feature of positive guidance experiences:

> We had a guidance counsellor in school and she brought us down like at the start of the year to see what exactly we wanted to do, to make sure we'd the right subjects for it and all that. And I told her there wasn't a chance of me going to college and she said what do you want to do, I said hairdressing, and she looked up FÁS for me and got me all the information and how to apply for it and what I need to do like. She was very good now, I have to say. (Niamh, Belmore Street, unemployed)

The use of aptitude tests and training in using the Qualifax (guidance) website were seen as helping students to gather relevant information:

> We had like classes in fourth year and actually that [Qualifax] website was quite handy, we were shown how to use that. And then we had like one-on-one with the guidance counsellor as well. (Brigid, Harris Street, higher education)

Individual attention through one-to-one sessions with the guidance counsellor was seen as a key factor in satisfaction with guidance provision.

> We had like the career guidance counsellor, like we went to her like one to one and she'd go through [the information] with us and tell us, you know, what would be suited to us to do in college and how we'd get into it like. So she was helpful like and ... you do a personality test and see what would be suited to you, what career to go and, you know, she'd kind of help you and if

> you had any ideas, you know, she'd be able to tell you where to go and what to do and give you the information about what you wanted to do and how to go about doing it. (Siobhan, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

In Dawes Point school, which had a very high level of satisfaction with guidance provision (see above), Brian emphasised the personal qualities and proactive approach of the guidance counsellor:

> The guidance counsellor was probably one of the best people you could ever have ... But he was great, he told us all the information ... he told me all about the grants for college. There was forms and booklets and college prospectus and everything you needed. Even if he didn't have it, say someone said they wanted to go to [name of] university, he would come back to you next day or the day after and he'd have the prospectus and he'd hand it to you - take it home, read it, see if you like it, mark the courses and I'll make an appointment with you and come back in and we'll have a chat. All you had to do is go to him and say something to him and he helped you. (Brian, Dawes Point, unemployed)

For many of the young people across a range of schools, open days and guest speakers were seen as useful in supplementing class-based discussion with more detailed information on specific courses and pathways:

> People from the colleges would come in and give talks ... and they'd give us like an idea of what the college is like and what, you know, so we kind of had an idea then of what each of the colleges were like so it was a good help as well, to give us an idea. (Siobhan, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

> I went to a few [open days] and I think they are probably the best way to kind of get a feel to talk to actual students that are studying and stuff like that, you know, and what the course is about and stuff but like yeah they were probably the best way I found out about stuff. (Denise, Harris Street, higher education)

> The girl from the college came in and she was explaining all the different courses and it just appealed to me. (Bridget, Barrack Street, PLC)

> I remember going to one kind of career day where they got two or three colleges in and put them in different rooms and you could pick which one you wanted to go to and they talked about all the different [courses], maybe [there should be] more of them. I only remember being at one and that was in fourth year so it was quite early on, you know. (Deirdre, Harris Street, PLC)

A number of different responses were offered by those who were more negative about the guidance they had received. An important factor was the lack of time given to guidance activities, especially to one-to-one sessions with the guidance counsellor. The constraint on time meant that the approach taken was generic in nature rather than personalised to reflect the needs and interests of each specific person.

> Maybe more of a one-on-one session [is needed] ... they should talk about people's personality and what they would like and not just getting them to tick off pieces of paper, actually getting to know the person like, and then making an ... informed decision and, you know, helping them decide, talking to them about it and maybe giving them information on what the course would be like. (Sandra, Belmore Street, higher education)

> It wasn't very inspiring, it was just very, very, I'm the guidance counsellor, I've every bit of knowledge in my head, I've all the archives of where, what, where each course is on each page in each book for each college but that was the extent of it. There was no real imagination of theirs put into it, there was no real like little tactics to relate to the person or the student, who's mind is being moulded sitting in front of you. There was none of that, it was all very just streamlined, bog standard. (Clodagh, Belmore Street, unemployed)

> There was career guidance modules but ... it was nothing to do with the kind of personal [approach] or anything like that ... because like obviously there's a lot of versatility in the class like, everyone is veering off in different directions and I just feel it was more kind of like reading from a book if anything kind of. ... I think you really need to talk to someone or someone should be able to kind of identify that, what you like and your strengths and stuff, that what you might like and recommendations but like there was just, well I feel personally there was none of that in my school. (Denise, Harris Street, higher education)

In one school serving a disadvantaged population, time for career guidance was seen as constrained by the focus of the guidance counsellor on addressing the personal problems of students.

> She focused more on maybe the people that were really, like had other things going on in their lives, she'd talk more with them and not really with other people that are coping, the other students that are coping, they'd kind of be left aside and given their own work to direct or look at. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

It was also suggested that guidance should be provided at an earlier stage in the schooling career.

> I didn't know what I wanted to do, maybe if I had maybe a bit more classes or something in fourth year that had different areas ... maybe a class that would look into that, like focusing on different areas. .... Maybe if we had talks on different areas, like health sciences and sciences and that sort of thing. (Brigid, Harris Street, higher education)

For those who were sure of the pathways they wanted to pursue, guidance was sometimes seen as irrelevant, with information readily available from websites and other sources:

> They [guidance counsellors] tell you information you could just find yourself. (Robert, Lang Street, higher education)

> I knew what I wanted to do so I didn't really pay a whole lot of attention because I didn't need to concentrate on it. (Brigid, Harris Street, higher education)

> I didn't think he [the guidance counsellor] was great to be honest because I'd already made up my mind in sixth year what I was going to do. And then he was going through a lot of slide shows and things about different colleges and that didn't really interest me because I'd my mind made up. (Shane, Fig Lane, apprenticeship)

In some instances, the guidance counsellor was seen as actively encouraging higher education with little information provided on other post-school options.

> There was a guidance counsellor but, to be honest like, I found her really useless ... she'd show me these like fulltime, like being a year in college but for beauty and I was kind of like that's not really what I'm looking for, you know, I want to work, like I always worked … I got the impression people kind of disregard things that aren't educational so giving me the courses that were similar to a college course but just in relation to what I'm doing wasn't exactly what I was looking for. (Rosemary, Harris Street, employed)

Information was also seen as lacking on a broad range of course options and on the kinds of jobs that courses would lead to:

> I don't even really know the other options really, but I wasn't fully aware of the options, I definitely wasn't made fully aware of the options. (Carol, Harris Street, higher education)

> I suppose maybe we could have been given a bit more information like about you know, possibly things you could kind of do out of courses ... rather than let's say just courses themselves, you know. (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education)

Those who were uncertain about their future direction in sixth year were sometimes more critical of guidance provision. In three instances, young people explicitly criticised the guidance counsellor for inadequate 'direction'.

> They were kind of like you have to look for yourself or she'd just give you a newspaper, you know, and say 'what are you interested in?' and just look in the newspaper at the colleges, you know, but I didn't really find it helpful, like I didn't find that I was directed well. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

> You're eighteen, you don't want to think, you're sitting your Leaving Cert, you don't want to think in any way about more studies, you know that kind of way, but you need someone there telling you, you're only kids like. (Carol, Harris Street, higher education)

> We had a guidance counsellor ... I think it was like in fourth year and stuff, like it's mandatory that you go and stuff like that but I mean, they like, there is no direction as such if you get me you know, given. ... I just don't feel like it benefitted me in any way whatsoever like. (Denise, Harris Street, higher education)

More broadly, some young people felt that it was too early to make decisions in sixth year, making it difficult for guidance to play a useful role in their longer term decision making.

> If I … knew what I wanted to do, they would have been a great help, because they did, they did lead me in the right way, but then I was going back 'oh I don't know if I want to even do that', so I just wasn't enthusiastic about it at all. (Moira, Harris Street, employed)

> [I] think eighteen is very young though to leave school and to try to like, you have to know what you want to do. Nobody knows what they want to do in my opinion, you can't, you're only eighteen. You change your mind every five minutes. (Deirdre, Harris Street, PLC non-progression)

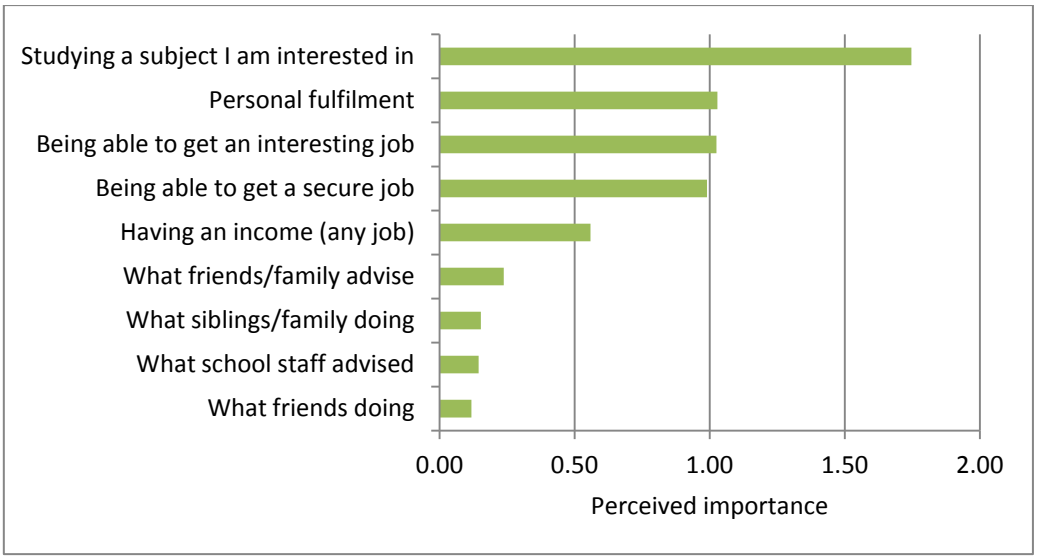
The chapter so far has looked at the kinds of information and advice young people drew on in making their decisions about post-school pathways. The following section looks more specifically at the influences on, and reasons for, selecting particular pathways, colleges and courses.

4.4 The Choice Process

Chapter 3 has outlined the key background and school factors associated with pursuing the main post-school pathways – higher education, PLC programmes,

and entering the labour market. This section unpacks the decision making processes behind the pathway taken. Young people were asked to indicate, from a specified list, the most important influences in deciding what to do after leaving school, ranking them 'the most important', 'the second most important' and the 'third most important'. Figure 4.7 shows the average ratings across the specified categories, with high values indicating they were more likely to be cited as the most important influence. The single most important influence was intrinsic, namely, wanting to study a subject in which they were interested. Personal fulfilment was also highly rated by survey respondents as was being able to get an interesting job. However, some young people were more extrinsic, regarding a secure job and having an income as important influences. Interestingly, what family members and friends were doing and advice from family, friends or the school were regarded as much less important *influences* (rather than sources of advice).

FIGURE 4.7 Perceived Importance of Influences on Post-School Decisions

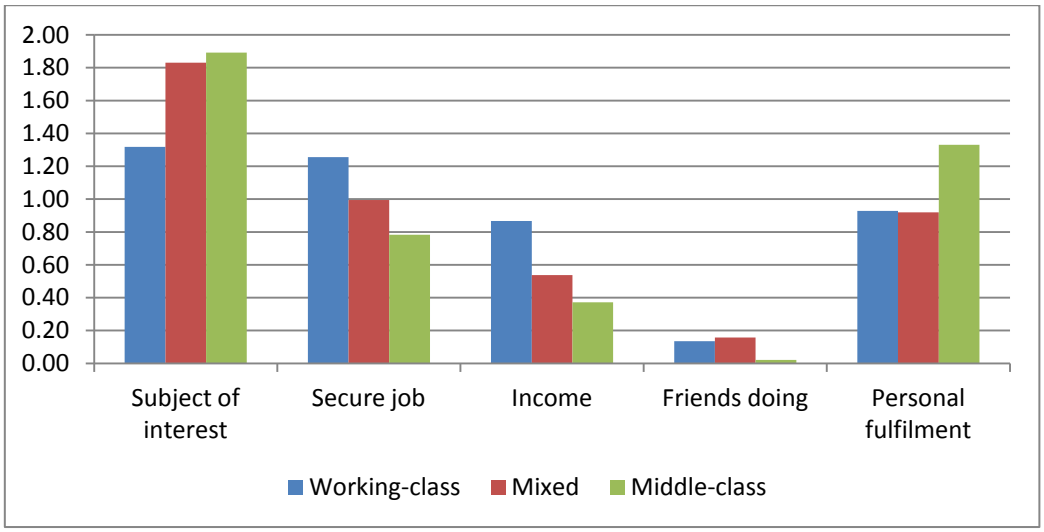


Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

There were some gender differences found in the responses: women were significantly more likely to mention personal fulfilment and studying a subject they were interested in than men. Men were somewhat more likely than women to mention having an income and what their friends were doing. Studying a subject of interest was more highly rated by those from more highly educated families while those whose families had lower secondary education or less were more likely to place a higher value on job security. Young people with special educational needs were somewhat more likely than their peers to mention personal fulfilment or getting an interesting job. There was some variation by school social mix. Figure 4.8 shows only those factors for which significant

differences were found by school mix. Those who attended working-class schools placed greater importance on a secure job and an income and less importance on studying a subject in which they were interested. Those who attended middle-class schools placed the highest premium on personal fulfilment and were much less likely than others to report being influenced by what their friends were doing.

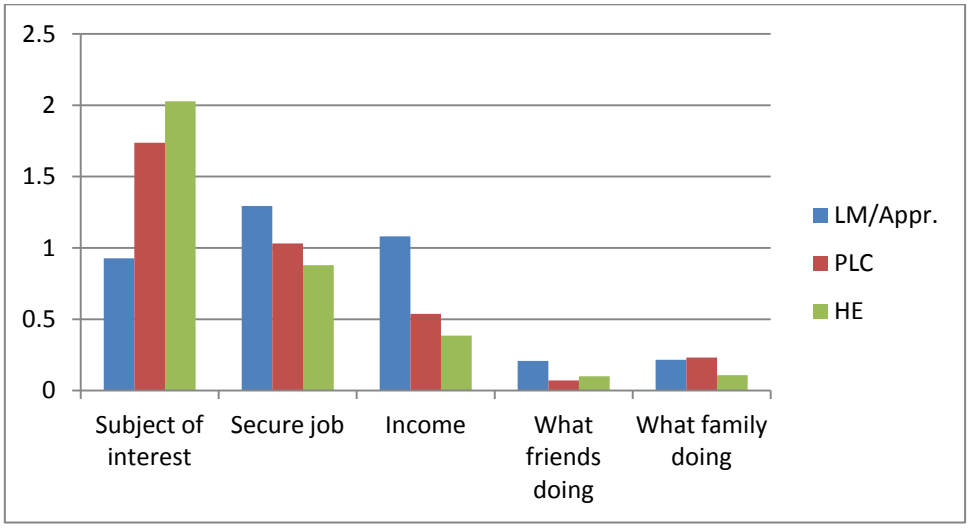
FIGURE 4.8 Perceived Importance of Influences on Post-School Decisions by School Social Mix



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

There were significant differences across actual post-school pathways in the perceived importance of different influences (Figure 4.9). Labour market entrants and apprentices were more likely to emphasise extrinsic reasons, including getting a secure job and having income. The labour market group was also more likely to place a greater weight on what their friends were doing, though the numbers doing so were quite small. Those who went on to higher education placed much less premium on what their siblings and other family members were doing as an influence than those on PLC courses or in the labour market. The higher education group placed a somewhat higher weight on studying a subject of interest to them than those in the PLC group.

FIGURE 4.9 Perceived Importance of Influences on Post-School Decisions by Main Pathway Taken



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

An important feature of the cohort under study is the dominance of higher education as a post-school pathway (see Chapter 3), representing the main pathway for 61 per cent of the leavers sampled and a further 14 per cent entering higher education having previously taken a PLC course. Over three-quarters (78 per cent) of the young people surveyed had applied for a higher education place at some stage since leaving school. Those who had not applied were asked to indicate the reasons for their decision. The main reasons given were the desire to earn money straight away (36 per cent), lack of interest/not feeling college was for them (32 per cent), not feeling they would get the required grades (27 per cent) and wanting to do another form of education/training instead (20 per cent). Financial constraints were reported by just over one in six of those who did not apply for higher education. Lack of encouragement from parents and/or teachers was reported as a factor by only a small number of respondents.

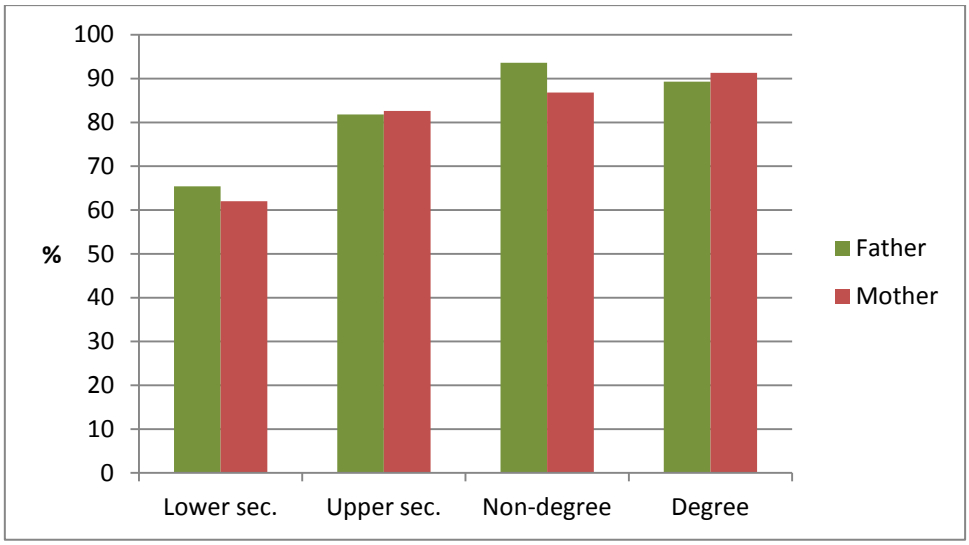
TABLE 4.1 Reasons for Not Applying for Higher Education

	%
Wanted to earn money straight away	36.4
Wasn't interested or didn't think it was for me	32.9
Didn't think I would get the grades	26.6
Wanted to do other education/training instead	20.4
Felt I couldn't afford it/too expensive	16.9
Wanted to travel/have gap year/take time out	4.2
My school/teachers didn't encourage me to	4.0
My family didn't encourage me to	3.5

Note: Totals to more than 100 per cent because several categories could be selected.

Young women in our sample were significantly more likely to apply for higher education than young men (81 per cent compared with 74 per cent). This gender difference held for all of the case-study schools, except Argyle Street, a socially mixed school, suggesting that gender differentiation in post-school pathways can be influenced by the specificity of the local context as well as broader societal trends. Young people with special educational needs were less likely to apply for higher education than their peers, through the majority of this group did apply (68 per cent compared with 79 per cent). Applying for higher education did not vary by immigrant status. Higher education application was strongly associated with family background and the social mix of the school attended. Figure 4.10 shows much lower levels of application for higher education among those whose parents had lower secondary education or less, with higher levels found among those with post-school education (non-degree and degree).

FIGURE 4.10 Applied for Higher Education by Parental Education

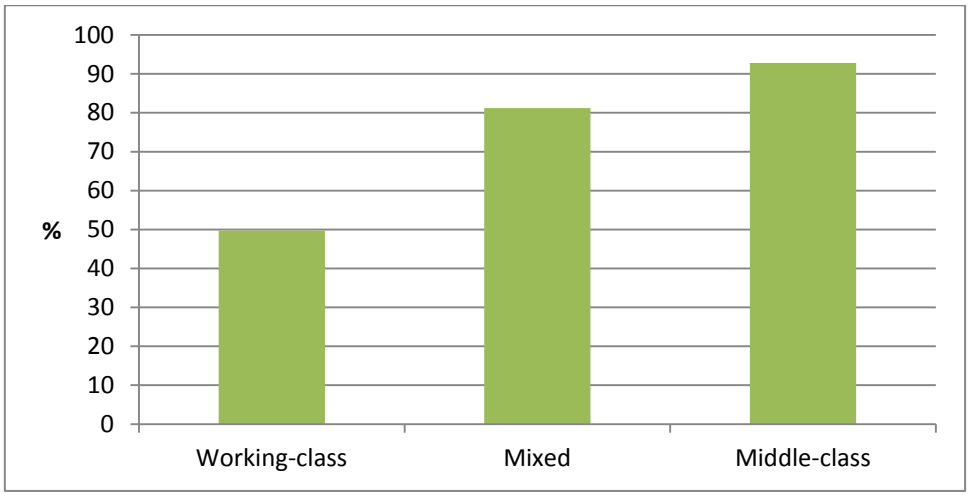


Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

A similar pattern is found by parental social class, with much lower levels of higher education application among those from working-class families and higher levels found among the middle-class (salariat) group (72 per cent compared with 86 per cent). It is worth noting, however, that differentiation in terms of parental education is stronger than that in social class background. Figure 4.11 shows that there are stark differences in levels of higher education application according to the social class mix of the school. The vast majority (94 per cent) of young people who had attended middle-class schools applied for higher education, reflecting the 'natural progression' of school to higher education described by interviewees (see above). In contrast, just half of those who had attended working-class schools (and completed senior cycle) applied for higher education. The behaviour

of those in socially mixed schools is closer to that in middle-class schools, with four-fifths applying for higher education.

FIGURE 4.11 Higher Education Application by School Social Mix



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

The interviews with a subgroup of these young people allow us to unpack the processes behind the impact of school social mix. A number of the interviewees vividly describe the climate of low expectations that was evident in their local area.

> I think the problem there was that there was a lack of dreams ... the social dynamic is based around, we'll say to be frank, alcohol and they're at the local bars there, that's where a lot of the socialising would have gone on and that's where a lot of the parents would remain ... I think the other lads were unfortunate in the sense that they weren't really told that, you know, you can have these kind of dreams and, you know, push forwards like, and there's nothing stopping you other than yourself. So I think it's not so much that they didn't realise their own dreams, I just think that they may not have had as many of them. (Conall, Lang Street, higher education)

> Where we live ... it's like the culture is, is to be cool and just come in, drink at thirteen years old and it's influence like and that's what you think you have to do. I did it because I felt that I had to do it to be cool. Not everyone does, a few but I knew, when we were fifteen we used to go out drinking like half of class, you know what I mean and that surely can't be helpful for wanting to go on and do well in life like. (Brendan, Lang Street, incomplete higher education)

While supportive, parents were described as less proactive than their middle-class counterparts in actively encouraging their children to go on to college through, for example, private tuition:

> I used to be with a girl there now, she was wealthy like and everyone in her class and all went to college, learned everything expected of them, they went to [a grinds school] in the summer. If they didn't get this grade or that grade, their parents would ground them and all that kind of stuff. Like the way I lived ... parents were a lot more chilled out like. (Robert, Lang Street, unemployed having left higher education early)

In some instances, this lack of explicit encouragement was described as being reinforced by the low expectations of teachers in working-class schools:

> I think it's also like the school that we went to, I wouldn't know how to put it, but like you'd have expectations but it's not like high expectations, you know, it wouldn't be the thing of like 'okay, try to all be doctors or try to all be lawyers' and things like that, it was kind of like 'okay, just get past your Leaving Cert or just get past your Junior Cert', kind of attitude, you know. So I don't think a lot of the students that were in my class even thought of college as like an option. ... But no drive [from the teachers] to say like you can do it. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

Brendan, in particular, points to the lack of balance between care and challenge in his classes (see Darmanin, 2003, on this delicate equilibrium), making it difficult for students to develop independence as learners in preparation for the post-school period:

> I think in the school it's just like we're handed everything, we're not supposed to read books, the teacher reads us all the books, everything, you're not given any responsibility, I think. No one used to study ... even the Irish teacher used to know we wouldn't study so he'd let us do everything in the class and even write out all the, you know the oral, so you'd to write out our orals and all week we'd sit down in the class and learn them and then we just repeated it and that was it. ... If you look at the facts, you know people [from the school] are dropping out of college. Not much people even went to college, not much people achieved their full potential at all. There were so many clever people in there. (Brendan, Lang Street, incomplete higher education)

A feeling that college was 'not for them' meant that some of the young people who applied for higher education places did not take up those places (in line with earlier findings by McCoy *et al.*, 2010a; and Reay *et al.*, 2005, for similar findings in the British context). The survey responses indicate that the vast majority (92 per cent) of those who were offered a higher education place accepted it.

However, non-acceptance rates were much higher for those who had attended working-class schools (20 per cent compared with 6 per cent in mixed schools and 9 per cent in middle-class schools). Bridget attended Barrack Street school, a working-class school in which a high percentage of girls had applied for higher education (see Smyth and Banks, 2012). She describes how, while many of her classmates did go on to higher or further education, many did not realise their initial goals because of their reluctance to step outside their immediate surroundings and embark on an unfamiliar trajectory:

> I wanted the experience of going to college but a lot of people wouldn't, you know, making new friends and you know being in a totally different atmosphere. Yeah, I remember talking about that in sixth year, god now, you know like and what's it going to be like and stuff like that, we would talk about it amongst ourselves, a lot of people would be nervous. ... A good few did go [to college] but then I think when it came to the crunch time, maybe end of the year no, [they] didn't. You know people applied for courses, I think nearly everyone applied for a course and then I think when it came, had come around, you know in the summer or stuff like that, had come around and then September, you just decided not to go. (Bridget, Barrack Street, PLC)

However, it is important to recognise the presence of active agency on the part of young people, even in the presence of difficult social and economic circumstances (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Some of these young people did apply for and take up higher education places. A central factor was seen as strong support from their parents:

> My mother was fully supportive ... I always had a very kind of, a real relationship with my mother in the sense that I always had a certain level of independence that, you know, it wasn't forced upon me to do this to please. ... She was always supportive but I was very motivated in secondary school. (Conall, Lang Street, higher education)

> I was raised really well, I don't know about other kids but I don't know, my mum was very strict like, you know. Me and my brother, we never missed a day of school, we missed one day in sixth year, other than that we never missed a day of school. (Brendan, Lang Street, incomplete higher education)

It should be noted too that not all young people attending working-class schools are themselves of working-class origin (and vice versa for middle-class schools). Fiona, for example, points to the middle-class occupation of her father and her family's commitment to education as fostering her aspirations to pursue higher education, despite her feeling that teacher and peer expectations were low in her school:

> It was always college, I don't know if it was maybe the way that I was brought up, not to say like my parents were like 'you have to go to college', but I just knew that college was the next step, you know. ... So my frame of mind was basically to get as many points as I could so that I would have more options so that if I decide on a career I'd have the option of going in to it. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

Liking school and having support from teachers also played a role in promoting higher education aspirations among those who attended working-class schools:

> Some teachers expected a lot of us, certain teachers who, like one teacher, a maths teacher expected a lot out of me and my brother like, expected us to achieve very highly and go on to college. (Robert, Lang Street, unemployed having left higher education early)

> I loved school. ... Yeah, well I passed, school was easy for me ... I never had a problem doing me homework, I always had it done because it wasn't a fact that me parents were going mad, it was more just for meself. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

Chapter 3 highlighted the differences in attitudes to school among those taking different post-school pathways. These differences were also apparent in the in-depth interviews with young people. Those who entered the labour market directly were more negative about school. Some had wanted to drop out of school early but had been dissuaded or prevented from doing so by their parents:

> She [my mother] would have killed me, oh there was no way I was allowed to leave, no, no way, it wasn't gonna happen. (Rosemary, Harris Street, employed)

This group of young people were more likely than their peers to report difficulties with their schoolwork, in part because they became more interested in 'messing' or 'partying':

> Up until second year I was legitimately a straight A student, there was no question and then kind of end of second year, you know, you're a teenager and start having a fag out the back of the school and you start going to discos and hanging out with your friends and school becomes a lot less important because you're just having a more fun and going out with your friends and so yeah [I] kind of, kind of faltered a bit. ... I started to like get bad grades ... I had all the potential and all the academic mind to do it, I was just more interested in partying and having a laugh with my friends. (Clodagh, Belmore Street, unemployed)

For these young people, post-school education was seen as providing 'more of the same'.

> I looked at college and I just thought at the moment I couldn't take any more school like not even an ounce of school, but like it just wasn't for me. I didn't like anything about school, I wasn't good at it. (Rosemary, Harris Street, employed)
>
> I was fine at it [school] ... I didn't feel like going on to a few more years of the same sort of thing. (Shane, Fig Lane, apprenticeship)
>
> I'm not one for college, I wouldn't be able for two or three years. (Niamh, Belmore Street, unemployed)

In contrast to the patterns found in the survey, only a small number of interviewees framed their choices explicitly in terms of financial issues. For Shane, the motivation to earn money played a part in his decision to do an apprenticeship but it was also seen as a route to secure a qualification:

> I liked the idea of getting, I suppose, getting some money and everything. But then it's not just working you are getting a qualification as well so it's the best of both things really. (Shane, Fig Lane, apprenticeship)

Those who took the higher education pathway were more positive about school than those who had taken other pathways:

> I was happy, I was happy with my results and I thought we got as much help as we needed in secondary school and I was happy with the teachers and everything pretty much. (Elaine, Belmore Street, higher education)

The only exception to this pattern was Sandra who had moved schools a number of times; she disliked the school structures and missed time because of illness. In spite of this dislike, she did very well in the Leaving Certificate exams and went on to higher education.

The PLC group had more mixed perceptions of school than those who went on to higher education. Among this group, those who went on to HE subsequently had more positive perceptions of school, though the social aspects of school were sometimes seen as equally important as the academic side.

> I liked school to be honest, I liked school, I just like liked coming in every day and meeting my friends and taking part in sports in school so I, I quite liked secondary school now I have to say.
>
> Interviewer: And you know, what about the academic side?
>
> The academic side? I, I would have been quite interested I suppose in [the] academic side. I would be more interested in sport at school to be honest

> but I still think I worked quite hard academically in school. (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education)

Others described themselves as lacking focus and not working while at school, though relations with teachers were not seen as particularly negative:

> I just didn't care, I didn't care. Like I used to skip school a lot like you know, I'd say I was going to school but I'd be skipping school with my friends like. ... I just wanted to leave school as fast as I could. I didn't like it in school. I didn't care back then so I didn't want to [study]. (Patrick, Park Street, PLC)

> I didn't want to leave school but I just, I didn't really have the head for it. I just wasn't really in the mood of sitting there and I kind of used to get myself into trouble. (Catherine, Harris Street, PLC)

Young people who were unsure about their preferred destination adopted different strategies to deal with this uncertainty. Two of the interviewees (Moira and Clodagh) decided not to go on to post-school education because they did not know what course to choose:

> I was very scared of making the wrong move. ... I hadn't a clue what I was going to put down on my CAO. Everyone else was like oh my parents are saying, oh I have to put something down and [I am] not allowed take a year off, I have to do this. I didn't agree with that, I said to everyone that I'm not filling out a CAO to do front office management or to do you know, whatever else, if I don't feel like that I'm going to want to study that for four years and then be that for the next twenty to thirty years in a career. (Clodagh, Belmore Street, unemployed)

Ronan had aspirations to go on to higher education (which he did subsequently) but was unsure of his direction so took a PLC course which reflected his interest in sports:

> I did sport and recreation, I'd be very interested in sport so I wanted to do something in sport anyways. ... I wasn't sure that I wanted to commit to let's say a three year course in sort of sport because I suppose there's not a lot of jobs in that so ... I wanted to do something for the year. (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education)

Karen adopted a similar strategy, opting for a PLC social care course to see if she would like to pursue this area in the longer term:

> I tried a PLC course first to see if I actually liked social care, so I did that and it was, I liked it ... [but] then I kind of decided at the end of that that I wouldn't mind doing something kind of maybe slightly different. (Karen, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

The young people interviewed were asked about their reasons for choosing the kinds of courses and institutions they attended. The dominant reason underlying course choice related to liking a related subject during second-level education. Thus, Sandra's and Anthony's orientation towards humanities subjects prompted them to choose an Arts degree:

> I loved History and I was good at English so I decided I'd do Arts. (Sandra, Belmore Street, higher education)

> At the time when I was in secondary school ... it made the most sense, I had more of a kind of academic-based mind, just studying literature and history was mostly where I would have went to. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)

In Anthony's case, his preference was reinforced by advice from his guidance counsellor:

> I actually had a career guidance teacher who said that ... based on how I'd been doing in secondary school, the two best choices I had would have been business or the arts, so that was what I was aiming towards. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)

In the same vein, Conall had preferred maths and science subjects which led to him choosing an engineering course:

> Like I mean my Leaving Cert was really based around sciences and the maths, that side of it, I wasn't very good at sports or geography or history so I was very maths and science based. (Conall, Lang Street, higher education)

For Ronan and Siobhan, liking and doing well in business subjects at school led to them opting for business courses in higher education:

> I suppose commerce was the thing I liked doing in school. I liked studying it for the Leaving Cert so I decided to go for that and I didn't really have anything in mind ... well not really, I was kind of saying I want to something in this or so that's what I decided in the end anyway. (Ronan, Park Street, higher education)

> I was interested and I did like it [business studies] in secondary school and that's why I went further to do it, do you know, because I did like going to classes and I did, it was kind of one of the ones I did best in as well in school, like I did the best at it in secondary school and I didn't mind it so I think that's why I picked that. (Siobhan, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

Shane's interest in technological subjects coupled with his lack of interest in more academic subjects was a driving force in his decision to do an apprenticeship:

> I liked doing the woodwork and drawing and all in school so I thought I'd like to do this. I didn't really want to go to a college like an academic kind of writing. (Shane, Fig Lane, apprenticeship)

A smaller group of young people were motivated by a particular interest they had developed while at school. Robert referred to his long-standing interest in computers as a motivation for choosing a related course within third-level education:

> When I went home I liked to go on the computer so that's why I wanted to do computers ... At home I did graphics and made music and stuff so I just thought you know, I like doing this so that's what I think I'll do. (Robert, Lang Street, incomplete higher education)

A desire to run his own business prompted Dermot to pursue a business course even though he had not taken related subjects at school:

> It's strange because I didn't even do business in school but when I was applying for different courses I applied for a few ... Because business is what I'm interested in, I like working with food and that as well like, I'd like to own my own restaurant and stuff like that but the course kind of, it's to do with law and marketing and accounts, like it covers everything in the business so you kind of have to grab up the ins and outs of everything, you know. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

Two of the interviewees reported that doing work experience during Transition Year gave them useful insights into different careers and had actually discouraged them from pursuing a particular course option.

> I always wanted to do veterinary and, something kind of sciencey, because I was really into that, and I did my work experience in fourth year in, in a veterinary clinic and I just didn't like it at all ... You're actually on call all the time and I was put off it. So, I was happy I did the work experience and found out. Then I was kind of, I was going to do dentistry or optometry and I just chose optometry in the end. (Elaine, Belmore Street, higher education)

> I was thinking of architecture before I went into engineering and then the architecture work experience, it wasn't that what changed my mind but it had an influence. It was really boring. I hated it (laughing), just working on a computer all day. (Brigid, Harris Street, higher education)

Young people were more reflective about their choice of course than the choice of college or institution. In line with recent research (Cullinan *et al*., 2013)

proximity emerged as an issue for several young people, with their choices determined by wanting or needing to live at home while at college:

> I suppose the main reason would have been the proximity to home ... only thirty minute drive so I suppose that was the main reason to be honest with you, there wasn't any other particular reason but just closeness to home ... I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do there was you know. I didn't think there was any reason going to the other side of the country you know, to you know, to do something when I wasn't really sure what so I said I might as well stay at home and do a broad course at home. (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education)

> I was always going to stick with [name of city] because I just live up the road from the college, you know, so it was always going to be convenient let's say, live from home and just go into college then from, from home. (Thomas, Park Street, higher education)

While proximity was usually related to the costs of attending college, it could also reflect a desire to postpone independence from the family:

> I'm kind of a home bird ... I suppose it was kind of the cost of it as well but I kind of never really looked at that side of moving away. I wanted to stay at home, I didn't want to move away and then the cost of it as well and I wasn't really that bothered or pushed about moving away. I would prefer to stay at home and go to college there. (Siobhan, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

In contrast, Conall, who had been critical of the climate of low expectations in his local area (see above), deliberately chose a college outside his home town so that he could 'break free' from the local area.

> I was just kind of looking for an excuse I think to leave [name of the city], just perhaps see a bit more and kind of break free of that kind of circle, if you know what I mean, that environment that people tend to get caught up in and stay in for, you know, most of their lives. I think I wanted to see a bit more and, you know, kind of throw myself to the deep end a small bit. (Conall, Lang Street, higher education)

Friends were mentioned as an influence on choice of college but the impact of their choices did not appear to be decisive.

> Sometimes when a person is going to a certain college or university, that the friends would all try to go to that one or whatever. So it happened that all of my friends were pretty much going to [name of college] anyway so it wouldn't have really affected my decision, but friends really, they were all

> supportive, we all said yeah sure you know go for that if that's what you want to do. And we all really ended up going, all the close friends really ended up going to [that college] anyway. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)

The size of the college was one of the deciding factors for Karen:

> The college I'm at is good in a sense because it's small, you know, it's not like you're in a big massive lecture hall and you're a mile away from the lecturer, you would actually know the lecturer, so it's probably better in that sense, that side of it. (Karen, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

Young people who went directly into the labour market were less explicit than the post-school education group about their reasons for pursuing particular jobs. Rosemary (Harris Street) had 'always' taken for granted that she would work in her mother's beauty salon when she left school. Similarly, Niamh (Belmore Street), at least partly, attributes her choices to wanting to work in her mother's hairdressers. She clearly articulated how hairdressing (and beauty) was seen as a desirable option for young women, one which reflected their 'natural' interests in self-presentation.

> An awful lot of us when we were doing the Leaving Cert had decided on hairdressing, I'd say there was about nearly, in my group of friends, about seven of us that were doing hairdressing, there was an awful lot. ... I think everything goes through a phase and hairdressing was so popular back then. ... Every girl loves doing their hair ... So I think if girls are kind of into their hair and make-up they kind of tend to go down the hairdressing or beautician road. (Niamh, Belmore Street, unemployed)

4.5 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has looked at the kinds of information young people use in making decisions about their post-school pathways. Parents and guidance counsellors emerged as the main sources of advice and information in sixth year. Although parents were rarely explicitly directive in their advice, many took it for granted that their children would attend post-school education with college thus appearing as a natural progression to many middle-class young people. The research also suggests that middle-class young people have more access to networks which included people who had taken a particular course or worked in a specific field, all of which provided valuable information about possible post-school pathways. In contrast, and in line with earlier research (McCoy *et al*., 2010a) young people from less educated and/or working-class families had less immediate knowledge of higher education in their social networks and, as a result, they were found to be more reliant on school-based sources of guidance.

Survey responses indicated that the majority of young people were happy with the guidance they had received at school. The responses from the interviewees were somewhat more nuanced. On the whole, young people valued the detailed information offered and the personal qualities of the guidance counsellor, highlighting in particular the importance of one-to-one sessions. However, issues emerged regarding constraints on time for guidance, particularly for the kinds of one-to-one appointments which facilitated a more personalised discussion. Some young people pointed to the absence of information on options other than higher education and on the employment opportunities following from the courses in which they were interested. Those who were uncertain of their future direction were more critical of guidance provision, suggesting a preference for 'more direction'. However, this must be contrasted against the impatience with being given information on a range of options among those who already felt certain what they wanted to do.

Most young people highlighted the importance of intrinsic reasons – wanting to study a subject they were interested in, personal fulfilment and being able to get an interesting job – in influencing their post-school decisions. However, young people who had attended working-class schools were more likely to value extrinsic reasons – an income and a secure job, suggesting greater risk aversion among this group (see Reay *et al.*, 2005, on risk aversion among working-class young people in Britain).

The majority of young people had applied for a higher education place. However, there were significant differences in application rates by school social mix, with almost all of those in middle-class schools applying, reflecting the taken for granted nature of going on to higher education in these contexts. In contrast, just half of those from working-class schools applied for higher education, a pattern attributed to a climate of lower expectations in the school and local area. Parental support was seen as a particularly strong factor in encouraging working class young people to aspire to higher education. The course chosen was often based on liking related subjects at school, which may mean differential exposure to a full range of subject areas depending on the school attended.

Chapter 5

Realising Goals and Regrets

Chapter 4 looked at the decisions young people made about their post-school destinations. Chapter 1 outlined previous international studies which indicated that not all young people realise their aspirations, with actual outcomes reflecting the complex interaction of individual, institutional and structural factors. This chapter examines the extent to which young people in this study actually realised the goals they had formulated in their final year of school and examines the extent to which they were satisfied with the pathway they pursued. The final section looks at the plans young people had for the future, focusing in particular on the likelihood of returning to full-time education and on intentions to emigrate.

5.1 Realising Aspirations

Respondents were asked what they had planned to do upon leaving school. The majority (79 per cent) had planned to go on to post-school education/training, 17 per cent planned to 'get a job' while 4 per cent planned to travel or 'take time out'. Overall, 62 per cent said that they got to do what they planned to, 22 per cent did 'to some extent' while 16 per cent did not realise their pre-leaving goal. A stark contrast is apparent between those who intended to go on to further education/training and those who planned to obtain employment (Figure 5.1): the majority (69 per cent) of those who aspired to post-school education realised their goal with a further fifth achieving this goal 'to some extent'. In contrast, a minority (41 per cent) of would-be employees realised their goal with a third not realising this goal at all.

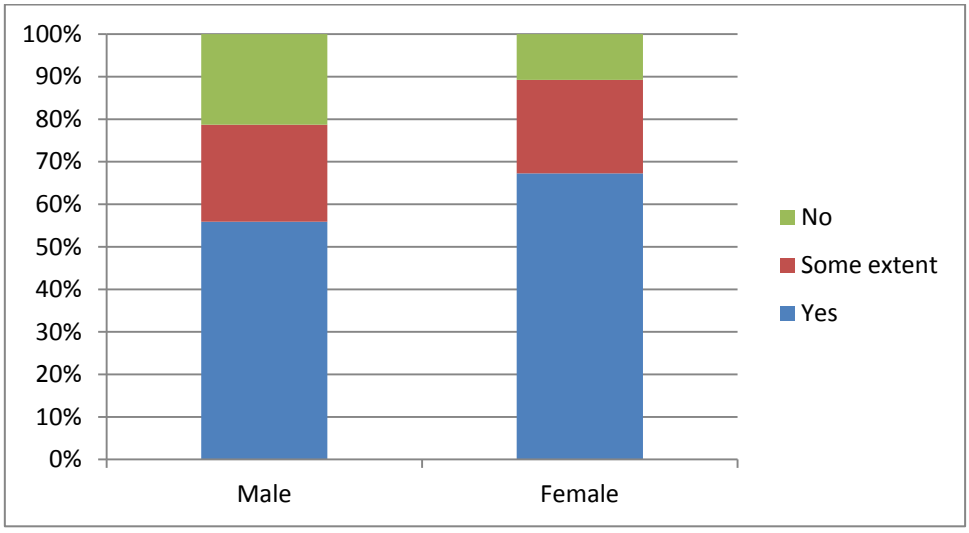
Which young people failed to achieve their goals? There were clear differences by gender in the extent to which goals were realised (Figure 5.2), with male leavers much less likely to realise their goals than their female counterparts. Clear differences were also evident by social class background (Figure 5.3); leavers from middle-class and intermediate backgrounds were more likely to achieve their goals while working-class leavers were more likely to have compromised (that is, achieved their goals only 'to some extent'). The 'class unknown' group, who are likely to be the most disadvantaged, are particularly unlikely to achieve their pre-leaving goals. Similarly, the extent to which goals are realised varies by the social mix of the school; 37 per cent of those who had attended working-class schools did not achieve their goal compared with 12 per cent of those in mixed

schools and 6 per cent of those in middle-class schools. The extent to which leavers reported realising their goals did not vary by immigrant status or having a special educational need.

FIGURE 5.1 Realisation of Goals by Pre-School Plans

Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 5.2 Realisation of Goals by Gender



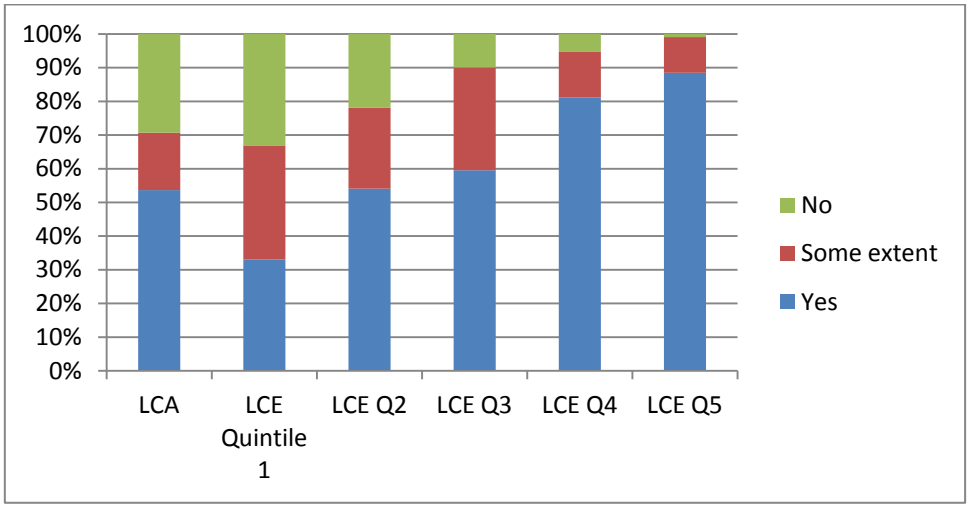
Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 5.3 Realisation of Goals by Social Class Background

Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Educational grades serve as a crucial means of accessing post-school education/training and have been found to be a strong predictor of employment chances in the Irish context (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). It is not surprising therefore that there is a significant relationship between Leaving Certificate achievement and the realisation of pre-leaving goals. Figure 5.4 shows the realisation of goals by whether leavers took the LCA programme and, for LCE/LCVP leavers, by Leaving Certificate grades measured in quintiles (fifths). There is a strong relationship between grades achieved and goal realisation; over four-fifths of those in the highest performance group achieved their goals compared with only a third of the lowest performers. Leavers who took the LCA programme resemble low-achieving LCE/LCVP leavers in the extent to which they realised their goals.

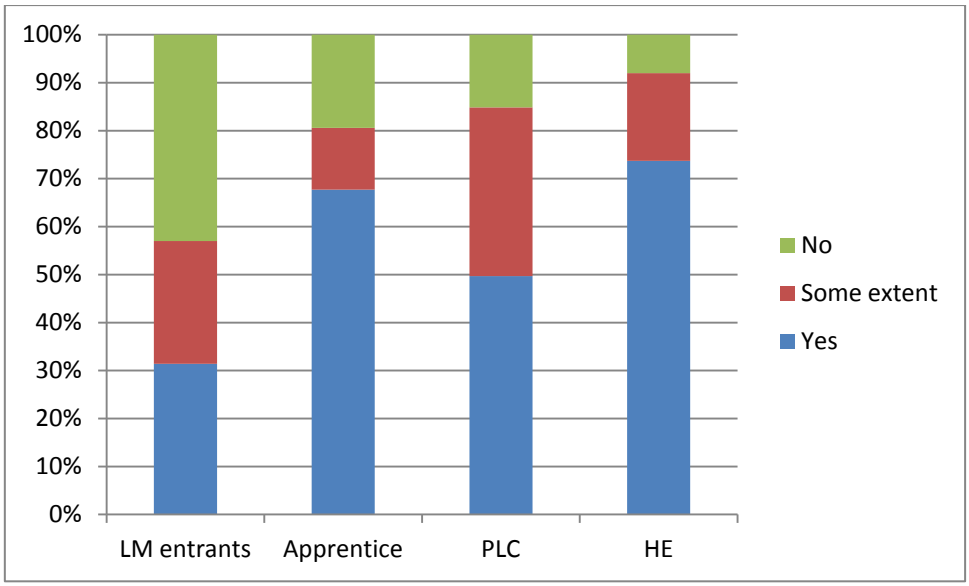
FIGURE 5.4 Realisation of Goals by Leaving Certificate Achievement (Quintiles)



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

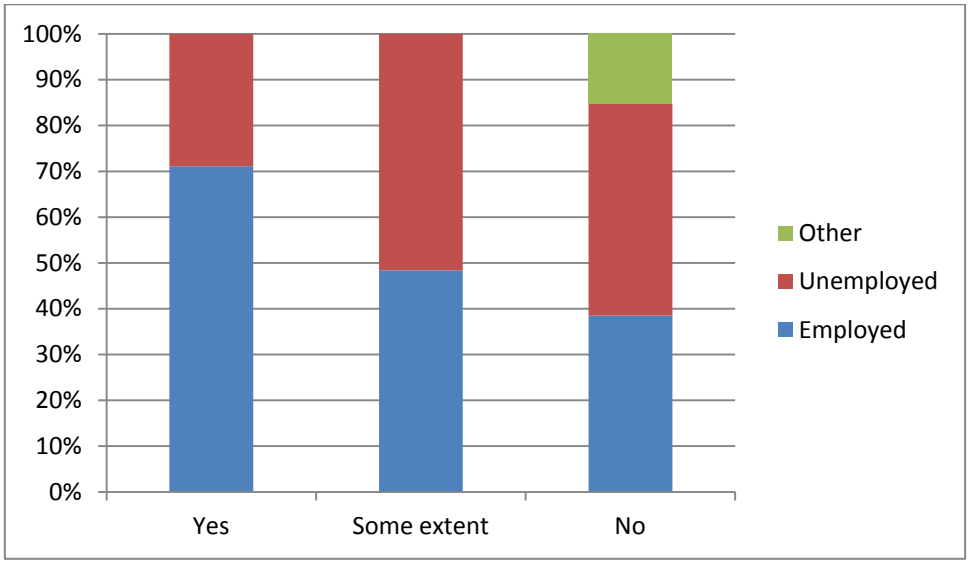
What were the pathways taken by young people who did not realise their goals? Significant variation is found in the extent to which young people felt they had realised their goals across the actual pathways they had pursued after leaving school (Figure 5.5). Higher education entrants were more likely to report realising their goals (74 per cent), though almost a fifth (18 per cent) reported compromising (realising their goals 'to some extent'). The proportion who realised their goals was also high, two-thirds, among the small group who took apprenticeships; as with HE entrants, almost a fifth (19 per cent) felt they had not realised their goals. Among PLC entrants, half had realised their goals, with over a third compromising in their goals. Labour market entrants were least likely to feel they had realised their goals; 43 per cent had not done so while a further fifth had compromised. Further insights into the situation of labour market entrants can be gleaned by looking at their status at the time of the survey. It is apparent that a significant proportion of those who have not reached their goals or had compromised were unemployed at the time of the survey (Figure 5.6).

FIGURE 5.5 Actual Post-School Pathways by Goal Realisation



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

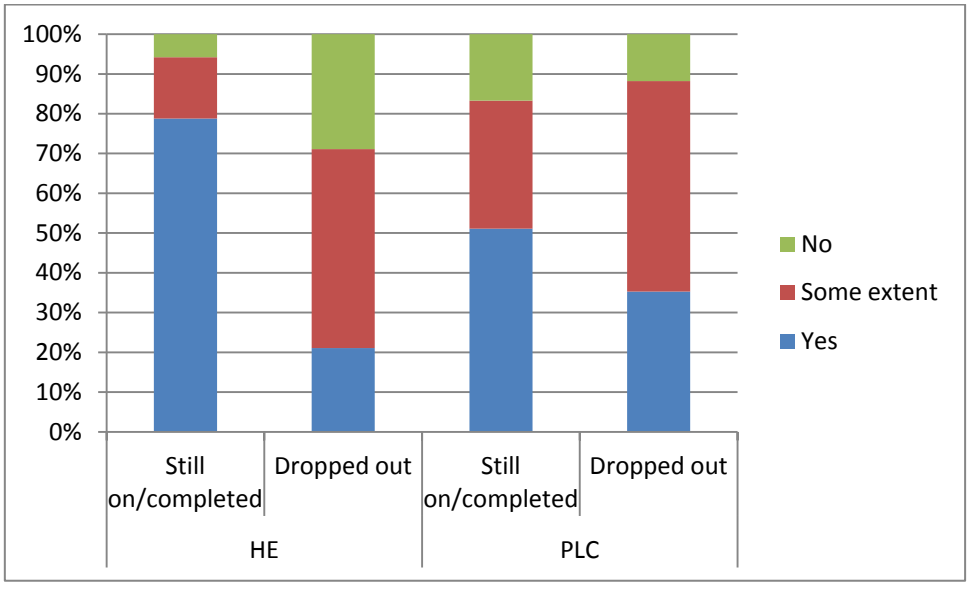
FIGURE 5.6 Current Status by Goal Realisation, Labour Market Entrants Only



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Among those who went on to higher education, leaving before completion of the course was a significant factor in feeling that they had not realised their goals (Figure 5.7).[15] However, a significant proportion of those who were still on, or had completed, PLC courses felt they had not realised their goals.

FIGURE 5.7 Goal Realisation by Course Drop-out



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

[15] Of higher education entrants 9 per cent did not complete their course. The reasons underlying non-completion are explored in Chapter 6.

Young people who did not realise their goals were somewhat more dissatisfied in hindsight with the guidance information they received in school (42 per cent compared with 32 per cent of those who realised their goals). It is evident, however, that their opinions of guidance information are coloured by their subsequent experience; when surveyed in sixth year, there were no differences in satisfaction with guidance classes or individual sessions by subsequent realisation of goals.

Further analyses were conducted to explore the simultaneous effects of background factors and the post-school pathway pursued on whether young people reported realising the plans they had made while at school. A multilevel model is used to take account of the fact that young people who had attended the same school are likely to have shared common experiences. Those who had realised their plans 'to some extent' and those who did not realise their plans are contrasted against those who had secured their preferred outcome (Table 5.1). The first model indicates that the extent to which young people realise their goals differs significantly by gender, individual social class background and the social class mix of the school they attend. Young men are 1.6 times[16] more likely than young women of similar backgrounds to report that they did not realise their goal. Working-class young people are more likely to realise their goals to some extent than those from salariat or intermediate backgrounds while those for whom social class is unknown (largely, those from non-employed households) are the group most likely to report not realising their goals at all. As in the descriptive analysis, young people with special educational needs do not differ significantly from their peers in the extent to which they report realising their goals. There is no significant difference between those from immigrant families and their peers in the extent to which they realise their plans.

Model 2 shows the effects of academic achievement on realising post-school plans. Not surprisingly, given the use of grades for access to post-school education and employment, lower performing leavers are significantly less likely to realise their goals upon leaving school. Those who had taken the Leaving Certificate Applied programme are less likely than lower-achieving LCE leavers to realise their goals only 'to some extent'. This pattern should be interpreted with caution due to the small numbers involved but may reflect the greater satisfaction with information and guidance found among LCA leavers (see above).

[16] This odds ratio is calculated on the basis of the additive coefficients presented in Table 5.1.

TABLE 5.1 Multilevel Model of Factors Influencing Realisation of Post-School Plans

	Model 1 (Background)		Model 2 (Background and Achievement)		Model 3 (Background and Pathway)	
	To some extent	No	To some extent	No	To some extent	No
Constant	-1.004	-2.000	0.284	-0.374	-0.185	-1.147
Male	0.041	0.475±	-0.110	0.403	0.152	0.525*
Social class:						
Salariat	-0.425±	-0.335	-0.088	0.149	-0.147	0.129
Intermediate	-0.506±	-0.406	-0.353	-0.287	-0.407	-0.304
Unknown	0.527	0.700±	0.418	0.598	0.343	0.512
(Base: Working class)						
SEN	0.024	0.010	-0.028	0.080	-0.011	0.042
Immigrant	-0.275	0.113	-0.511	-0.279	-0.472	-0.112
Class mix of school:						
Working class	0.285	1.378***	-0.219	0.607*	-0.331	0.479±
Middle class	-0.067	-0.583±	0.047	-0.467	0.157	-0.289
(Base: Mixed)						
Educational achievement:						
LCA			-1.206±	-0.938	-1.334±	-1.041
LCE quintile 2			-0.945**	-0.965**	-0.877**	-0.658±
LCE quintile 3			-0.785*	-1.673***	-0.456	-0.999*
LCE quintile 4			-1.926***	-2.385***	-1.636***	-1.704***
LCE quintile 5			-2.331***	-4.552***	-1.989***	-3.837***
(Base: LCE quintile 1)						
Post-school pathway:						
LM entrant					0.673±	1.159**
Apprenticeship					-1.786*	-0.102
PLC non-progression					0.564	0.565
PLC progression					0.826*	-0.034
(Base: Higher education)						
N	719 young people within 12 schools					

Note: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10.

The gender and individual social class differences found in Model 1 become insignificant when we take account of educational achievement (Model 2, Table 5.1). Thus, working-class young people in our sample are less likely to attain their preferred pathways largely because of their lower Leaving Certificate grades. However, the effect of school social mix is not wholly accounted for by between-school differences in achievement. Having attended a working-class school is found to have a direct effect on realising post-school goals, with these leavers being less likely than similarly qualified young people to attain their preferred options. Not realising their goals is inextricably linked with the kinds of pathways taken by young people. Model 3 takes account of the main pathway taken after leaving school.[17] Labour market entrants are more likely than any other groups to report not having realised their goals. Furthermore, the PLC progression group is more likely to report having only realised their goals 'to some extent', perhaps because their initial preference was to access higher education directly rather than indirectly through a PLC course. The effects of educational achievement on goal realisation are to some extent mediated by the pathway taken; in other words, higher grades facilitate access to preferred post-school routes.

The interviews with young people provide further insights into the extent to which young people realised their goals. Consistently with the survey patterns, most of those interviewed had managed to realise their initial aspirations:

> I wanted to go to college and that's what I did. (Bridget, Barrack Street, PLC)

In keeping with the survey analyses, obtaining the necessary Leaving Certificate grades was a crucial factor in realising goals:

> My friend ... she worked very hard for her Leaving Cert and she had mostly honours, I think she had all honours subjects and she got 535 [points], something like that. She did really well, and then she wanted to do pharmacy but she didn't get it, and she was devastated because she was only a few points off, so she put a huge amount of pressure on herself first of all and then she didn't get it. (Sandra, Belmore Street, higher education)

Failing to get the required number of points did not deter some young people from pursuing their area of interest. Denise and Carol, both from Harris Street, did not obtain their first choice of institution and course but pursued another higher education course in a related area. Similarly, Gerard did not obtain his first choice of Italian and business; he repeated his Leaving Certificate but still failed

[17] The influence of pathway on goal realisation cannot be regarded as causal in nature. Rather this model is used to illustrate the way in which educational achievement is reflected in access to particular routes which in turn shape young people's experiences of whether they have realised their goals or not.

to obtain his preferred course, 'settling' for another higher education course in the unrelated area of software development:

> I done the Leaving Cert again and I got my first choice but I didn't get the requirements, you know I got the points for it but I didn't get the requirements. So I got the same course again the second time in [name of institution] so I said I'll do it just to see what it was like. (Gerard, Park Street, higher education)

Some young people who did not obtain their preferred higher education place instead took a PLC course in a related area. Thus, Karen did a PLC course in social care, later entering a related course in an Institute of Technology.

As indicated in Chapter 4, a number of young people were uncertain about their actual goals. Thomas therefore decided to take 'a year out' to reflect on what course he wanted to pursue and raise money to fund his studies:

> It was just to work and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do because I had a few choices and I said just ... take a year out and see how I got on then. Just save up money as well because I was paying my own fees anyways, you know so that's what happened. (Thomas, Park Street, higher education)

Moira reported that her friends from Harris Street, a middle-class school, were 'all in college now doing what they kind of wanted to do'. However, she was uncertain what she wanted and remained working in the same shop in which she had been employed while at school. Similarly, Clodagh (Belmore Street), who was from a middle-class family, did not want to go to college unless she was sure what she wanted to do and, after travel and a series of jobs, was unemployed at the time of the interview.

The survey analyses indicate that those who entered the labour market directly upon leaving school were less likely to realise their goals, mainly because of their inability to access (secure) employment. This cohort of young people is unique in moving through second-level education during a period of boom but leaving school at the beginning of a deep recession (see Chapter 1). For these young people, there was a significant mismatch between the expectations formed in adolescence and the reality they faced upon leaving school: 'when you are at school you expect to come out of school, go to college and get a job' (Brian, Dawes Point, unemployed). Section 3 below will outline the potential implications of recessionary conditions for plans to return to education. However, some young people referred to the likely disincentive effects of the recession, seeing it as less 'worthwhile' to invest in education in a context of uncertain prospects:

> I have friends who work with me who have degrees and whatever and they are still working in [name of shop]. Some of them are accountants, some of

> them are personnel, whatever, they are still working in [name of shop] like. (Patrick, Park Street, PLC)

Thus, Brian, who attended a working-class school, had initially planned to do an Arts degree with the longer term goal of training for teaching. However, the lack of teaching jobs put him off his initial plans, he was offered a college place he did not want and he was unemployed at the time of the interview:

> I had plans to go to [a university] and do Arts. I was mad about English then. I did a bit of research into it over the summer because I knew I was going to get enough points like. ... And I remember I did research into it then because I wanted to do teaching and I think I found out that 95 per cent of sub teachers are English teachers and it's very, very hard for English teachers to get a job, unless you get in there straight away and you are proven as a good English teacher. So that kind of faded away and I let that off, I kind of tried to focus on getting a job then. But that hasn't worked out like. (Brian, Dawes Point, unemployed)

Brian reported similar experiences of discouragement among his peer group:

> A girl [I know], she's just finished school and she was saying all the way through she's going to college, going to college but now she's thinking I'll just leave, what's the point in going to college? I mean you mightn't get anything at the end of it because the recession might be still here. (Brian, Dawes Point, unemployed)

Young people who had attended working-class schools reported greater difficulties among their peers in accessing employment opportunities than those from other schools:

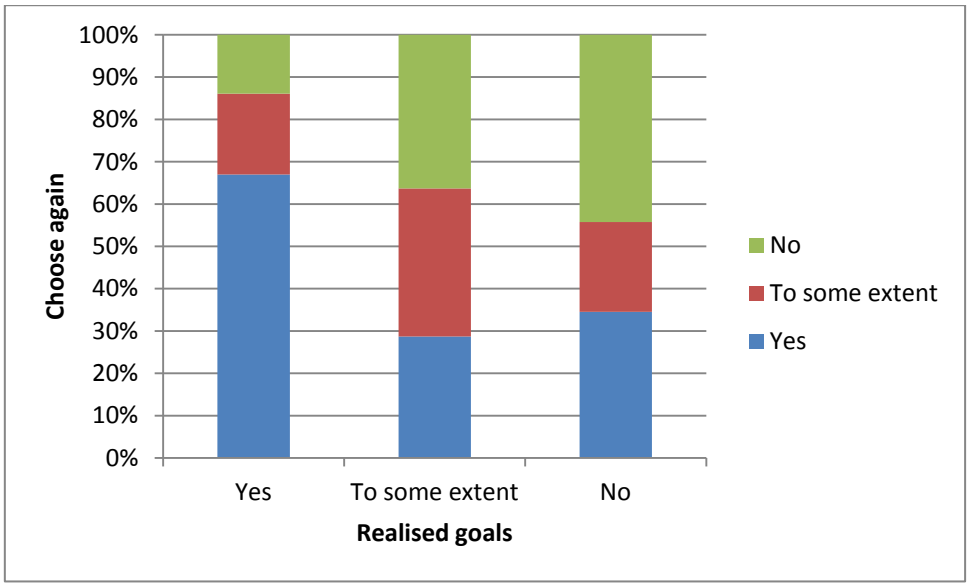
> I look at a lot of girls I was in school with and they've nothing, they've no job. Some of them are doing like six months' courses here or three months' courses there through FÁS. … But my main friends from kind of school, they either have kids or they're on the dole, they do a few courses. (Bridget, Barrack Street, PLC)

Realising their initial goal did not mean that young people were necessarily satisfied with the pathway they pursued, an issue explored in the following section.

5.2 CHOICES AND REGRETS

Respondents were asked whether they would take the same pathway if they were free to choose again[18]; over half (53 per cent) would choose the same pathway, 23 per cent would choose the same pathway 'to some extent' while 24 per cent would not choose the same route. Not surprisingly, leavers who had not realised their goals were more likely to say that they would not pursue the same route (Figure 5.8). However, it is worth noting that even among those who had realised their goals, a certain proportion would choose a different route completely or partially. Thus, the experience of regret is a complex one; it may reflect not realising initial post-school plans in general terms (e.g., accessing higher education or not), it may reflect the type of course taken or institution attended, or alternatively, may reflect feelings that the course or job was not what they expected.

FIGURE 5.8 Choose Same Pathway by Whether Realised Goals



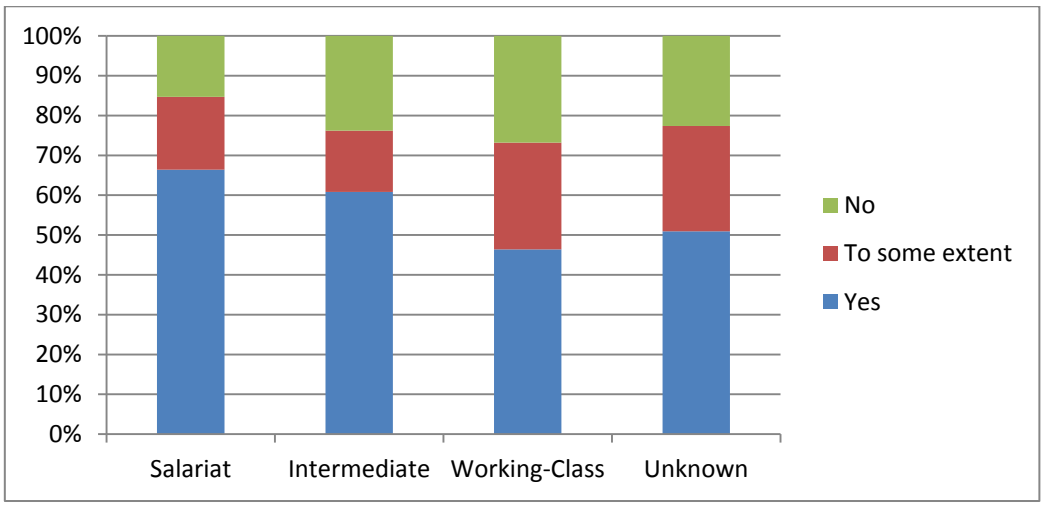
Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Young men and women were similar in the extent to which they would choose the same pathway again. Clear differences were evident in terms of social class background, however, with middle-class leavers more likely to say they would choose the same pathway while working-class leavers were more likely to regret the pathway chosen, either partially or entirely (Figure 5.9). Figure 5.10 shows variation in the degree of regret across the twelve schools attended by study respondents. On average, young people who had attended working-class schools were most likely to regret their choices while those who had attended middle-

[18] The wording of the question was: "Looking back if you were free to choose again would you take the same pathway (education, training or job)?".

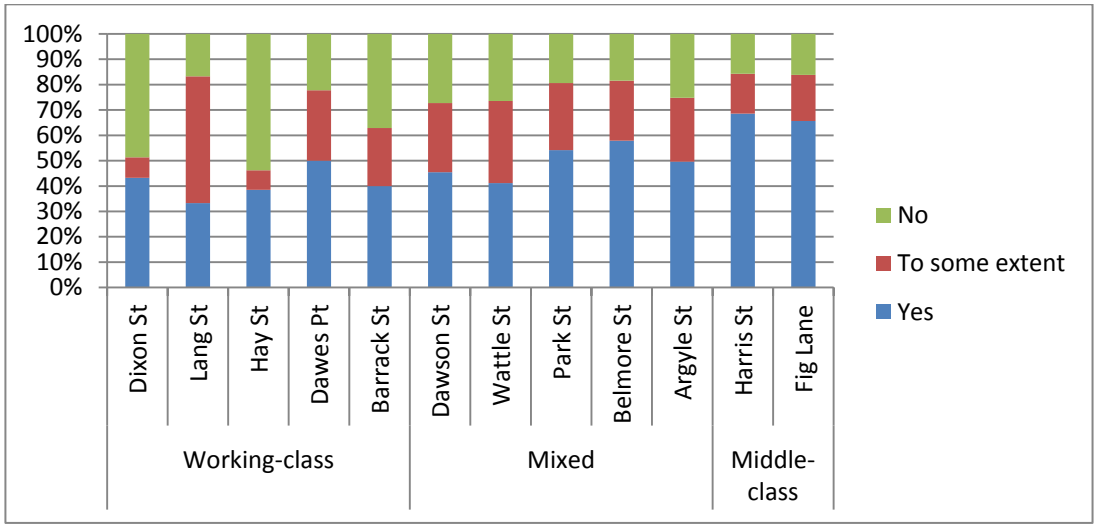
class schools were least likely to do so (Figure 5.10). However, between-school differences were not entirely due to social class mix, most likely reflecting differences in satisfaction with guidance (see Chapter 4) and the availability of employment opportunities in the local area. Leavers with SEN were more polarised than other leavers, being less likely to say they partially regretted their choices. Thus, 63 per cent of those with SEN would take the same pathway compared with 52 per cent of their peers; at the same time, the SEN group were somewhat more likely to completely regret their choices (28 per cent compared with 23 per cent). Regret was strongly related to Leaving Certificate achievement (Figure 5.11). Thirty-seven per cent of leavers in the lowest quintile (fifth) of Leaving Certificate grades would not choose the same pathway again compared to just 6 per cent of those in the top grade quintile. Leavers who had taken the LCA programme had similar levels of regret to the lowest-performing LCE/LCVP group. It is clear, therefore, that grades play an important role for young people in accessing a valued pathway.

FIGURE 5.9 Choose Same Pathway by Social Class Background



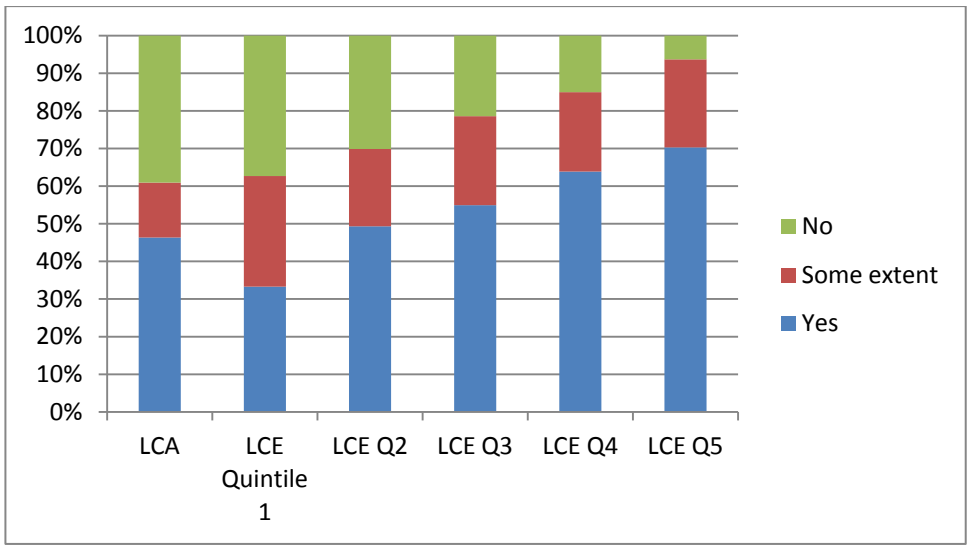
Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 5.10 Choose Same Pathway by School Attended



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 5.11 Choose Same Pathway by Leaving Certificate Achievement



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Young people who would not choose the same pathway again were somewhat more dissatisfied in hindsight with the guidance information they received in school (42 per cent compared with 32 per cent of those who would choose the same pathway). At the time they were in sixth year, these young people were equally satisfied with guidance classes but were somewhat more likely to be critical of individual guidance sessions (24 per cent were dissatisfied compared with 16 per cent of those who would choose the same pathway again). The group who regretted their choices were also more likely to report in sixth year that they did not have enough information about post-school options (46 per cent compared with 34 per cent of those who would choose the same pathway). In addition, they were more likely to say that they would like to know more about

possible jobs and courses after leaving school. It is apparent, therefore, that information gleaned at school plays at least some role in facilitating young people in making choices they will not later regret. The extent to which other factors play a part in regretting the pathways taken will be explored below by drawing on the in-depth interviews with young people.

The analyses so far have looked at how regrets vary by specific characteristics. Multilevel modelling was used to look at the simultaneous impact of a number of background factors on regretting the pathway chosen. Respondents who would not take the same route or would take the same route only 'to some extent' are contrasted against those who would choose the same pathway again. Table 5.2 shows that the social class differences shown in Figure 5.9 are mostly mediated through educational achievement but middle-class (salariat) and intermediate groups are less likely to regret their choices than similarly qualified working-class leavers (Model 1). Over and above the effect of individual social background, young people who had attended a middle-class school are less likely to regret their choices than other leavers. There are few consistent differences by gender or immigrant status. Those with special educational needs are somewhat less likely to say they would take the same pathway again but these patterns should be interpreted with caution due to the small size of the group. Young people who express dissatisfaction with guidance while at school are significantly more likely to say that they would not take the same pathway again.

Educational achievement emerges as a particularly strong influence; those who had achieved high Leaving Certificate grades are much less likely to regret the pathways they had taken (Model 1). Educational qualifications appear to operate as a way of securing a preferred post-school pathway as the direct effects of education are reduced in Model 2 when the main post-school route is entered. In keeping with the descriptive analyses presented above, there are significant differences by the actual pathway pursued. Labour market entrants are much more likely than higher education entrants to regret their pathway either entirely or 'to some extent'. Those who pursued PLC courses are more likely to express regrets than HE entrants, a pattern that is more marked for those who did not progress onto further study after leaving their PLC course. Apprentices have broadly similar views to HE entrants in terms of the likelihood of regretting the pathway taken.

TABLE 5.2 Multilevel Model of Factors Influencing Whether Would Choose Pathway Again

	Model 1 (Background)		Model 2 (Background and Pathway)	
	To some extent	No	To some extent	No
Constant	0.200	0.453	-0.425	-0.492
Male	0.158	-0.345	0.247	-0.185
Social class:				
Salariat	-0.417±	-0.190	-0.411±	-0.178
Intermediate	-0.650**	-0.104	-0.613*	-0.062
Unknown	-0.349	-0.279	-0.272	-0.154
(Base: Working class)				
SEN	-0.821±	-0.026	-0.858±	-0.118
Immigrant	-0.487	-0.402	-0.440	-0.304
Dissatisfied with school-based guidance	0.147	0.549*	0.131	0.522*
Class mix of school:				
Working-class	-0.078	-0.023	-0.151	-0.169
Middle-class	-0.432±	-0.698*	-0.373	-0.589*
(Base: Mixed)				
Educational achievement:				
LCA	-1.206	-0.393	-1.327±	-0.485
LCE quintile 2	-0.772*	-0.672*	-0.576±	-0.312
LCE quintile 3	-0.589±	-1.074**	-0.098	-0.376
LCE quintile 4	-0.906**	-1.572***	-0.368	-0.782
LCE quintile 5	-0.846*	-2.444***	-0.287	-1.639 ***
(Base: LCE quintile 1)				
Post-school pathway:				
LM entrant			0.743*	1.186***
Apprenticeship			0.158	0.053
PLC non-progression			0.758*	0.946**
PLC progression			0.331	0.815*
(Base: Higher education)				
		719 young people within 12 schools		

Note: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10.

The in-depth interviews with a subset of the cohort of young people provided more detailed insights into the factors shaping these feelings of regret. Many young people were happy with the pathway they had chosen and would opt for the same trajectory if they could select again. Thus Catherine reported being very pleased with her time in college:

> I really have enjoyed my time being there. So yeah, I'm glad I made the choices that I did. (Catherine, Harris Street, PLC)

Anthony was also happy with how 'things worked out' for him with regard to his chosen higher education course:

> No, I don't think I would have done anything differently with regards to changing the course, I was very happy with the way things worked out. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)

Although Sandra described her Arts degree as a 'jump up' (see Chapter 6) from school, she was interested in the subjects she had chosen. Dermot and Thomas were also happy with their higher education courses but in hindsight would have gone straight to college instead of taking a 'year out':

> So maybe I should have just got it out of the way rather than taking a break and going straight into it. But other than that I'm happy with the course I chose. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

Even though she was unemployed at the time of the interview, Niamh had no regrets about not going to college and thought that things had worked out as she had planned:

> College-wise no, I've no regrets there, I'm glad I went to FÁS and I'm glad I did FÁS. I'm glad I went straight into work and all that and I think probably everything kind of worked out the way I wanted it to and had planned it to. So no I wouldn't really have to change anything. No, I'm happy. (Niamh, Belmore Street, unemployed after initial spell in employment)

Others were dissatisfied with the course they had chosen. Robert, who had attended a working-class school (Lang Street), started a higher education course in ICT because of his long-standing interest in the subject (see Chapter 4). However, he was disappointed with the course content, finding it different to what he had anticipated. He soon lost interest, leading to a decision to leave the course after first year:

> [I] really like computers but I thought I'd like it but that's all coding and stuff but I like the more graphics and creative side of computers. I lasted a year like and then I dropped out ... I just didn't like ... some of the classes I was taking, because they just didn't interest me, all these kind of doing algorithms and all this stuff and I just didn't like them ... It was just more sitting down, doing the work. I just couldn't imagine myself doing this for another three years and then doing it for the rest of my life. ... It bored me a bit like ... I thought it'd be a bit more fun. (Robert, Lang Street, incomplete higher education)

Seamus, who had attended a middle-class school (Fig Lane), disliked his engineering course because of the workload, the institution and the fact that none of his friends were attending the same college. Personal circumstances eventually prompted his withdrawal from higher education; he later embarked on an Arts degree and was doing a Master's (in an unrelated area) at the time of the interview. Patrick had been disengaged in school but continued on to a further education course. He dropped out of the course because he was feeling unmotivated and finding it hard to combine study with part-time work:

> I just didn't like getting up in the morning and whatever and going to work in the evening I was too tired, that was it like, you know. I'd no interest in it [the course] really, I just done it for the sake of it, like you know. (Patrick, Park Street, incomplete FE, employed)

Chapter 6 discusses how young people experience the transition to higher education in greater detail.

Some of those who had gone directly into the labour market regretted not going on to college, especially in light of the economic downturn which constrained their labour market opportunities:

> If someone had of said to me how things are going to be turn out, like exactly how they would turn out, I would have definitely gone to college straight away after school and tried to finish it, even just to have something behind you. (Brian, Dawes Point, unemployed)

Some of the young people did not regret the pathway they had taken so much as the lack of options open to them on leaving school, which they largely attributed to not having studied hard enough to achieve good grades. When asked whether, in hindsight, they would do anything differently, several interviewees wished that they had put more effort into their schoolwork:

> I suppose if I could look back and say just work harder in school and just get a better grade in your Leaving Cert just in case, you know, just to have, I probably would have but I don't know if I would have listened to myself anyway (laughs), I probably would know better at the time. (Rosemary, Harris Street, employed)

Moira adopted a similar perspective to Rosemary; having not taken school seriously at the time, her results in the Leaving Certificate exams were poor and left her with only limited options:

> Like when I was in school, when we were at the point of doing the Leaving Cert and doing the CAOs and all, I was a bit of a messer in school and I

> didn't, I didn't take it seriously. Like if I could go back I would have taken it more seriously, you know, like I didn't do that well in my Leaving Cert, so it didn't give me a lot of options. ... Well I probably would have tried harder, if I could I probably would have gone back to school, gone back in time into school and worked harder. I would have liked to have done maybe, gone through the whole college thing and got a degree. (Moira, Harris Street, employed)

However, she qualified her regret at not going on to college by referring to the lack of job opportunities open to her peers who have degrees; she herself muses as to whether this is just an 'excuse' to justify to herself not having gone on to higher education.

> But then in a way, probably because I'm in my position, the position I'm in now, I look, and go well, at my friends, and go you may have a degree but what are you going to do, you can't get a job, which is probably my excuse for not doing college. (Moira, Harris Street, employed)

Reflecting on their experiences, Bridget and Karen would also have changed certain things about the decisions they had made. Karen wished that she had worked harder while at school in order to obtain better results, enabling her to have a greater number of options open to her after finishing school. Rather than taking a PLC course first, she would have preferred to go straight to the Institute of Technology of her choice:

> I probably would [have] waited and gone on to one of the colleges in one of the cities. ... Probably would have put more effort in secondary school, but I still, I don't think that would have made any difference for me, in what I wanted to do. I just would have had more options, like I would have had a higher mark, so I would have got more, you know, courses. (Karen, Belmore Street, further and higher education)

Bridget regretted not continuing on to degree level after having finished her PLC course. At the same time, she felt that the PLC qualification was an advantage and improved her employment situation vis-à-vis her peers.

> I would like to think that I've gone on to [the Institute of Technology], you know, and this course was finished. Finished the degree and had that, I'd like to think I would have done that, you know had I been more interested in stuff like that. Where I would never regret doing the two years, never ... I didn't want to leave school and just be doing that, because I look at a lot of girls I was in school with and they've nothing, they've no job. (Bridget, Barrack Street, PLC)

Several young people, despite feeling they would have chosen differently in hindsight, actively rejected characterising their perspective as one of 'regret'. Talking about his experiences, Conall felt, that while the college experience had been challenging for him, it had been a useful experience and enhanced his resilience:

> Actually, I've been thinking about this for many, many years and I genuinely don't think I would [do things differently]. ... It certainly has been a challenging one anyway, a challenging couple of years but, you know, it's given me kind of a lot of experiences to draw off of and it kind of gives me a bit more strength to be able to handle things. So honestly no I wouldn't [change anything]. (Conall, Lang Street, higher education)

Elaine did not enjoy her experience in college but is happy to have a qualification that may make it easier for her to get a job:

> I probably didn't enjoy college as much as I would have liked to, but I'm happy with it now because there's loads of job opportunities and I got to do four years in college and I'm completely qualified. So I'm happy that I didn't go working [immediately after leaving school]. (Elaine, Belmore Street, higher education)

Having finished her science degree, Brigid is now thinking of taking a different degree (see below). However, she does not regret her initial pathway, given her indecision about what course to take and the fact that a science degree does enhance her employment opportunities:

> I'm kind of glad I did it because I didn't really know specifically what I wanted to do so this was general and that was probably the best decision. ... Yeah, if I had known then, yeah, but I didn't know then, but if I was going back in I probably would have done science again because I didn't know, I didn't look into it. ... It's a good plan B, because now the recession and all that chemistry is probably one of the more safer things, because like pharmaceutical and stuff. (Brigid, Harris Street, higher education)

Carol argued that she never regrets anything and although she did not enjoy her time in college, the experience made her realise that this is not what she wants to do in future, with a similar sentiment expressed by Deirdre.

> No, I never regret anything that I ever do. I put everything down to life experience, like ... it's going to be something you can talk about. I don't even regret college and I hated it but I don't regret it. I don't regret any second of it, while it made me know that I don't want to do that. (Carol, Harris Street, higher education)

> I'm still glad I went and did it [beauty therapy course] because I always would have been wondering about it but it just wasn't for me. (Deirdre, Harris Street, employed)

The experience of many of the young people interviewed shows the difficulty in viewing post-school transitions as a linear track from school to college and into employment. Several took courses which proved different from what they anticipated, some were unsure about what to do while others discovered new interests as they grew older. Clodagh was adamant that she would not go to college without being sure of her desired path. She sometimes felt 'guilty' or 'a bit disappointed' about her resulting lack of career direction. However, she eloquently contrasted her situation with that of her peers who, having finished higher education, found themselves unsure about their own direction:

> I'm very aware of a vast amount of my friends and people I know that are my age that are completely unhappy and more torn or lost than I am. ... They've come out with their full qualifications and ... for the last year haven't been able to get a job with these at all. And then some of them it's just realising that this actually isn't what they wanted to do and it took them to stand in their robe and get pictures with their parents to realise that I don't want to go out and actually look for a job in this sector. (Clodagh, Harris Street, unemployed)

In a similar vein, Ronan, who has just completed a postgraduate degree in business, a choice at least partly driven by his mother's preferences (see Chapter 4), feels it is too 'late' for him to pursue a new-found interest in science:

> I suppose it's a bit late to be talking about it now but I suppose let's say, let's say when I was in secondary school ... I never would have thought about doing something like medicine ... that would have been nowhere near anything I was interested in. But you know, I suppose in the last maybe couple, couple of years, I've developed much more of an interest in science and kind of areas like that. ... As you get older you kind of start to kind of realise what, what sort of things you are interested in and what you aren't so you know, I think maybe, maybe I would have made a different choice alright but I suppose it's a bit late to be saying that now. ... I think I probably was a bit immature making decisions, you know, I didn't really know much about the world or, or things that, or even myself at the time. (Ronan, Park Street, further and higher education)

In sum, regrets among the young people interviewed centred on their courses being different from what they had anticipated, realising that they did not want to seek employment in their field of study, and not being able to secure employment because of the difficult economic context. In addition, some young people regretted not studying while at school because of the lack of opportunities open to them on account of poor Leaving Certificate grades.

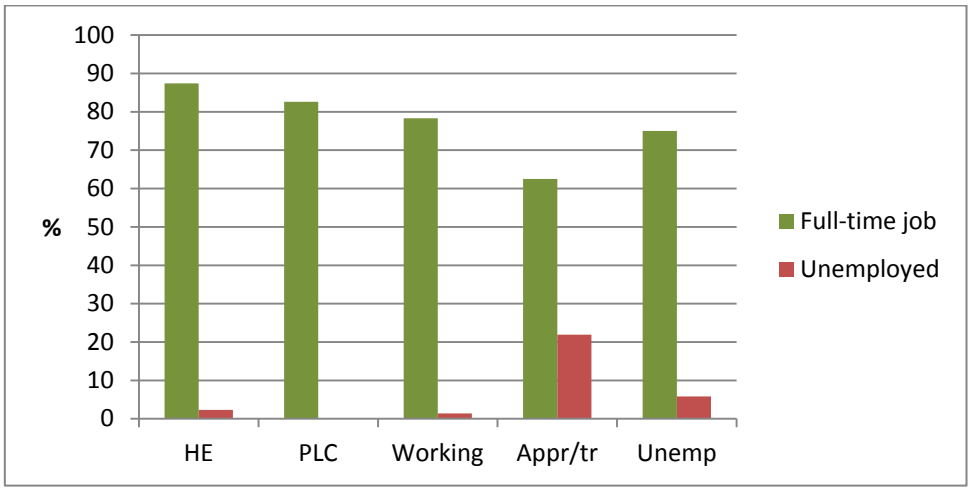
5.3 EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Young people were asked about two aspects of their expectations for the future: what they expected their employment status to be in five years' time, and whether they were likely to be living in Ireland in five years' time. Over four-fifths (81 per cent) of the leavers expected to be in full-time employment in the future while a further 4 per cent expected to be in a part-time job; 8 per cent expected to be in education/training, 5 per cent looking after their family, 4 per cent unemployed while 11 per cent expected to be 'doing something else'.

Expectations for the future did not vary markedly by gender or social background characteristics. However, young men were more likely to expect to be unemployed (5 per cent compared with 2 per cent) than young women. Those who had attended working-class schools were more likely to expect to be unemployed in the future (8 per cent compared with 3 per cent of those from mixed or middle-class schools). Leavers with special educational needs were less likely to expect to be in a full-time job (66 per cent compared with 82 per cent) and somewhat more likely to expect to be unemployed (8 per cent compared with 3 per cent) or 'doing something else' (21 per cent compared with 10 per cent). Immigrant students were more likely to expect to be looking after their family in the future (15 per cent compared with 3 per cent) as were those who had taken the LCA programme (15 per cent compared with 4 per cent) and those in the lowest-performing LCE/LCVP group (12 per cent compared with 1-4 per cent of other groups).

Expectations for the future were found to vary significantly by young people's status at the time of the survey (Figure 5.12). Those in higher education were more likely to expect to be in full-time employment in five years' time than the other groups. Furthermore, those who were on apprenticeships/training schemes were most likely to expect to be unemployed in the future.

FIGURE 5.12 Expect to be in Full-Time Employment or Unemployed by Status at Time of Survey



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

TABLE 5.3 Multilevel Models of Factors Influencing Likelihood of Emigration

	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	-0.308	-0.736
Male	0.136	0.238
Social class:		
Salariat	0.295	0.301
Intermediate	-0.271	-0.195
Unknown	-0.291	-0.231
(Base: Working class)		
SEN	-0.276	-0.289
Immigrant	0.495±	0.506±
Class mix of school:		
Working-class	-0.384	-0.493±
Middle-class	0.159	0.288
(Base: Mixed)		
Educational achievement:		
LCA	-0.524	-0.380
LCE grade (centred on mean)	0.010	0.012
Dissatisfaction with current:		
Situation		0.487*
Financial well-being		0.475*
	526 young people within 12 schools	

Note: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10.

Over half (57 per cent) of the leavers surveyed felt it was 'likely' or 'very likely' that they would be living in Ireland in five years' time; 30 per cent felt it was 'unlikely' and a further 13 per cent considered it very unlikely. Table 5.3 looks at the factors associated with the likelihood of emigration, combining those who consider it 'very unlikely' and 'unlikely' that they will be living in Ireland in five years' time. There is very little systematic variation by background characteristics, indicating that the prospect of emigration is salient across different groups of young people. The exception is the immigrant group, who are significantly more likely to feel they will be living outside Ireland in the future. Likelihood of emigration does not vary by the type of Leaving Certificate programme or the grades received. Model 2 shows that the perceived likelihood of emigration is largely driven by dissatisfaction with the current situation, both in terms of overall situation and financial well-being. Alternative models (not shown here) indicate that actual status at the time of the survey in terms of whether young people are studying, working or unemployed has little systematic relationship with emigration intentions. Rather it is young people's perceptions of the quality of that situation that drives their intentions. Taking account of dissatisfaction

with their current situation, young people who attended working-class schools are less likely to intend to emigrate than other groups. This may reflect the findings in Chapter 4 that many young people from working-class areas are reluctant to leave their local community, deciding to remain within this 'comfort zone'.

The in-depth interviews with young people yielded further insights into their plans for the future. Talking about their hopes for the future, most young people reported that they aspired to be in a (good) job:

> I hope to be employed (laughs), you know, kind of a few steps ahead of where I am now I suppose you know, the career ladder if that makes any sense. ... And just enjoying my work and stuff like that I suppose. (Denise, Harris Street, higher education, currently on internship)
>
> Having a good position in a job, in an organisation somewhere, you know, please God anyway.
>
> Interviewer: And what do you need for that to happen then?
>
> Well just finish my degree ... and then just try, put applications out there and go for an interview, wear a nice suit and sell myself and hopefully they like what they see, you know. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

However, many young people were uncertain about the likelihood of obtaining secure employment as they had finished full-time education at a time of recession:

> I think people when they finish school they expect to be in some job or like some pay, you know. If it doesn't fall through, then you're crushed like. (Brendan, Lang Street, unemployed)
>
> It's very frustrating and I know just not for myself but for others to just find work. ... It's horrible to go out, you know, and obviously compete against people that have maybe ten years' experience ahead of you ... and that are ... going to know the industry inside out. (Denise, Harris Street, higher education, currently on internship)

The exceptions to this pattern were Conall and Thomas, both of whom felt that they had obtained qualifications in areas (specialist engineering and pharmaceutical science respectively) which enhanced their employment prospects:

> I'm very lucky in the sense that I've a lot of doors open at the moment. It's a broad industry and there is an awful lot of work out there for it. (Conall, Lang Street, higher education)

> It seems to be quite strong at the moment, let's say the medical sector. My brother is actually in [a related company] ... so he said it's quite strong and they're always looking to take on people. ... If I do well enough, let's say, in the work experience, I'm sure that they would consider it anyways, you know because it is quite a good degree to have. (Thomas, Park Street, higher education)

Several interviewees were thinking about continuing their education to postgraduate level on completion of their degrees. On the part of Anthony and Sandra, for example, such a move was motivated by the desire to obtain a qualification to enhance their long-term prospects and a way of dealing with an uncertain labour market ('to keep me going', Anthony, Park Street, higher education). For others, a return to education was motivated by a desire to change career direction. Having taken a science degree, Brigid (Harris Street) intended to take a 'year out' before returning to take an undergraduate degree in an unrelated subject. Those who had entered the labour market directly upon leaving school were less likely than the higher education group to have definite plans for further study. However, Niamh, who had previously taken a FÁS hairdressing course but was unemployed at the time of the interview, was considering taking a course in secretarial skills:

> I was thinking of going and doing a secretarial course because I've always had that at the back of my mind ... and my Dad was saying to me like why don't you just go and do it and you'll have two skills behind you. So I was thinking of going back then as a mature student so I thought then it would be handier, even though I couldn't see me doing college. (Niamh, Belmore Street, unemployed)

However, Deirdre, who had previously taken a PLC course and was working in an unrelated area at the time of the interview, pointed to the potential difficulties of adjusting to college life after having been working for a while:

> I am thinking about going back to college. [But] ... I don't think I can actually go back to college full time after working, you know, I think that would be very hard. Maybe I might do a night course or do something like that to change … More training but in a different field, in something completely different. (Deirdre, Harris Street, PLC)

Many of the interviewees reporting having peers who had emigrated:

> All my friends are gone now ... I have like no friends left in this country, they're gone. (Deirdre, Harris Street, PLC)

In many cases, this emigration was seen as temporary, motivated by the desire to travel and work but constrained by immigration policies:

> They haven't emigrated with a view of going straight into jobs or you know like really good jobs. They've emigrated really just for the sake of going over to Australia and having fun basically. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)

However, a small number of interviewees referred to friends who had emigrated on a more permanent basis, with the collapse of the construction industry prompting some of those on apprenticeships to leave the country.

A number of young people reported that they were open to the prospect of emigration if employment was not available for them in Ireland:

> I have thought about it. ... To be honest for me at the moment it depends on the work. (Denise, Harris Street, higher education, on internship)

Thomas, although he felt he had good employment prospects in Ireland (see above), would consider moving abroad in order to obtain further opportunities:

> I'd have no problem let's say if they wanted me to go somewhere where there's job opportunities in another country, let's say America, Australia, Canada. I'd have no problem taking them, you know, because when you're young and you're not tied down you might as well take the opportunities as they come, if they come, you know. (Thomas, Park Street, higher education)

Fiona, who was about to finish her degree, planned to get some experience in Ireland before emigrating:

> The economy, for now, probably it will get better, but I don't know how long that might take. But it's just the thing of like I want to see the world like, I want to see other places other than here and with my profession [nursing], I think it will be easier. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

Among the interviewees, only Elaine reported having definite plans to emigrate at the time of the interview:

> There's a group of us going to England to work for a year. ... So we decided we'd just work for the first year in England because the money is an awful lot better and we're young and it's something different, and we can all kind of go together and figure it out together. (Elaine, Belmore Street, higher education)

Other young people did not consider emigration as a viable option, partly because of the temporary nature of available visas and also because of financial constraints:

> It's far away [Australia, New Zealand], it's only an escape, you only escape for a year and then you've to come back like unless you're sponsored which

> is highly unlikely for someone with no degree or you know, experience. So I'd probably end up working in McDonalds, then immigration will boot me out. (Robert, Lang Street, incomplete higher education, unemployed)

An important factor in young people not wanting to emigrate was the strength of ties with friends and family. Patrick (Park Street, incomplete PLC, employee), for example, had been thinking about emigrating to Canada but reported that none of his friends were considering this option and 'I won't go over on my own ... I'd want to go over with friends'. Deirdre had moved abroad for a couple of months and 'hated it', describing herself as a 'real home bird':

> I'm kind of like, oh I tried going away and it doesn't work so I'm not going to bother again. (Deirdre, Harris Street, PLC, employee)

Similar sentiments were described by Siobhan and Niamh:

> I don't know about emigrating, but travelling, you know, when I'm finished college, travelling but not, I don't know about emigrating. I'm a home bird. (Siobhan, Belmore Street, further and higher education)

> I'd miss my father too much, oh I wouldn't be able to move away from my family. The family are my world. I wouldn't be able to move away from them, definitely not. (Niamh, Belmore Street, unemployed)

5.4 Conclusions

This chapter shows that middle-class young people are more likely to realise their goals and have fewer regrets about the pathway pursued, a pattern that was largely facilitated by their higher Leaving Certificate grades. Young people who entered the labour market directly upon leaving school have disproportionately experienced frustrated goals and have more regrets about their route. This is likely to be driven by their experience of unemployment and the quality of the work they could obtain, issues which are explored further in Chapter 7. In contrast, higher-performing students who went on to higher education as well as those who took apprenticeships are less likely to have regrets about the pathway pursued. For many young people, PLC courses appear to have been a compromise rather than a specific goal, especially where they did not go on to further study on completion.

School-based information and guidance are found to play at least some part in helping young people to avoid choices they will later regret since, for some, regrets centre on their courses not being what they anticipated. In some cases, this mismatch between expectations and reality culminated in young people not

completing their course. Others, however, only became aware later on that their field of study was ‘not for them’ even though they had completed their degrees.

The majority of the young people surveyed expect to be in full-time employment in five years’ time, but more than four in ten feel it is unlikely that they will be living in Ireland in the future. The likelihood of emigration is largely driven by dissatisfaction with their current situation and financial well-being, rather than by social background or educational factors.

Chapter 6

Transition to Post-School Education

6.1 Introduction

The issue of the extent to which second-level education adequately prepares young people for the kinds of teaching and learning experienced in further and higher education has been the subject of much policy debate (HEA, NCCA, 2011). However, there has been little empirical evidence on how the transition to post-school education and training is experienced by young people themselves. The *Leaving School in Ireland* study provides rich insights into these experiences, allowing us to link the nature of the transition to young people's earlier school experiences. Section 6.2 looks at young people's perceptions of the Junior and Leaving Certificate exams, highlighting the extent to which they felt they had benefited by the type of subjects and mode of assessment offered. Section 6.3 examines how young people characterise the transition while Section 6.4 explores the nature of any transition difficulties experienced. Section 6.5 considers patterns of course non-completion among the study participants.

6.2 Perceptions of the Junior and Leaving Certificate exams

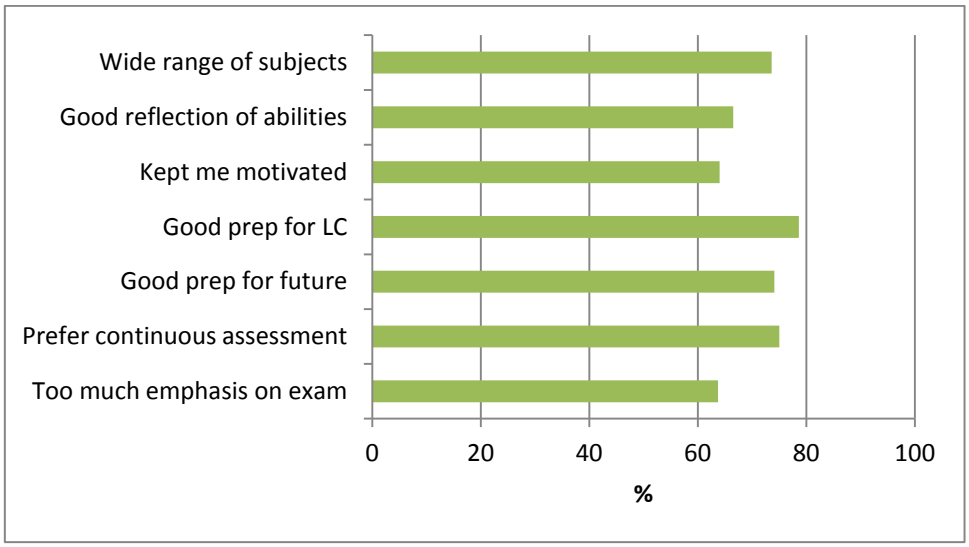
The *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study* documented the way in which attitudes to school changed as young people progressed through the school system (Smyth *et al.*, 2011b). In general, students contrasted the kinds of active teaching and learning that engaged them in schoolwork with the more teacher-centred methods (such as reading from the textbook and copying notes) which dominated in the exam years. By Leaving Certificate level, however, some students, particularly those aspiring to high points third-level courses, adopted a more instrumental approach, praising the kinds of teaching which was focused on 'what would come up in the exam'. The *Leaving School in Ireland* study provides an opportunity for young people to reflect back on their schooling in light of later experiences.

The school leavers were asked about their attitudes to the Junior and Leaving Certificate exams. Almost three-quarters (74 per cent) of the young people surveyed felt that they had benefited from a wide range of subjects at junior cycle level (Figure 6.1), a pattern that did not vary by gender or social class background. Those who had attended middle-class schools were somewhat more critical of the range of subjects than other groups (67 per cent compared with 78

per cent in working-class schools and 75 per cent in mixed schools). Within middle-class schools, young people with a special educational need were somewhat less likely to report that they had benefited from a wide range of subjects but this difference is not apparent in other school types.

A majority (64 per cent) of leavers considered that the presence of the Junior Certificate exam had kept them motivated in relation to schoolwork, with female students more likely to feel the exam played a role in motivating them (71 per cent compared with 56 per cent of males). Around three-quarters described the exam as a good preparation for the future (74 per cent) and for the Leaving Certificate exam (79 per cent). Two-thirds considered that their Junior Certificate exam results had been a good reflection of their abilities. The attitudes reported were somewhat contradictory. While a significant proportion described the Junior Certificate exam as a good preparation for the future, a majority were also critical of the exam-based nature of the assessment: three-quarters would have preferred continuous assessment while 64 per cent felt that there had been too much emphasis on the exam. This is not perhaps surprising given that, compared to early school leavers, this group of young people have done quite well in the existing system but at the same time does indicate a criticism of exam-based assessment. Views on there being an over-emphasis on the exam were apparent across gender and social groups but working-class leavers were more strongly in favour of continuous assessment than their middle-class peers (79 per cent compared with 67 per cent). Views on the junior cycle exam did not vary significantly by whether young people had a special educational need or not. Attitudes to the junior cycle exam did not vary markedly by the pathway young people had taken on leaving school.

FIGURE 6.1 Attitudes to the Junior Certificate Examination



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

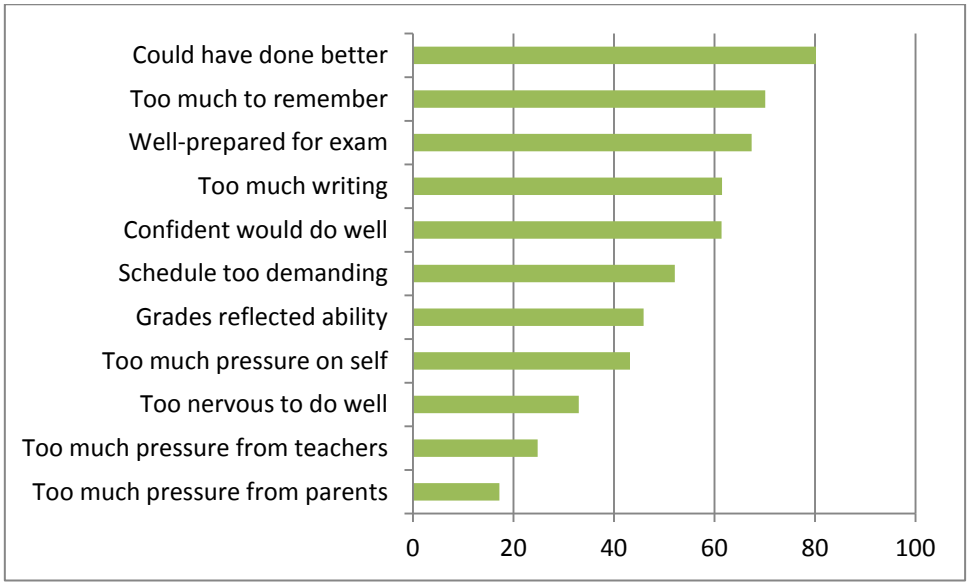
The school leavers were also asked about their perceptions of the Leaving Certificate exam. As with the Junior Certificate exam, young people had mixed views about the Leaving Certificate. Two-thirds of the school leavers felt they were well-prepared for the exam and 61 per cent had been confident that they would do well. Those from middle-class and intermediate social groups were more likely to feel well-prepared for the exam (75 per cent doing so compared with 65 per cent of working-class groups and 56 per cent of the class unknown group). However, less than half (46 per cent) of all leavers felt that their grades had reflected their ability and four-fifths considered that they could have done better. Attitudes to the exam did not vary significantly by whether young people had a special educational need. However, the SEN group were somewhat less likely to feel that they could have done better in the Leaving Certificate exam (72 per cent compared with 81 per cent).

In terms of the exam itself, the majority (70 per cent) felt there was too much to remember and 62 per cent felt there was too much writing, with over half (52 per cent) finding the exam schedule too demanding. Those in middle-class schools were more likely to find the exam schedule too demanding (64 per cent compared with 52 per cent in mixed schools and 37 per cent in working-class schools), most likely reflecting the larger number of higher level subjects taken. Those who had attended middle-class or mixed schools were also more likely to feel that there was too much to remember and too much writing compared to those who attended working-class schools. In keeping with their responses in sixth year (Smyth *et al*., 2012), pressure was seen as coming from the young person themselves, with 43 per cent feeling that they had put 'too much pressure on myself', rather than from their teachers (25 per cent) or parents (17 per cent). Young women were more likely to report putting themselves under too much pressure (52 per cent compared with 33 per cent of males) as were immigrant students (60 per cent compared with 41 per cent). Those whose parents had degrees were somewhat more likely to report parental pressure than other young people. A third of the school leavers felt that they had been too nervous to do well in the exam, with this being more prevalent among young women (39 per cent compared with 26 per cent), again in keeping with the higher stress levels found among female students in sixth year.

In contrast to the lack of variation in attitudes to the Junior Certificate, views on the Leaving Certificate exam varied to some extent by post-school pathway. HE entrants were more likely to feel that they were well prepared for the exam (Figure 6.3) and that they were confident they would do well. Only a minority of labour market entrants found the Leaving Certificate schedule too demanding compared to the majority of other groups, most likely reflecting differences in the

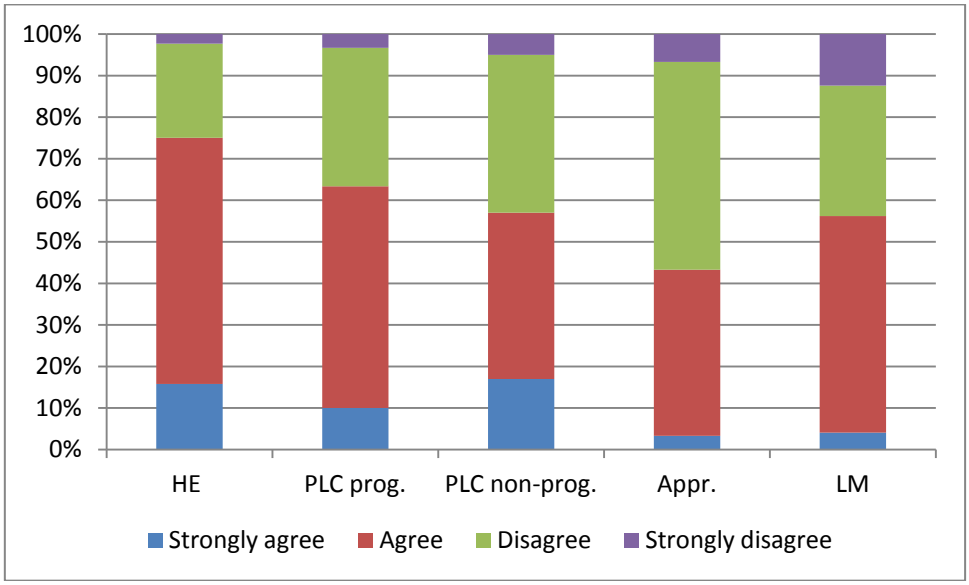
number of higher level subjects taken. Labour market entrants and apprentices were also less likely than PLC and HE entrants to report that they had put themselves under too much pressure.

FIGURE 6.2 Perceptions of the Leaving Certificate Examination (% strongly agree or agree)



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

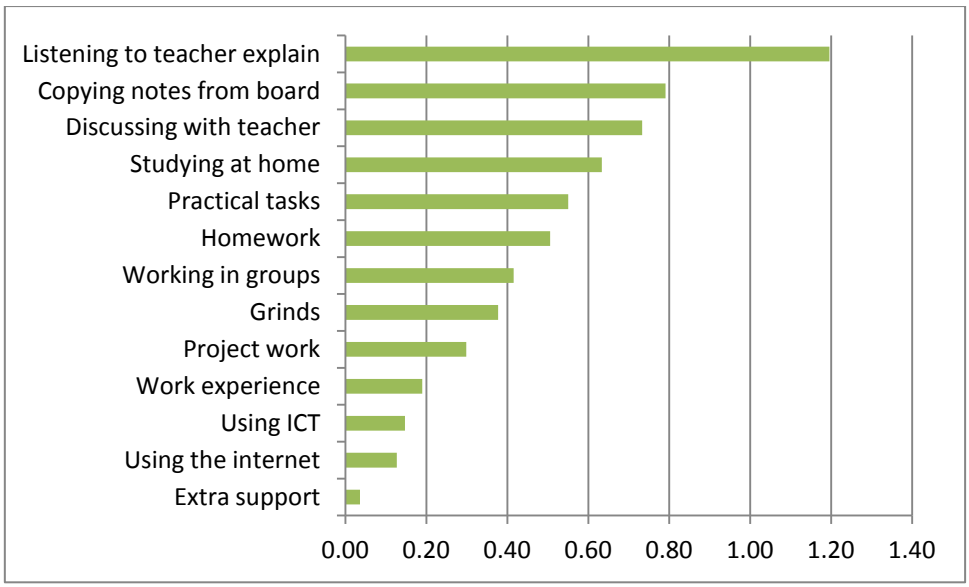
FIGURE 6.3 Extent to which School Leavers Feel they were Well Prepared for the Leaving Certificate Exam, by Main Post-School Pathway



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

The school leavers were asked about the perceived helpfulness of different forms of learning at school (Figure 6.4). It should be noted that while at school young people were more likely to experience teacher-centred approaches, such as copying notes from the board and the teacher reading from the textbook, with more interactive styles (such as group work and project work) being less prevalent, except for young people taking the LCA programme (Smyth *et al.*, 2011b). Reports on the approaches young people found most helpful must therefore be interpreted in the context of their direct experience of different methods. Among the leaver group, the most helpful approach was seen as listening to the teacher explain. This is consistent with reports throughout their schooling career, where young people valued clear explanation from teachers and the willingness to go over material that they did not understand. Copying notes from the board was also seen as helpful. Discussing topics with the teacher and practical tasks were highly rated by a number of young people but other interactive forms of learning such as group work and project work were not frequently mentioned.

FIGURE 6.4 Perceived Helpfulness of Different Approaches to Learning at School

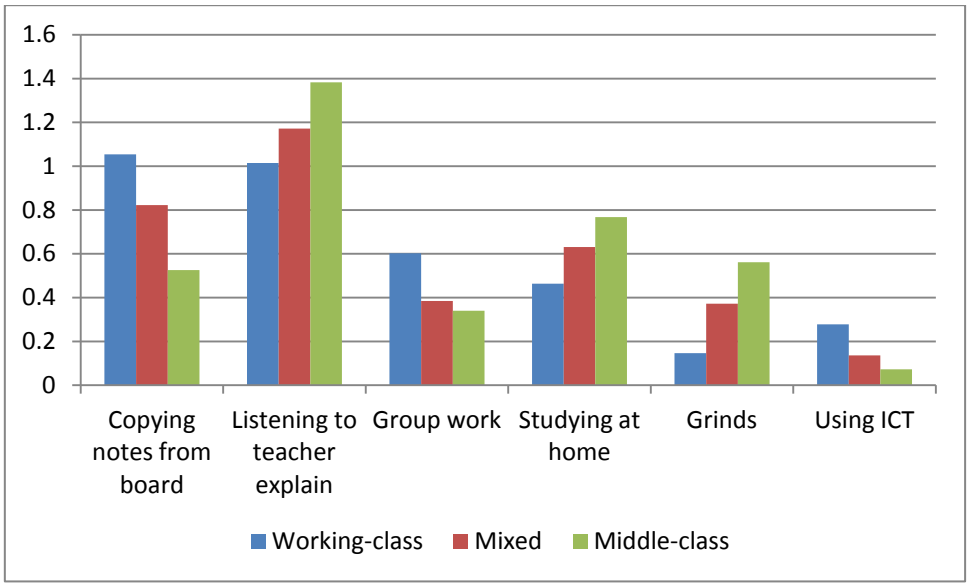


Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Some differences in learning styles were evident by gender, with females more likely to favour group work and private tuition ('grinds') and males more likely to rate project work and using the internet highly. Young people with a special educational need were more likely to find extra support from a resource/learning support teacher and/or a special needs assistant helpful and this group was also more likely to find doing homework or attending a homework club helpful. Young people from working-class or less educated families were somewhat more likely to report copying notes from the board helpful while middle-class leavers and

those with graduate parents were more likely to favour studying at home. Differences in preferred approaches to learning were also evident by school social mix (Figure 6.5). Those who had attended working-class schools were more likely to favour copying notes from the board, group work and using computers. In contrast, those who had attended middle-class schools rated listening to the teacher explain, studying at home and private tuition as more helpful. The extent to which these different forms of learning were used within further and higher education will be considered in Section 6.3 below.

FIGURE 6.5 Perceived Helpfulness of Different Approaches to Learning by School Social Mix

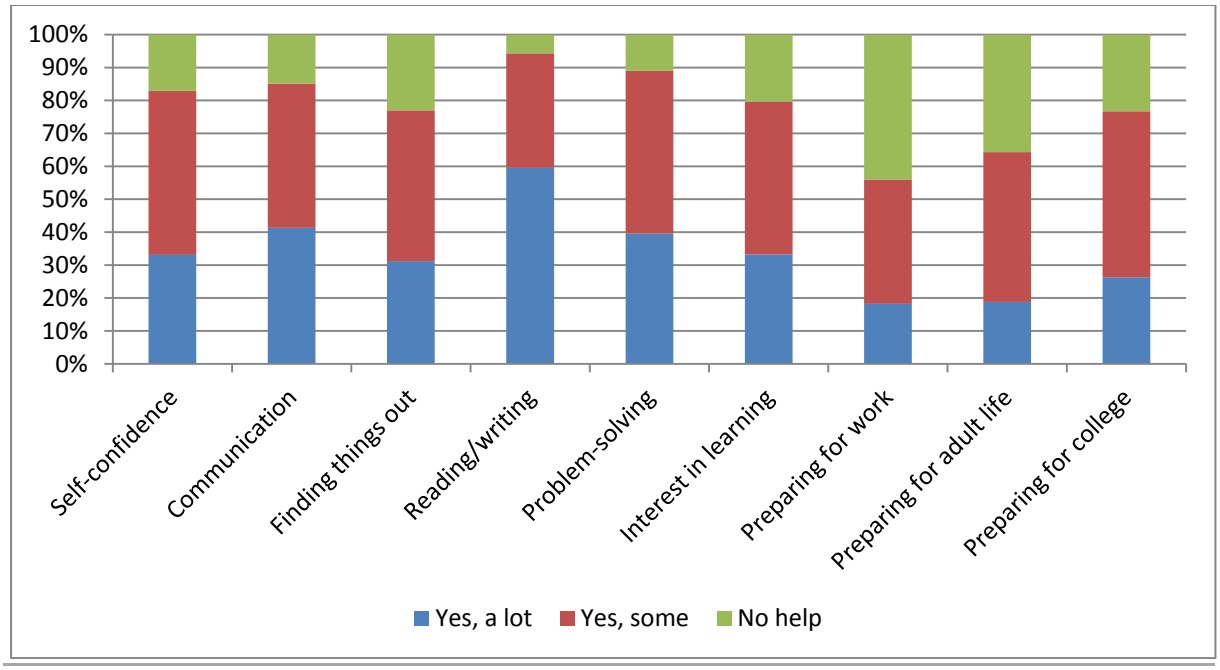


Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Young people were asked about whether their second-level education had benefited them in a number of ways. Three of these items directly referred to preparation for life after school – 'preparing me for the world of work', 'preparing me for adult life' and 'preparing me to study at college'. These items were asked of all respondents in order to assess the extent to which their education had channelled them into different kinds of post-school pathway. Figure 6.6 shows the responses on these items, comparing them to other perceived benefits of second-level education. It is evident that young people are more critical about whether second-level schooling prepared them for life after school than they are in relation to other aspects of personal development (such as increasing their self-confidence or improving their communication skills). Thus, 44 per cent of the sample felt that school was 'no help' in preparing for the world of work while 36 per cent felt it was 'no help' in preparing them for adult life. Young people were more positive about whether school had prepared them for college, with 23 per cent finding it 'no help' in this respect.

Attitudes to preparation for work did not vary by gender, social class background or having a special educational need. However, young women were more likely to feel that school had prepared them for adult life than young men; 41 per cent of men felt school had been 'no help' in this respect compared with 31 per cent of women. A gender difference is also evident in relation to preparing for college, with 30 per cent of men feeling it was 'no help' compared with 18 per cent of women. These gender differences were apparent even among young people attending the same school. LCA leavers were significantly more positive about the extent to which their second-level education had prepared them for the world of work; 57 per cent felt it had been 'a lot' of help compared with 16 per cent of LCE/LCVP leavers. LCA leavers were also more positive about the extent to which they had been prepared for adult life and for going on to college. Those who attended working-class schools were more likely to feel that school had prepared them for work (30 per cent finding it 'a lot' of help compared with 16 per cent in mixed schools and 13 per cent in middle-class schools), a difference that held regardless of the Leaving Certificate programme taken. A similar pattern is found in relation to perceived preparation for adult life, with those who had attended working-class schools having more positive views. When it comes to preparation for college, however, those who attended working-class schools were more critical than other leavers, with 30 per cent feeling school had been 'no help' compared with 23 per cent in socially mixed schools and 18 per cent in middle-class schools.

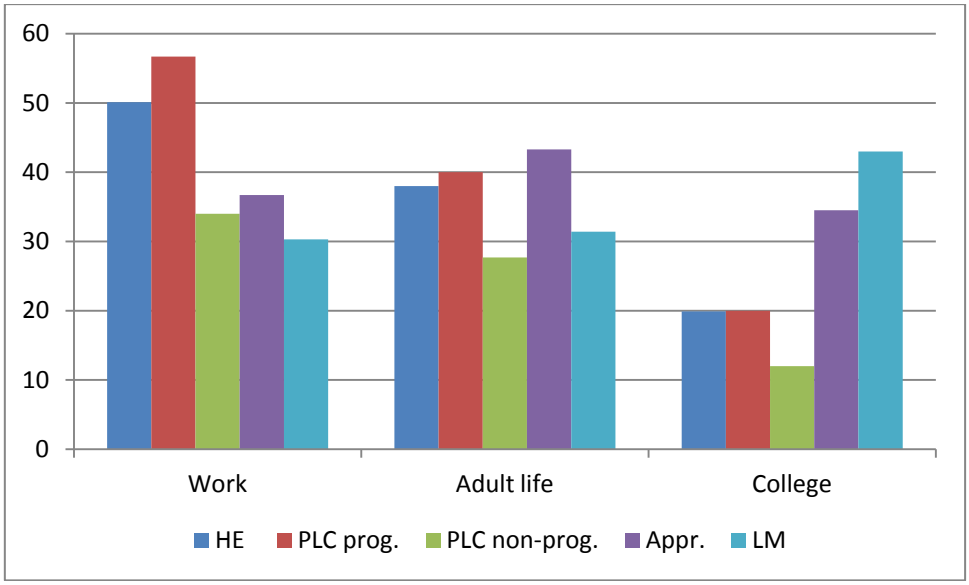
FIGURE 6.6 Perceived Benefits of Second-Level Education



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Significant differences in the perceived benefits of second-level education for preparation for life after school were evident according to the pathway young people had taken (Figure 6.7). Those who went on to higher education (either directly or indirectly through a PLC course) were more critical of the extent to which school had prepared them for work than those who entered the labour market or took a further education (PLC or apprenticeship) course. Those who entered the labour market directly and PLC entrants were also less critical of the extent to which they were prepared for adult life, though the between-group differences are much less marked than in the case of preparation for employment. Those who entered the labour market or took an apprenticeship were significantly more critical than the PLC or HE groups regarding preparation for going on to college.

FIGURE 6.7 Percentage Describing School as 'No Help' in Post-School Preparation



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

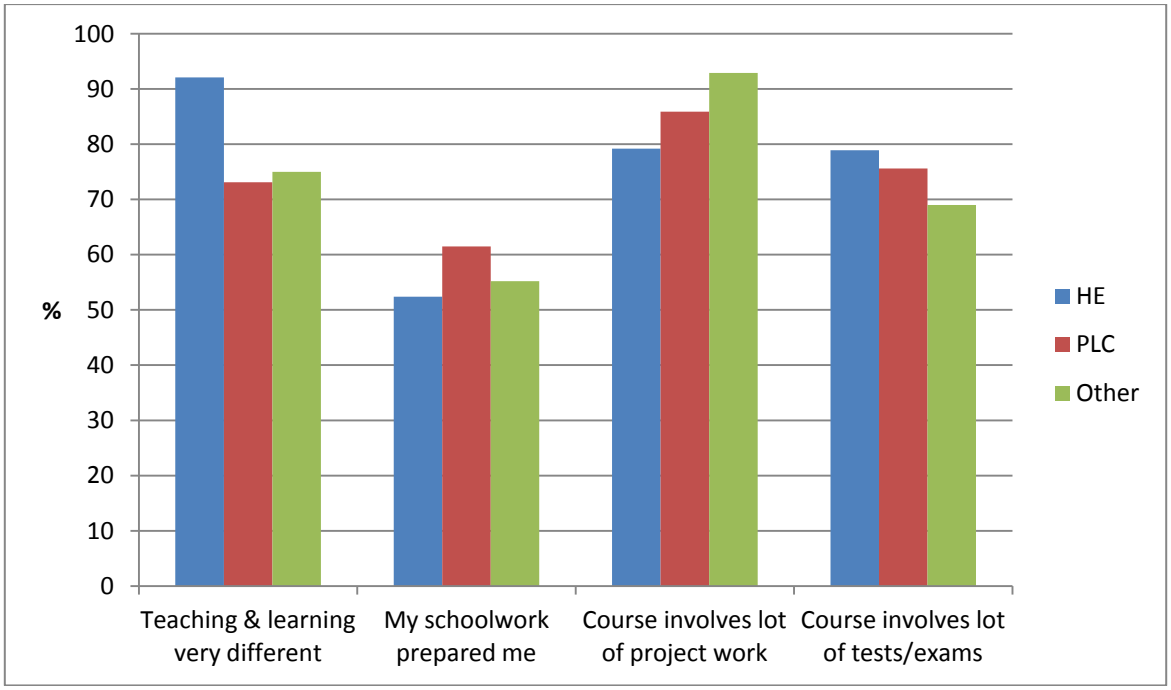
6.3 EXPERIENCE OF TRANSITION TO POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION

As part of the survey, school leavers who had taken a post-school education course were asked a series of detailed questions about their experiences of the transition to this form of education, including their level of preparedness, their experiences of the post-school course and meeting the financial demands of participation. Figure 6.8 illustrates their views on the nature of teaching and learning on their course and the course work. We differentiate between those who enrolled in higher education, those who participated in PLC courses and those who participated in other courses, including private colleges and State-provided training. A substantial majority indicate that the nature of teaching and learning on their course is very different to school. This is particularly the case for

participants in higher education, over 90 per cent of whom feel this to be the case. The nature of course work is also found to differ from school – 80 per cent of higher education course participants, 86 per cent of PLC participants and 92 per cent of other course participants agree that their course involves/involved a lot of project work. It is interesting that large numbers also indicate that their course involves a lot of tests and exams; in this case, participants in higher education courses are slightly more likely to hold this view.

The survey findings yield new insights into the extent to which young people feel that school prepares them for later study. School leavers who progressed to higher education were less likely to hold the view that their 'schoolwork prepared me for my studies'. Just over half of all school leavers who progressed to further study felt that second-level schooling prepared them for their course, with a slightly higher figure among PLC participants (62 per cent) as compared with higher education entrants (52 per cent).

FIGURE 6.8 Nature of Course; Percentage Who Agree



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

In the qualitative phase of the study, the majority of the interviewees felt that 'college' differed from school in many ways and it took them some time to adapt to the new environment. A number, like Sandra, commented on the different environment and their changed status:

> Just getting used to where you were and there was a lot of anxiety as to where, new classes and new, huge, huge change like, you're going from

> maybe being the top of your class in music and then going to this College where there's, you're insignificant basically, you know, in one area or something. (Sandra, Belmore Street, higher education)

Dermot spoke of the structure of the day, with periods of several hours between lectures, a substantial change that took time to adjust to and he only began to use this spare time productively as the year progressed:

> ...to be honest at the beginning of the year we didn't do anything really, we might even go for a game of pool or bring the football out to the field [during breaks in lectures] ... coming closer to exam times there would be nobody, the library is just full of people and that's when I like the timetable ... you're saying thank God we have a two-hour break, I need to get this assignment paper done. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

The larger scale of the post-school education setting was often an issue raised by young people, with larger class sizes in particular seen as a barrier to engaging with the content of the class and posing questions during the course of a class/lecture:

> ... in secondary like you can, in sixth year even, you can talk to teachers, you know. Lecturers like, you're going from a class of twenty-five, thirty to a classroom of sixty people, you know, and you're lost like. Like it's not like in school if you miss something you can just like put your hand up like. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

Despite the 'larger scale' some students did not perceive a big difference between school and post-school education, a pattern that was more typical among those who progressed to PLC courses:

> I think it was the exact same, they always talked about college like it's completely different, it's the same thing. You go to classes, you learn and you get tests and the tests can look the same ... you'd have five topics or four topics or whatever and get your question one ABC ... besides the fact that the college is massive and there's thousands of people walking around and you know, it's at a higher scale because there's more on the line to actually get a job and your degree out of it but besides that the structure is similar I think. (Brendan, Hay Street, PLC and unemployed)

Given the greater spread of PLC courses across both second-level schools and further education colleges, many school leavers in the qualitative sample enrolled in PLC courses at their original school or in the vicinity of their home. Hence, moving away from home was much less of an issue for PLC participants, making the transition a smoother one in some respects. The structure and nature of PLC courses also provided a more comparable experience to school. It became

increasingly clear that post-school education represented a more significant 'change' for HE entrants while many of those who progressed to PLC courses felt there was little difference in terms of the structure of the course:

> You know, the PLC course, the structure would have been quite similar to secondary school, you know, it wouldn't have been like a third level where there might have been a few hours here and a few hours there and that, the PLC course was pretty much, was pretty much kind of nine to four, nine to half three every day and that so it was kind of structured a bit similar. (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education)

Other aspects of the post-school education setting were commented upon by interviewees. For Anthony, the coeducational composition of the university represented a new and positive experience after single-sex second-level education.

> ... the mixed sex was going to be good for us because we'd been in an all boys school for five years and do you know it was better for our development as people, for our social skills that we actually were there. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education).

Across many interviews young people repeatedly alluded to the greater independence they gained in post-school education and, particularly in the higher education setting, the requirement for self-directed learning and taking responsibility for their learning. This formed a central theme across young people from all school contexts, although some important differences emerged in the way in which these transition differences were described and experienced. Overall, school leavers talked about the immediate change to taking responsibility for their work, which across the board represented one of the most significant changes in the transition to post-school education. In some cases this change was met with enthusiasm and satisfaction:

> The biggest difference was the fact that there's, there's really no one looking for you, you know what I mean, you're given your curriculum, you're given the assignments, you're told what to do, you're told when you need the, when the deadline is let's say, and then you're just left to your own devices and there's no one checking up on you, which is great, you know, I loved the independence of it all. (Conall, Hay Street, higher education)

However, more frequently the change in teaching and learning methodologies, in particular, represented a difficulty and something for which they felt ill-prepared and required a period of adjustment.

> Like I was saying about critical thinking like, in school you're learning for an exam, in college you're learning to think for yourself, it's just completely

> different. I don't think school really prepares you for it. (Sandra, Belmore Street, higher education)
>
> And then all of a sudden no one is making you do that, you're in college and it's up to you and at first when you're a bit more immature it's a harder thing to get to terms with because suddenly no one is making you sit down and do it, no one is coming after you for what you're supposed to be doing in your own time. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)
>
> So if you'd be missing lectures and if you'd be not reading the text in your own time, you will fall behind very quickly. And that actually did happen me for a good while now to be honest, because it's just a bit of a shock, it's harder to adapt to it than you'd be expecting because you're coming from doing such work every day to no one bothers you so. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)
>
> ... it was like you have to do the work for yourself. They're not going to chase up. I mean it's up to you if you want to be there ... if you're not willing to commit, it's on your own back whereas in school ... it's more like dictating ... you have to do this and you have to do that or you're being punished. (Denise, Harris Street, higher education)

As discussed further in the next section, some found the transition too difficult, failed exams and either dropped out or moved to a different course/institution. Thomas, for example, spoke at length about the independence and lack of monitoring in university which he felt did not suit him. Having failed his first year exams he enrolled in a course in an Institute of Technology, which he felt suited him better and entailed much greater monitoring, particularly of student attendance.

> [University] is different to [name of Institute of Technology] ... you can just go whenever you want and they didn't really know who you were and the attendance, so, I didn't get on too well there with my results so I went to [Institute of Technology], more disciplined **...** it was completely different, you know, you, at the start of each lecture they took your attendance, they knew who you were, they knew your name, there was smaller class sizes, you know, so it was much better experience and kind of, I was more motivated to do well in it because they kind of cared about you so you felt bad if you weren't going in you were like, you know, they expected you to turn up and you feel like you're going to disappoint them so you did make the effort to go in. (Thomas, Park Street, higher education)

Young people who came from working-class school contexts typically spoke about the transition as marking a move from being 'spoon-fed' in school to self-reliance

in post-school education; this kind of language was distinct to that of their counterparts from socio-economically mixed or middle-class settings. Conall, for example, felt that learning was not rewarded in the same way in higher education:

> I think we were kind of, to some extent, maybe spoon-fed might not be the right word but we were really, we were well looked after in that school. At least if you showed an interest in learning it was definitely returned and I think understanding like that doesn't happen once you get to the university side of it then, it can be quite I guess, not defeating, but it's just a different, a different way of learning and it's kind of difficult to adjust to it. (Conall, Hay Street, higher education)

Similarly, Fiona found the lack of direction and encouragement a difficulty in higher education and distinct from her second-level experience:

> ... there's a lot of self directed work compared to being in secondary school where you've got someone always behind you and saying, pushing you like 'you know you have to do this, you're in sixth year, your Leaving Cert is coming up', you know, pushing you all the time, whereas in College ... then they'll have like self-directing work and when you get that self-directing book what you don't realise is that you actually have to know it or you have to do it, you know, so that was a difference, sort of anyway, like I knew that I had to do it but I didn't take it as serious. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

Finally, Dermot spoke about being treated as a child in school and then as an adult on entry to higher education:

> Big change ... in school it's like you're spoon-fed, you know like everything is done for you. Like you're not children, like you're meant to be grown adults but it's still like, like they treat you as an adult when you get into college, you know, like if you missed work and you're out a day it's your business to go and find out or get notes off a colleague or a student in your class ... you're more responsible, you've to get your own stuff together. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

For some of the school leavers, one aspect of the more self-directed learning style that was particularly challenging was managing deadlines, again a skill that they felt school had not prepared them for.

> Well the Leaving Cert is the toughest exam I've had, but ... dealing with deadlines and stuff is completely different. Like in secondary it's just here you have the exams whereas if you are in college you could have three essays due in the same, within four days of each other. So you have to work around that. (Seamus, Fig Lane, PLC and higher education)

> We found out fast enough that it's kind of a continuous process of keeping yourself focused, it's not really something that's going to naturally happen. For some people it seems like it does but it's really a case of everyone individually just making sure that you're keeping on top of your work load yourself. So that was probably the biggest notion we had, that had to be shattered. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)

A few school leavers did feel well prepared for post-school education, but this was very much the minority perspective. One interviewee felt that school had prepared him for continuing his studies by 'giving a good education' (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education). Another young person noted that the support was often down to individual teachers and their commitment: 'It prepared me well, but I suppose I'd qualify that by saying a lot of it comes down to your individual teachers'. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)

Young people were also asked about the extent to which they could access support or guidance at their educational institution. The vast majority report that they can get career advice and that there is someone they can talk to if needed[19] (Figure 6.19). While the availability of personal and career supports appear strong across all post-school education groups, participants in higher education are less positive about the extent to which they get useful feedback on their performance – with just two-thirds indicating this to be the case. Across all groups, a substantial majority indicate that they get an opportunity to give feedback on their course. Young people are more mixed in their views on whether they can get extra help if needed. A total of 68 per cent of participants in PLC courses feel they can avail of such extra help, with just under three-quarters of higher education participants indicating they can get extra help.

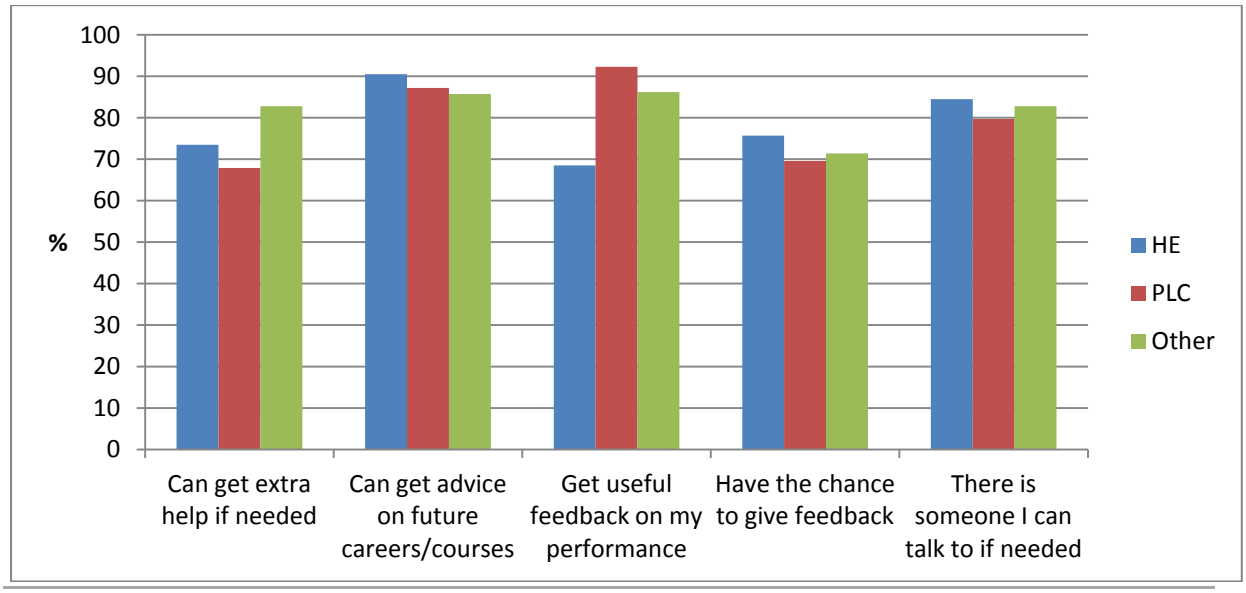
Interviewees' views regarding the support available to them were somewhat mixed. However, several of the young people felt that the support (e.g., tutors, student advisers, counselling, medical services) was available to them if/when they needed it.

> There is a lot of help within the college, like you'd have your tutor, so you could go to them if you're struggling or if there are things going on in your life or you feel that you can't cope, then she'd like tell you to, like help you along, or you could even talk to, like maybe the subject that you're struggling with, you could go to that lecturer and talk to them and they can

[19] It should be noted that the survey findings reflect overall perceptions of the availability of supports rather than whether the young person themselves had accessed such assistance.

guide you and make it easier for you. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

FIGURE 6.9 Support and Advice on Course; Percentage Who Agree



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

While many interviewees perceived that academic and social supports were available in their institution should they require them, a number did feel reluctant to avail of that support:

> ... to be honest with you if I did need help with anything ... I don't really know I suppose you'd feel a bit strange going to someone you don't know and ask, you know, asking for help with something ... I don't know I just don't think I would have if I did need help I don't think I would have gone... I'm not sure why ... But I think a lot of students would feel the same way. (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education)

> Yeah, the college, they have fantastic facilities ... They have free student counselling service, medical services, whatever is needed ... I would have participated in that but I wasn't I suppose in a very open position to do it ... I don't think I was quite ready for it to avail of the help that was there, so it didn't work for me that time but I don't think that was any reflection on the facilities in the college. (Conall, Hay Street, higher education)

One young person had a different experience noting that there was not as much support as there had been in school. However, students helped each other, partly by sharing notes and other materials where necessary:

> I suppose it was less so compared to secondary school, you were kind of just on your own. And we all used to help each other, we all kind of would have

> passed on notes or whatever but there was no real tutor anyway to go to as such compared to, when we were in secondary school we could go to the teachers or whatever. (Elaine, Belmore Street, higher education)

Similarly, Carol found academic support and guidance to be lacking in her institution; as a result she ended up getting information from a class colleague, who she did not know particularly well, having only met her on a couple of occasions:

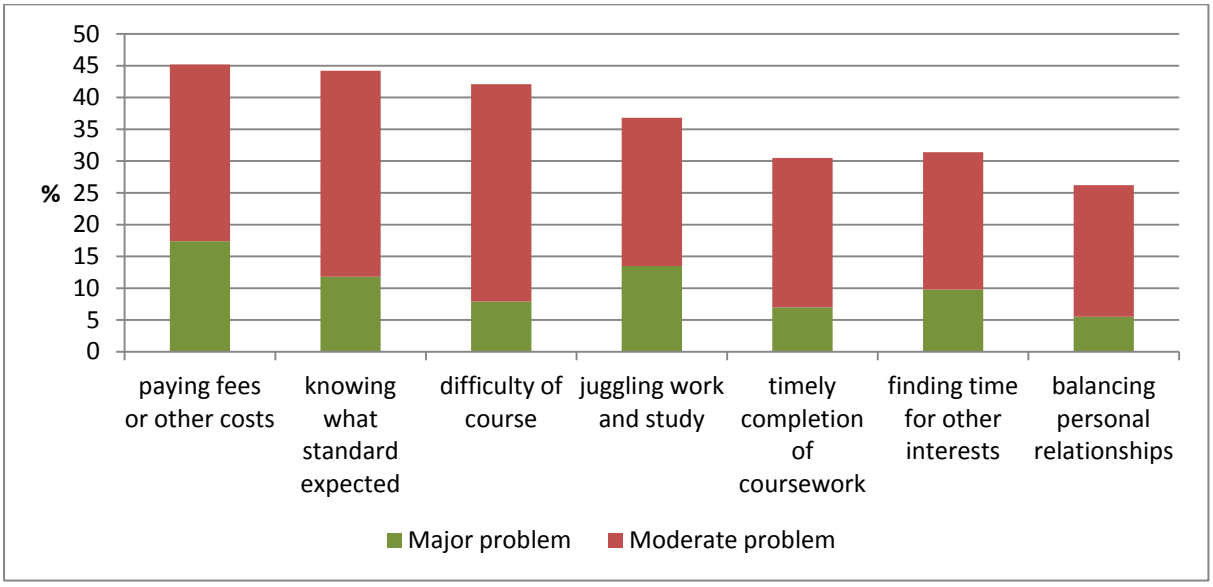
> I bumped in to my friend and she was like 'I repeated Second year', she was like 'come up', we did different courses and she was like 'come up with me' and she, this was a random girl I'd only met twice, got my results up on the screen with me, and she was like 'you can compensate that, you need to repeat that, that and that', she added up how much it would cost like. And my guidance counsellor didn't have a clue. (Carol, Harris Street, higher education)

These results reflect access to support in general while the following section explores whether young people actually experience difficulties in making the transition.

6.4 Experience of Difficulties (Academic or Social)

School leavers who are taken part in post-school education/training were asked to indicate the extent to which a range of potential problems were a difficulty for them during the first year of their post-school course. In line with recent research (McCoy *et al*., 2010b), meeting the financial costs of the course was the single biggest challenge, with 17 per cent indicating this to be a major problem and 28 per cent a moderate problem (Figure 6.10). The financial well-being of all young people in the sample, including those who entered post-school education, is analysed in greater depth in Chapter 8. In line with the earlier qualitative analysis, academic difficulties were also prominent – both in terms of knowing what standard was expected of them and in terms of the difficulty of the course. A total of 44 per cent of school leavers felt that knowing what standard was expected was a major or moderate problem for them while 42 per cent felt that the difficulty of the course was at least a moderate problem. Further, over 30 per cent found completing their coursework on time to be a challenge. Over one-third found juggling work and study to be a challenge and over 30 per cent felt that finding time for other interests was a difficulty. Just over one-quarter found balancing personal relationships with study to be a difficulty.

FIGURE 6.10 Main Challenges Faced By School Leavers in their First Year of Post-School Study



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

When talking about their studies, several students distinguished between the course years in terms of level of difficulty, with first year generally being seen as the easiest.

> In first year I definitely found it quite easy to be honest with you ... But let's say from second year onwards there was, it was more difficult now, definitely. First year was quite, quite straightforward, you know, I have to say. (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education)

> First year was very laidback and easy I thought, second year then was like a big pick up. (Brendan, Hay Street, PLC)

Academically, Dermot found first year 'easy' but that changed as the course progressed, with higher standards required as he moved into final year:

> [First year] was kind of easy ... I didn't put that much work into it and I was getting As and ... some of the stuff [was] nearly like sixth year level ... but then you find even second year like you can't do what you did in first year and do you know it's getting harder all the time ... I think the work is getting harder [now in third year] ... in some exams I thought I got a hundred per cent ... and the results came back and like forty-something per cent ... I think they could be marking you harder now. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

In contrast, pressure was seen as greater in first year for students who had not taken similar subjects while at school:

> We'd an awful lot of work to do for the first year because we had a lot more subjects. We'd all the sciences, I hadn't done Physics or Biology before. I'd

> just done Chemistry, so you had to take up those and we pretty much did the whole of the Leaving Cert course in one year. So it was tough going for first year. (Elaine, Belmore Street, higher education)

The change in modes of assessment, particularly the prominence of project work and assignments, was alluded to by a number of interviewees. The introduction of continuous assessment represented a positive development for a number of interviewees, taking some of the pressure off final exams:

> ... [continuous assessment] ah, they're the best ... like because you're going in on the day and nerves and everything ... so if you have a start going in you know that you don't need to get, like sometimes if you get a great continuous assessment, eighty-something per cent, that paper on the day, you could fail that paper on the day and still pass. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

Some young people acknowledged that they 'did not study hard enough' and, as a consequence, either had to repeat or dropped out of college: 'There was a good few that were, they repeated and we lost a few people from our year when we were back in third year' (Elaine, Belmore Street, higher education). Further, she felt that she had underestimated the workload in college: 'I wasn't expecting it, that there was going to be so much work involved compared to secondary school'.

For many students, the requirement to work part-time to fund their study created additional difficulties, an issue discussed further in Chapter 8. While some worked continuously during the year, others ceased work in the exam period and others still only worked during the summer so as to not compromise their studies.

> Just summers really, just summers, I wouldn't have really worked during college time, no, my parents didn't really want me to work during college time ... didn't think it was good idea, they thought maybe that I'd be, that I'd have, if i worked during college that I wouldn't be kind of brushing up on my school work so they didn't really encourage, they didn't really want me to work during college time but I'd say that I, I kind of used to make up money during the summer to finance myself (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education)

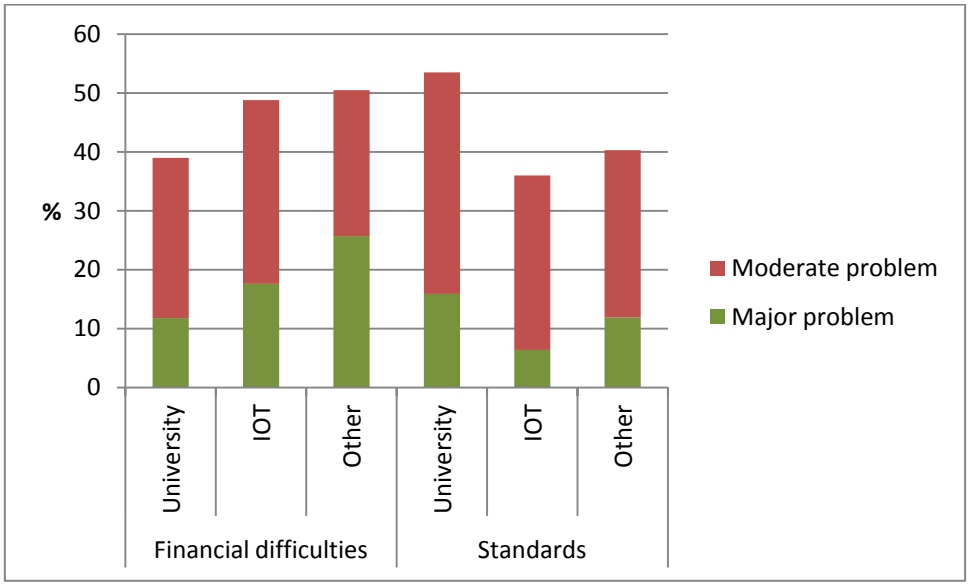
One young person felt that combining study and work left her exhausted and had a negative effect on her grades in college: 'It's not ideal because I think it effects my grades as well, because I needed down time, I couldn't study and work all the time, I was exhausted, I would have been exhausted if I did that, so it definitely

effected my studying' (Sandra, Belmore Street, higher education). For Elaine, the demands of her course meant she could not keep her part-time job:

> I would have done a job during that summer and then when I got in to third year I just couldn't handle it, I'd way too many hours and I used to work in a restaurant and I used to come home at the weekend and maybe do one or two days and I had no time to study and I just couldn't do it, I just had to give it up. (Elaine, Belmore Street, higher education)

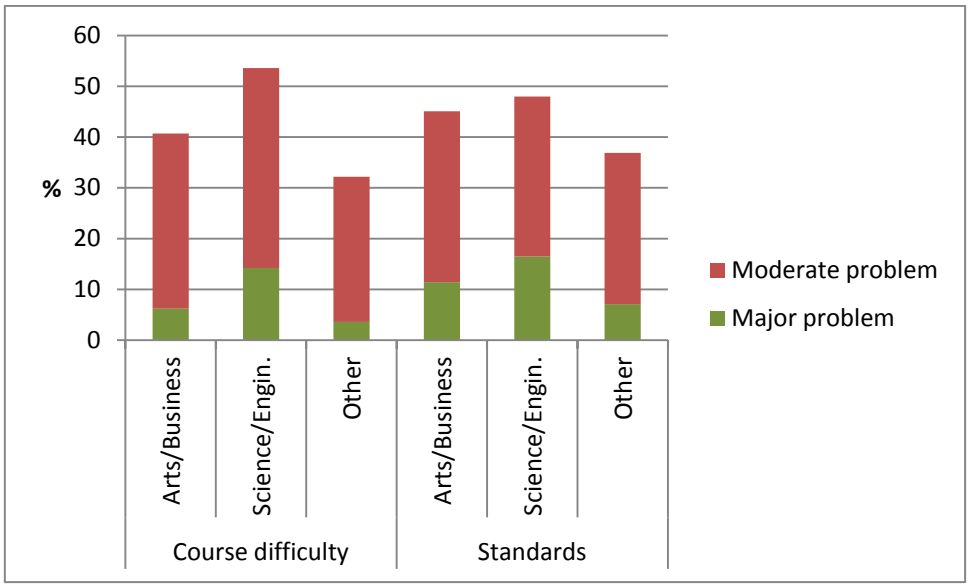
Some aspects of transition difficulties were found to vary according to the sector in which young people were enrolled and the course they were taking. Financial difficulties appeared less pressing for students in the university sector (Figure 6.11), with students in other colleges more likely to cite the costs of fees and other expenses as a major problem for them. In contrast, knowing what standard is expected of them is a serious concern for students attending courses in the university sector; over half of these students consider this issue to be a major or moderate problem for them (Figure 6.11). There is also some variation in reported difficulties across fields of study. Students enrolled on science and engineering courses are significantly more likely to cite course difficulty as being a problem for them – over half of these students indicate this to be a major or moderate problem (Figure 6.12). Similarly, knowing what standard is expected is rated as a more serious concern for students enrolled in science and engineering courses compared with other fields of study.

FIGURE 6.11 Extent to which Financial Difficulties and Knowing What Standard is Expected are a Problem by Sector



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 6.12 Extent to which Course Difficulty and Knowing What Standard is Expected are a Problem by Field of Study



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Factor analysis indicated that the ten items relating to transition difficulties reflected two dimensions – academic workload difficulties and social difficulties. Academic difficulties included course difficulty, knowing what standard is expected, completing coursework on time, study costs, juggling work and study commitments, and care commitments. Social difficulties included balancing personal relationships with study commitments, fitting in with other students, finding time for other interests and coping with long breaks between term times. The two scales constructed have a reliability of 0.67 and 0.73 respectively. Multilevel regression models were used to explore the individual, school and post-school factors which were associated with transition difficulties. Table 6.1 shows that academic difficulties do not vary by gender or having a special educational need. Young people from middle-class (salariat) families report slightly fewer academic difficulties, a pattern that is related to their more positive view of themselves as learners at senior cycle (compare Models 1 and 2). Immigrant students are somewhat more likely than others to report academic difficulties as are those who experienced the illness or disability of a family member while at school. Model 2 looks at the potential impact of senior cycle experiences on later transition difficulties. Students who had a more positive academic self-image in sixth year report fewer academic difficulties, a pattern that is mediated by their lower stress levels. Those who had higher stress levels in sixth year report more academic difficulties on transition to post-school education. Respondents were asked about the approaches to learning they found most helpful while at school (see Section 6.2). Those who favoured studying at home as the most important way of learning tend to have more transition difficulties as do, to some extent, those who favoured discussing issues with the

teacher. The interpretation of these patterns is not straightforward but being strongly reliant on studying at home may reflect an emphasis on rote learning and this group of young people may experience greater difficulties in adjusting to the more self-directed approach expected in post-school education. Furthermore, students who were reliant on discussing issues with the teacher may find the lack of feedback and focus on independent learning more challenging.

Interestingly, Leaving Certificate grades are not predictive of later transition difficulties (Model 3). This may appear at odds with studies of progression and retention in higher education; McCoy and Byrne (2011) found Leaving Certificate performance to be strongly associated with progression in higher education suggesting that lower performing groups face particular challenges in meeting the requirements of higher education. However, the definition of academic difficulties adopted in the current study is broader and reflects challenges in adapting to new learning styles which may or may not translate into poorer grades. Model 3 does show that those who reported that they were disappointed with their Leaving Certificate results experienced greater difficulties. In keeping with the descriptive analyses presented above, those taking science/engineering courses reported greater academic difficulties (Model 4). Academic difficulties were somewhat more frequently reported by those attending an Institute of Technology, all else being equal (including taking account of Leaving Certificate achievement). The level of qualification taken is not significantly related to perceived academic difficulties so is not included in the models shown. Likewise, additional models examined whether differences were found in transition difficulties between those entering further education and those enrolled in higher education – the results showed no significant differences. Working part-time while at college is found to contribute to academic difficulties on transition (Model 5); this is not surprising given that the measure reflects perceived difficulties in managing workload. Young people had been asked about the extent of personal and academic support they could receive in their institution (see Section 6.3). These items were used to form a composite scale of support, which had a reliability of 0.76. Those who felt that their college provided such support were much less likely to report academic difficulties on transition than other students.

Table 6.2 presents similar analyses in relation to experiences of social difficulties on transition to post-school education. Such social difficulties do not vary by gender, social class or having a special educational need. There is tentative evidence (in Model 5) that immigrant students report greater social difficulties than others but these results should be interpreted with caution as no such difference is evident in the earlier models (1-4). As with academic difficulties,

young people who experienced the illness/disability of a family member while at school report greater social difficulties (Model 1). Stress levels in sixth year are not associated with social difficulties later on. However, feelings of isolation in sixth year are predictive of greater difficulties integrating socially in post-school education. As with academic difficulties, those who favoured studying at home as the most important way of learning report greater social difficulties (Model 2).

Difficulties in the social sphere were also highlighted by several interviewees. Sport was seen as one way to get to know people and ease transition difficulties.

> ... mainly through my involvement in sport really, I suppose that was a huge, huge help to me in first year college, I played football and hurling for the college team and, and you know, and through that I suppose I, I got to know a lot of people around. (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education)

Not knowing any of the students before enrolling in the course was found to be daunting for several young people, particularly for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds perhaps with little experience of post-school and higher education in their family or among their peers:

> ... it's hard when you go in on your own, it's kind of a bit daunting, you know, you don't know anyone ... you're kind of worried and you're kind of like worried to be on your own and you mightn't make friends. (Siobhan, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

This difficulty was also observed by Fiona who noted:

> First year, it was hell for me, I think for me anyway ... people already had friends from high school and I didn't have a friend from high school so I found that I was eating alone a lot of the time and everyone really knew everyone and it was just difficult to kind of find a clique ... I was kind of depressed, you know, and I didn't have the time to socialise because of living [distance away] and having to travel and during the winter time it would take me like two hours to get home because I wasn't driving at the time, and two hours to get in ... so it was too much pressure at the time, I think. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

TABLE 6.1 Multilevel Models of the Factors Influencing Academic Difficulties in the Transition to Post-School Education

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Constant	2.002	1.817	1.454	1.270	1.579
Background characteristics					
Male	-0.065	-0.089	-0.105	-0.117	-0.111
Social class:					
Salariat	-0.135±	-0.150	-0.125	-0.078	-0.075
Intermediate	-0.050	-0.229±	-0.215±	-0.192	-0.116
Unknown	-0.064	0.084	0.040	0.079	0.080
SEN	-0.009	0.008	0.033	0.023	0.083
Immigrant	0.141±	0.142	0.168	0.160	0.202±
Family member ill/disabled	0.215**	0.199	0.192	0.208±	0.109
Experiences in 6th year					
Academic self-image		-0.152	-0.111	-0.093	-0.035
Stress levels		0.183*	0.156*	0.136±	0.177*
Approach to learning (mentioned):					
Discussing with teacher		0.063±	0.057	0.058	0.046
Studying at home		0.073±	0.079*	0.086*	0.086*
Leaving Certificate					
Exam grades (centred)			-0.002	0.003	-0.002
Disappointed with results			0.130*	0.129*	0.114±
Type of post-school education					
Subject area: (Ref. Arts/business)					
Science/engineering				0.209*	0.178*
Other				0.020	0.000
Institution: (Ref. University)					
IOT				0.202±	0.260*
Other				0.166	0.205
Experiences in college					
Funding study through part-time job					0.183*
Level of perceived student academic and personal support					-0.204*
School-level variation	0.016	0.005	0.005	0.003	0.009
% individual-level variance explained	2.9	16.4	20.1	23.6	29.3
			439 young people within 12 schools		

TABLE 6.2 Multilevel Model of the Factors Influencing Social Difficulties in the Transition to Post-School Education

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Constant	1.829	1.329	0.957	0.894	1.714
Background characteristics					
Male	-0.099	-0.107	-0.102	-0.061	-0.058
Social class:					
Salariat	0.121	0.100	0.081	0.090	0.087
Intermediate	0.077	-0.010	-0.028	0.001	-0.023
Unknown	-0.080	0.117	0.067	0.120	0.033
SEN	-0.102	-0.256	-0.146	-0.165	-0.134
Newcomer	0.010	0.152	0.164	0.156	0.197±
Family member ill/disabled	0.210**	0.190±	0.171±	0.133	0.047
Experiences in 6th year					
Stress levels		0.014	-0.028	-0.043	-0.018
Feeling isolated		0.227*	0.200*	0.199*	0.162±
Approach to learning:					
Studying at home		0.109**	0.100**	0.104**	0.101**
Leaving Certificate					
Put under pressure by others			0.130*	0.135*	0.137*
Exam grades (centred)			0.017*	0.022*	0.020*
Disappointed with results			0.103±	0.113*	0.101*
Type of post-school education					
Subject area: (Ref. Arts/business)					
Science/engineering				0.053	0.068
Other				-0.183	-0.185
Institution: (Ref. University)					
IOT				-0.003	0.048
Other				0.292	0.282
Experiences in college					
Level of perceived student academic and personal support					-0.266***
School-level variation	0.018	0.011	0.006	0.006	0.008
% individual-level variance explained	2.8	18.0	21.6	24.4	28.9
			439 young people within 12 schools		

From the survey results, those with higher Leaving Certificate grades tend to report somewhat greater social difficulties (Model 3). Feeling that they were under pressure from parents or teachers in terms of the Leaving Certificate is associated with greater social difficulties, perhaps reflecting less independence among these young people. Those who were disappointed with their Leaving Certificate results report more difficulties integrating socially into college life. Unlike academic difficulties, social difficulties do not vary by type of course or institution, all else being equal (Model 4). Access to support within the educational institution is found to significantly reduce levels of social difficulties on transition to post-school study (Model 5).

6.5 Course Non-Completion

The survey tracked both participation in post-school education/training and completion and dropout. The patterns should be interpreted with caution as a significant proportion, 55 per cent of the total sample, were still on a further or higher education course at the time of the survey. Levels of non-completion vary considerably across the post-school sectors[20] – with relatively low levels of non-completion in higher education and relatively high levels in 'other' courses, including both State-sponsored training and private education and training courses (Figure 6.13). Just under 9 per cent of our cohort of school leavers left their higher education course prior to completion. Among PLC course participants, 22 per cent left the course prior to completion, while 28 per cent of 'other' course participants left without completing.

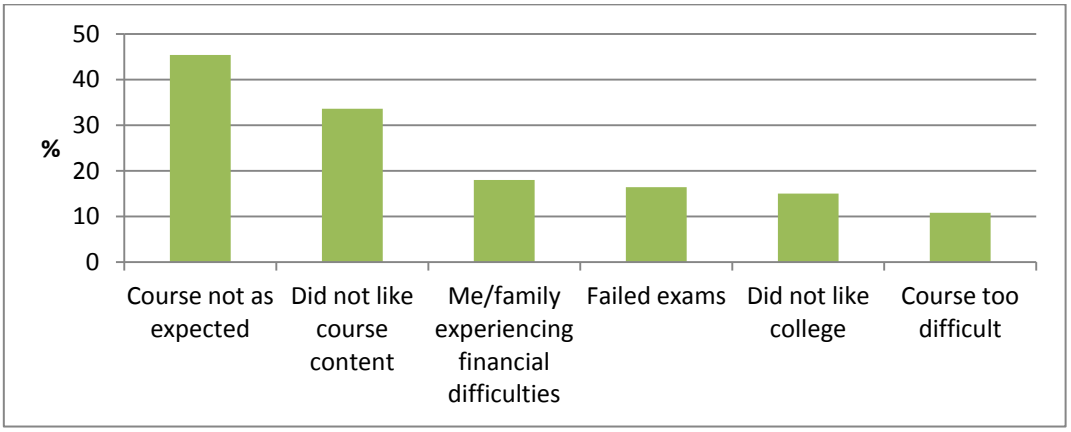
School leavers were asked to indicate the reasons for not completing their course. The single biggest factor cited was 'the course was not what I expected', accounting for 45 per cent of all early leavers (Figure 6.14). Other course-related/academic factors also featured strongly – including 'I did not like the content of the course', indicated by one-third, and 'I failed my exams' and 'the course was too difficult' accounting for 16 and 11 per cent respectively. Personal, social and familial factors appear less prominent in the early leaving decision, although the experience of financial difficulties in the family was a significant factor for nearly one-fifth of early leavers.

[20] This section does not explore non-completion by background characteristics such as gender, social class and SEN, as the size of the sample makes it difficult to compare different groups within similar types of courses and institutions.

FIGURE 6.13 Proportion Who Left Course Early

Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 6.14 Reasons for Leaving Course Early



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

The survey patterns were echoed in the interview responses with being disappointed with the course they had chosen and not finding the course content as they had expected it to be emerging as reasons for not completing the course:

> Like it was tough enough ... but I thought I'd like it but that's all coding and stuff but I like the more graphics and creative side of computers. I lasted a year like and then I dropped out ... I just didn't like some of the, some of the classes I was taking, because they just didn't interest me, all these kind of doing algorithms and all this stuff and I just didn't like them ... I just couldn't imagine myself doing this for another three years and then doing it for the rest of my life. (Robert, Hay Street, higher education)

> Everything was fine. It just didn't interest me. The course was very mundane like, you know. (Brendan, Hay Street, PLC)

Interestingly, there is some variation in the factors shaping early departure across the different education sectors. Course difficulty was a particular issue for HE participants; as was course content and failing exams (more so for males). The course not being as expected was a particular concern for females in PLC courses. For participants in PLC courses, one-quarter of females cited 'having a baby' as a reason for not completing their course. As might be expected, for participants in labour market training/apprenticeships, one-quarter (all males) cited 'placement with employer ceasing' as the main reason for not completing. Non-completion does not seem to be particularly related to satisfaction with advice on post-school options while at school. In terms of the scale of transition difficulties, young people who reported greater academic difficulties were significantly more likely to leave their course early ($p<.001$). However, the prevalence of social difficulties on transition did not vary between those leaving early and those who were still on or had completed their course.

6.6 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has looked at how young people experience the transition to post-school education. Young people characterise their Leaving Certificate exam as requiring 'too much writing' and memory work, with a significant proportion finding the exam schedule too demanding and feeling under too much pressure. Those surveyed were quite critical about the extent to which second-level education prepares them for the world of work, for adult life and for going on to college. A large majority report differences in teaching and learning between second-level education and their post-school course. Significant minorities of young people report difficulties in relation to the standard expected of them, the difficulty of the course and completing coursework on time. Interviews with young people point towards the challenges involved in independent learning and managing their own workload. Academic difficulties are more prevalent among those who had high stress levels in sixth year and who relied on studying at home as a way of learning. Such difficulties are more commonly reported by those on science/engineering courses and in institutes of technology. Working part-time while at college also contributes to academic difficulties. Young people experience fewer academic difficulties where there are higher levels of personal and academic support in their institution. Academic difficulties emerged as an important factor in leaving the course before completion.

A number of young people experience difficulties integrating socially into post-school education. Those who felt more isolated at school, those who had higher Leaving Certificate grades but felt disappointed with their results, and those who

felt under pressure from others in the run up to the Leaving Certificate exam had more difficulties in terms of social integration. As with academic difficulties, support provided by the institution helps to reduce social difficulties.

The most frequent challenge reported by students was meeting the financial costs of their course. The extent to which young people are satisfied with their financial situation and the sources of funding they draw upon to finance their post-school education will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Chapter 7

Young People and the Labour Market

7.1 Introduction

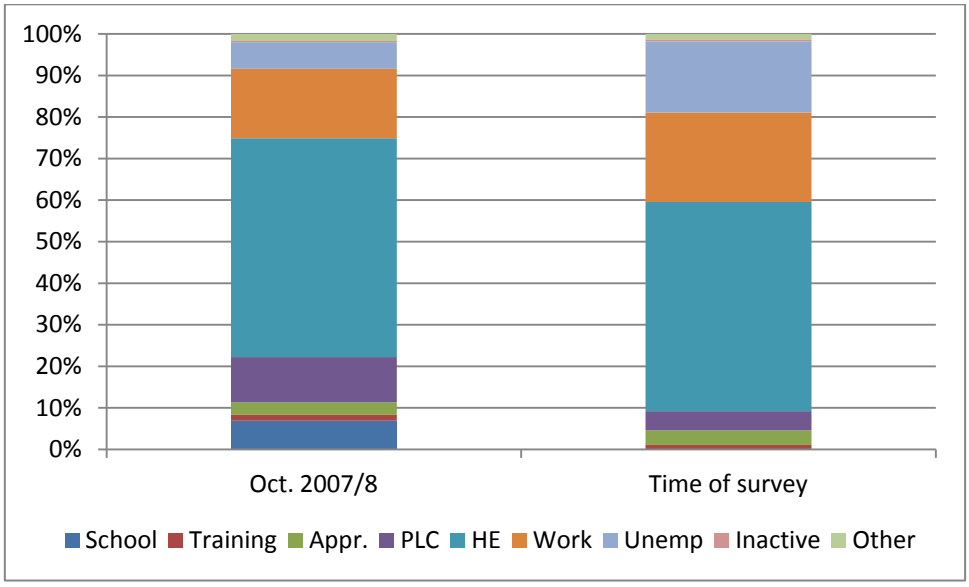
Given the rapidly changing labour market context as our cohort of young people was leaving school, it is important that we consider how young people fared when they entered the labour market. This is particularly important for those who entered the labour market immediately on leaving school, perhaps with an expectation of employment stability but faced with a very different reality. The chapter is focused on two main sets of questions:

- How were young people faring in the labour market? Which groups were particularly vulnerable in the current climate? What was the nature of unemployment experienced?
- What were the characteristics of the jobs young people secured and to what extent were young people gaining employment commensurate with their qualifications? To what extent were young people accessing on-the-job training?

7.2 Labour Market Experience

Chapter 2 presented detailed information on the main economic status of school leavers immediately upon leaving school and at various points subsequently. Figure 7.1 compares the main status immediately after leaving school with the status at the time of the survey (in early 2011). Overall, we see that levels of unemployment exposure among this cohort rise over the post-school period – as initial employment, perhaps of a casual and temporary nature, declines to be replaced by persistent or intermittent unemployment. This mirrors the broader economic decline in the period since this cohort left school in 2007 and 2008. In the initial post-school period (October of the year in which they left school), a minority of our school leavers had entered the labour market, with the bulk pursuing further or higher education and training. By the time of the survey, three to four years after leaving school, considerably more had filtered into the labour market. For some this was a natural progression on completion of training programmes or further education courses, while others had entered relatively recently on completion of higher education. This means that young people in our sample had varying lengths of experience in the labour market, along with varying levels of success in their integration. It should be noted too that a significant proportion of the cohort had yet to make the transition into the labour market as they were completing higher education or other courses.

FIGURE 7.1 Main Status Immediately After Leaving School and at the Time of the Survey



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Overall 23 per cent of school leavers in our sample were in the labour market during the initial post-school period – with males accounting for a significant share of such labour market entrants (30 per cent of males were in the labour market relative to 17 per cent of females). Just over one-quarter of these labour market participants were unemployed, with the majority successful in gaining employment at this stage. In the 3-4 year period after leaving school, more young people progressed to the labour market, many on completion of further training or study. Just under four-in-ten of the school leavers were in the labour market at the time of the survey, with many of the remainder in their final year of higher education or pursuing post-graduate study. Gender differentials are less apparent at this stage, with 41 per cent of males and 36 per cent of females in the labour market. However, males appear less successful in terms of labour market integration with almost half of the male labour market group reporting that they were unemployed at the time of the survey. This compares to 40 per cent of female labour market participants. These unemployment levels are undoubtedly high, in line with the national figures illustrated by the QNHS analysis in Chapter 2. It is important to bear in mind that the unemployed group is diverse, including school leaver entrants to the labour market, further education leavers and higher education graduates.

7.3 UNEMPLOYMENT

Of particular interest is which groups are most vulnerable in the current climate; the QNHS analysis in Chapter 2 showed that nationally unemployment rates vary quite dramatically across individuals of different qualification levels. In looking at

our cohort of young people, it is important to bear in mind that many are still not in the labour market at the time of the survey and some, especially higher education graduates, have only recently entered the labour market. It is worth distinguishing between unemployment ratio (the proportion of all young people who are unemployed) and unemployment rate (the proportion unemployed among those in the labour market). If we look at the unemployment ratio by main post-school pathway, 36 per cent of those who entered the labour market directly upon leaving school were unemployed at the time of the survey compared with 30 per cent of those who took PLC courses and 7 per cent of those who went on to higher education. However, this does not give the full picture as many of the higher education entrants were still in full-time education at the time of the survey. If we confine attention only to those in the labour market, unemployment rates were 37 per cent for direct labour market entrants (including apprentices), 35 per cent for recent higher education graduates and 52 per cent for those who had taken PLC courses.

These patterns do not give the full picture. If we look across the post-school period, we see that some experience of unemployment is a feature of the transition process for many young people. Of all young people 43 per cent surveyed had been unemployed at some time since leaving school. This figure was much higher for those who entered the labour market immediately upon leaving school, for those who had taken an apprenticeship and for those who had taken a PLC course without going on to higher education, with around two-thirds having had at least one spell of unemployment. In Chapter 3, we looked at the influence of background and school characteristics on the kind of post-school pathway taken. A similar approach to looking at the factors influencing unemployment experience is more difficult as a significant proportion of the cohort have yet to enter the labour market and many others have only recently completed education/training. If we confine attention only to those who entered the labour market immediately after leaving school, some differences are evident in unemployment experience. In particular, young men are more likely to have experienced unemployment than young women (75 per cent compared with 57 per cent) and experience of unemployment was more prevalent among those who had attended working-class schools (75 per cent compared with 60 per cent of those from socially mixed schools and 38 per cent of those from middle-class schools). Furthermore, those who had experienced some unemployment had significantly lower Leaving Certificate grades than those who had never been unemployed (9.8 compared with 12.3 grade points).

Interviews with a subset of the cohort of young people provide greater insights into their experiences of unemployment and the job search strategies they have

adopted. At the time of the interview, five young people (Niamh, Clodagh, Robert, Brendan and Brian) among the group of 27 were unemployed. Three of them (Robert, Brian and Brendan) had attended schools (Lang Street and Dawes Point) with a working-class intake. The two girls had attended a school with a mixed social class intake (Belmore Street). In the interviews, the young people reflected on their experiences of unemployment and reasons leading to their present situation. On the whole, the routes into unemployment differed. Robert and Brendan (twin brothers) had dropped out of third-level education and were finding it difficult to get a job. Robert has been unemployed for year and a half and was finding it difficult to get employment. He talked about a lack of relevant experience as a barrier to employment: 'It's not good like, but the economy's tough, lack of experience in work, so it's hard to get a job' (Robert, Lang Street, higher education dropout). The economic downturn has also had an impact on Brendan's job:

> I'd say about four months now [being unemployed], I was working in a job for about four years I'd say, it was in a garage and ... when I left college I was working like four or five days a week. And since I didn't have seniority at all like I was the last in, so everybody was cutting down hours and then I got down to three days, two days and one day and then I just, you know that was it like, it wasn't enough like. (Brendan, Lang Street, unemployed)

Niamh was made redundant a year and a half ago and had found it difficult to get alternative employment. While the months initially following the redundancy were filled with wedding preparations and caring duties, she was now finding it difficult to cope with unemployment:

> ... at the start I loved it because I was working for so long full time, I loved the few, like the first few months I loved it, being off, and arranging my wedding was hard so I had to kind of, I was glad I had the time off to do that as well but then now like I'm sitting at home doing nothing, nothing to arrange. (Niamh, Belmore Street, unemployed)

All five young people were currently looking for employment. While Brendan was hoping to find a 'good job', others were happy to take up any employment opportunity. For some the boredom created by unemployment was a major problem, while others talked about the impact on their self-esteem and the isolation of not having the interaction with others in the workplace:

> Right now I'd love a job because it would be interacting with new people, it would be doing something with myself each day (Clodagh, unemployed).

Since finishing second-level education Clodagh has held a number of different jobs. Also having caring duties, she was let go from one job as she was late to

work too often during the probation period. Although admitting that it is difficult to find a job, Clodagh was hopeful that she would succeed and had managed to get several interviews: 'I have one to two each week'. She noted that she is always on a look-out for a possible employment opportunity:

> I have a memory stick in my pocket that has in case I don't have my physical CVs with me, if I am in town hanging out with a friend or going for lunch and I hear that that hotel or that whatever is looking for work, I'll just run across to an internet café, put my memory stick into the computer, print out a few CVs, come back. So I have, I have, I've been looking for work for so long that I have it down to a fine art. (Clodagh, Belmore Street, unemployed).

Although Brian (who was not interested in accepting the course offered and went to work instead) was initially employed, he subsequently lost his job and was unemployed for a number of years at the time of the interviews. Like others he talked about the vulnerability of young people in the labour market, with the 'last in first out rule' frequently mentioned:

> I had one [a job] in a factory and I loved that, but they were taken over by another company and the company wanted them out so they let go me first, since I was last in you know first out. And then I got a job in a call centre, which was supposed to be this fantastic place that were hiring everybody but what they don't tell people ... is that they are leaving them go just as quick as they are hiring them. (Brian, Dawes Point, unemployed)

Weighing up his options, Brian was considering various possibilities, but was generally unsure what to do: 'I'm still looking for work but I have a few ideas of what I might do. I'm not sure like ... It's a toss-up between college and emigrating.' He admitted, however, that the latter may not be a viable option because it was difficult to save while on welfare: 'Because even like talking about moving away or anything like how are you supposed to save up when you are on social welfare like'. Brian felt very negative about his situation: 'Horrible, absolutely horrible.'

According to Brian, his whole family suffered in the recession as his sister's hours of employment were reduced and his brother had also lost his job as the company he had worked for folded. His parents (one of them was not working and the other had limited hours at work) were worried about their children and their future in Ireland:

> I know they've said to me like they are nearly in tears saying it to me like if we had the money we'd send you away, we'd help you out but like we just can't afford it like. (Brian, Dawes Point, unemployed)

Like a number of others, Brian noted that a college degree is not a guarantee of a job any more: 'I have, a good few friends that have gone to college but I mean they are all unemployed now, three finished this year and the three of them are going to Australia in January'.

Even young people who had managed to obtain employment spoke of the challenges they faced in obtaining a job. Several young people (mostly in the PLC group) reflected on their experiences applying for jobs; their lack of experience seemed to be one of the main barriers that they faced.

> I got interviews like but lack of experience because I only worked once in my life so it's not lack of trying like, I have passed out CVs like everyone else, just unlucky. (Robert, Lang Street, higher education dropout)

Bridget had also found it difficult to get much needed work experience and talked at length about the challenges facing young entrants to the labour market:

> I remember like applying, looking up jobs and applying and an awful lot you had to have so many years behind you and experience, no one was taking you on for experience ... you need to have a lot of experience behind you for jobs in the hotels and the same with travel agents, you need to have at least two or three years. So how are you supposed to get experience? (Bridget, Barrack Street, PLC)

Deirdre (Harris Street, PLC) became very frustrated by having very little success in finding a job: 'I traipsed the streets for weeks with CVs. I was online, I actually gave up at one stage because it was just so sickening. Nobody was even calling me back. It was awful like'.

Catherine (Harris Street, PLC) was given a job by a relative: 'my cousin was the manager so she just gave me the job'. Karen observed that knowing somebody is becoming increasingly important in getting work or work experience: 'I always notice even when I'm looking for work experience that's it's more who you know than what you know' (Belmore Street, PLC and higher education). In the same vein, Niamh commented on the benefit of having a family business: 'So the advantage of my mother owning her own salon made it easier for me to get in'. (Niamh, Belmore Street, unemployed)

Denise (Harris Street, higher education) observed how difficult it is for young people to get their first job (other than unpaid internships) when they have just graduated from higher education. Out of her course only two people had secured employment at the time the interview took place:

> ... even out of my class like in college, I think there's about two people that only have a job and that's it like ... now in saying that we only finished like a while ago but like it's just, it's impossible to get a job. It's all unpaid internships and that's it, that's going like.

Ronan (Park Street, PLC and higher education) noted that some colleges helped young people to look for a job: '... in the college they do, they, they you know you can sign up to sort of careers thing where they send you out'. Gerard (Park Street, higher education) had actually got a job through college having approached lecturers for assistance:

> I found that job through the college ... you ask lecturers do you know anybody anywhere that can get me a job and then like [name of company] had, they were employing loads of people you know at the moment.

7.4 Employment Quality

The quality of jobs obtained is an important dimension of post-school transitions. We now consider the quality of the jobs obtained by the cohort of young people in terms of hours worked, occupation and job security. The extent to which young people received on-the-job training is examined and whether they entered jobs which they saw as appropriate to their level of education is also discussed.

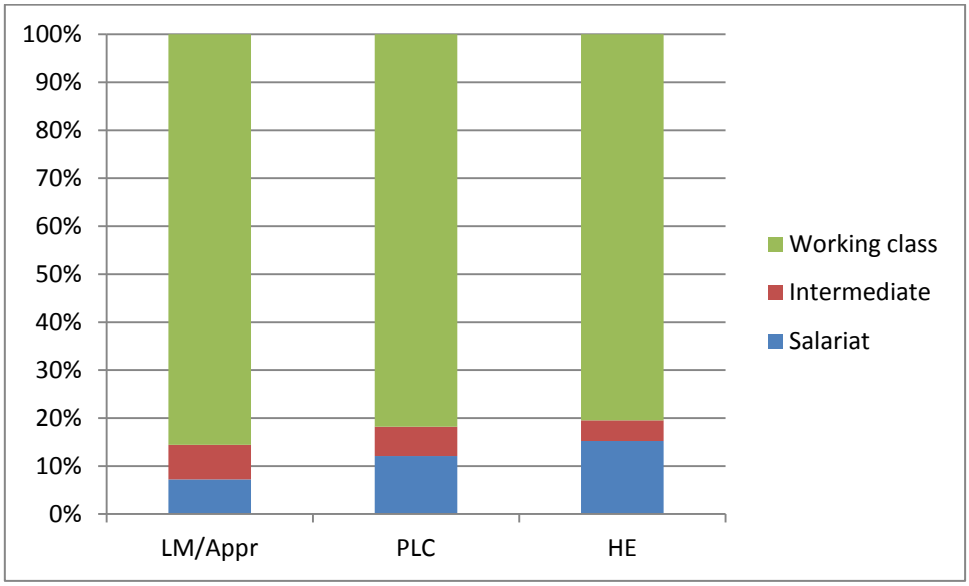
When we consider the nature of the jobs young people hold, we find important differences between those who are studying and working part-time to support that study and those whose main status is employment. For 80 per cent of those still enrolled in higher education, their employment is of a part-time nature, presumably an intentional strategy to allow time to engage with their studies. For those whose main status is employment, one-fifth are working in a part-time capacity, perhaps not all by choice and there may be some element of under-employment among the group. It is interesting to note that among those who are currently unemployed, over half of them had been previously working in a part-time job.

One measure of the quality of the job is the social class status. Figure 7.2 shows the social class of school leavers whose main status is employment. Previous research has indicated a high wage premium attached to third-level qualifications in the Irish context (McGuinness *et al.*, 2009), with graduates disproportionately found in higher status professional and managerial jobs (Hannan, Ó Riain, 1993). The results for this cohort show little difference in the types of jobs of different groups of young people – lower status service and manual positions (e.g.,

working in shops or restaurants) continue to dominate among all pathway groups, with over 80 per cent of the higher education group (virtually all of whom are graduates) employed in such routine positions and relatively few engaged in the types of managerial and professional positions (15 per cent) which might be considered commensurate with their higher education qualifications. Many of the jobs in which these graduates are engaged are located in the lower sales and services class and routine occupations class. This pattern may reflect the fact that these young people have left college only very recently. It should also be noted that those who took longer education courses have yet to enter the labour market.

Just 14 per cent of school leavers in employment are members of a trade union in their current or most recent employment. Despite the wider economic context and the nature of the jobs in which young people are employed, school leavers feel relatively secure in their employment – 34 feel very secure, 44 per cent secure and just 22 per cent insecure.

FIGURE 7.2 Social Class of School Leavers Whose Main Status is Employment at the Time of the Survey by Main Post-School Pathway



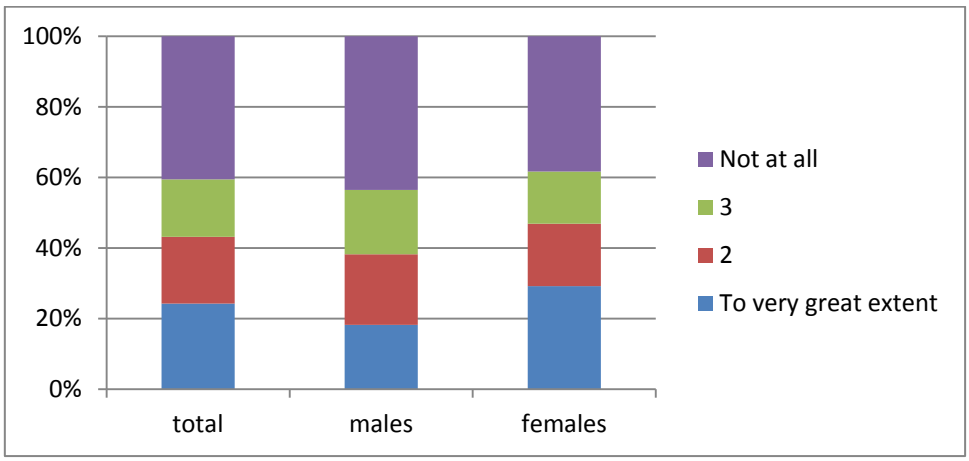
Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

We now consider the extent to which young people, who had gained employment, had received on-the-job training in that employment. Overall, just over 60 per cent of those with previous employment had received training in their last job; there is little difference in receipt of training for men and women, but those who entered the labour market and/or apprenticeship programmes are more likely to be in receipt of training, as might be expected.

The survey also asked the young people to assess the extent to which they used their knowledge and skills acquired through education and training in the course of their job. The results show that a large share of young people do not feel they use their knowledge and skills in carrying out their job (Figure 7.3). In total, 4 out of 10 school leavers feel they do not use their knowledge and skills at all in their job. In contrast, just one-quarter indicate that they draw on their skills to a great extent. When we consider differences across the main post-school pathway groups, we find relatively low levels of skill utilisation among higher education and PLC graduates – half of the HE graduates feel they do not use these skills at all as do 40 per cent of PLC leavers. Given the characteristics of the jobs in which they are employed, predominantly routine positions, these results are perhaps not surprising but are of some concern, especially if the patterns persist past the initial post-graduation period.

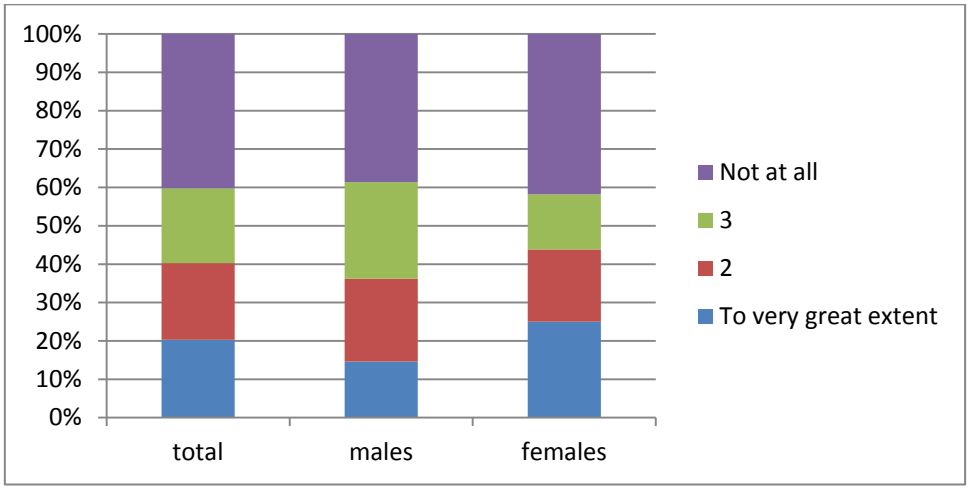
The young people were also asked to assess the extent to which they felt their current job is appropriate to their level of education (Figure 7.4). Overall, 40 per cent indicate a mismatch and that their job is 'not at all' appropriate to their level of education. Just one-fifth indicate that their job is matched to their level of education 'to a very great extent'. There is little difference between men and women in the extent to which they feel appropriately qualified for their job. However, again we find that higher education and PLC graduates are likely to indicate a mismatch in their employment – half of graduates and almost half of PLC leavers in the labour market rate their job as 'not at all' appropriate to their level of education. School leavers who pursued apprenticeship training or entered the labour market immediately on leaving school are unlikely to indicate that their job is inappropriate to their level of education.

FIGURE 7.3 Extent to Which School Leavers Feel They Use Knowledge and Skills Acquired in Current Job



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 7.4 Extent to Which School Leavers Feel Current Job is Appropriate to Level of Education



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

7.5 SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

Finally, school leavers were asked to assess to what extent they have acquired a range of skills and competencies by the time of the survey; these skills could have been acquired at any point, including during second-level education, post-school education or in the labour market. The ability to work well with others emerged as the skill school leavers are most positive about, with nearly 60 per cent indicating that they had acquired this skill 'to a great extent' (Figure 7.5). Just over half indicated strong ICT skills, with just under half indicating that they had acquired oral and written communication skills to a great extent, with females more likely than males to indicate strong written communication skills. Just over 40 per cent felt they had the ability to perform well under pressure. Similarly, 40 per cent of the young people indicated that they had acquired knowledge of their field of work/study to a great extent. School leavers are less positive about their analytical skills and ability to come up with new ideas/solutions: just 30 per cent indicate they have acquired analytical skills to a great extent, and 35 per cent similarly rate their ability to come up with new ideas. Males are more positive about their analytical and problem-solving skills than females. Less than 5 per cent of the young people indicated strong foreign language skills.

Some young people, particularly those who had pursued PLC training, commented on the practical skills they had acquired during the course of their studies that could be useful in the labour market.

> Like there was an awful lot of like basic skills, you know communications ... I suppose it kind of helped me with my confidence as well ... doing presentations and stuff like that, that was something I'd never done before ... somewhere down the line, you know I could be working wherever I'm

working and they needed to do a slide show, that's always behind me as well, you know. (Bridget, Barrack Street, PLC)

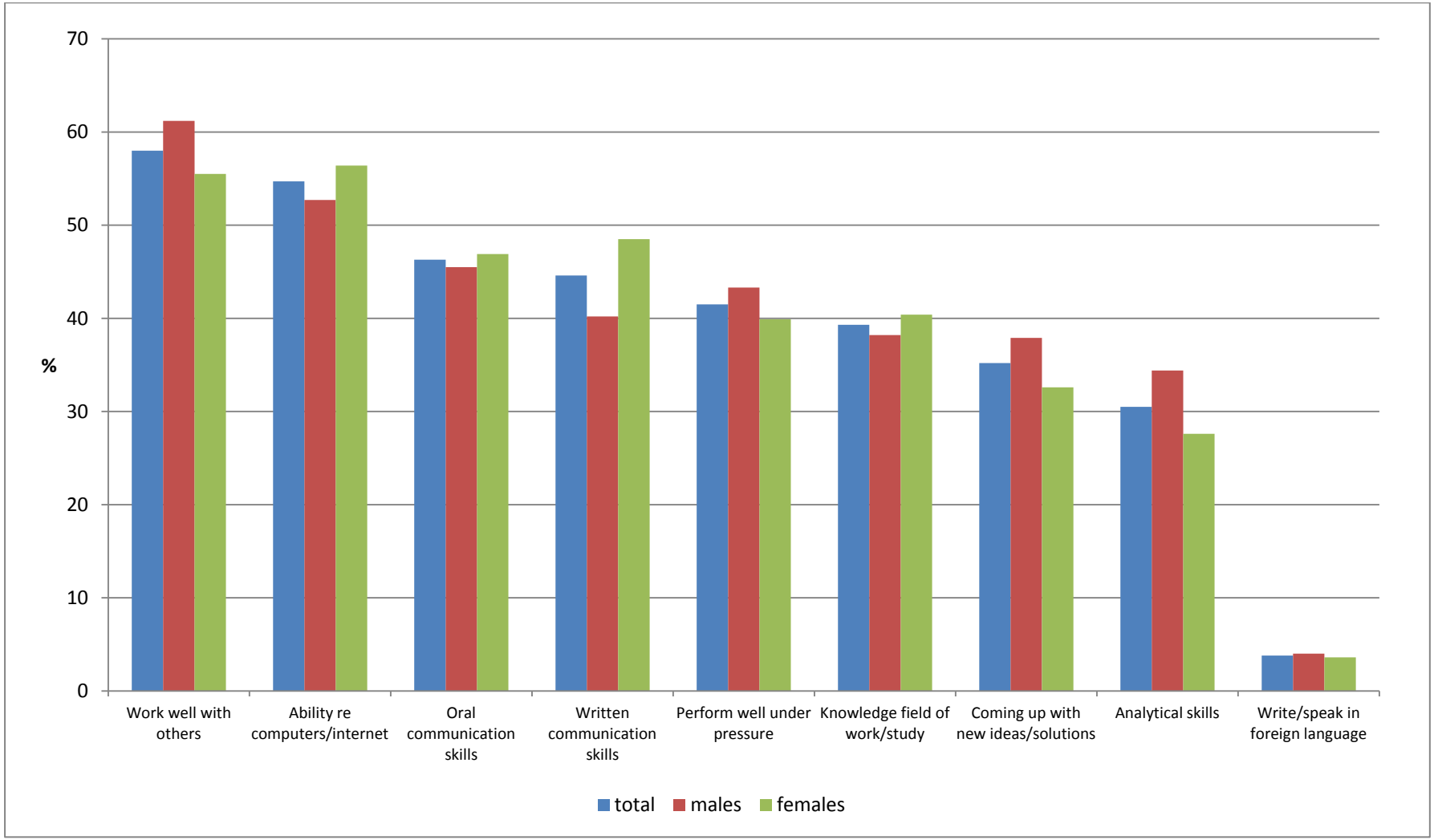
Well when I did first start I could use computers but basic, just for internet, you know, the likes of all that ... but now I can set up a spreadsheet, a database, you know things like that that I wouldn't have been able to do before. So I have improved a lot in my actual computer skills ... I can work in an office now with the first years results that I got. (Catherine, Harris Street, PLC)

I learned a lot about what's involved in how to set up a business and how to get funding and, you know, about a bit as well about how to get customers. (Siobhan, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

Figure 7.6 shows skills and competencies evaluations across the main post-school pathways taken by the young people in our sample. There are some commonalities in perceived skill acquisition, regardless of the pathway taken. Thus, young people across all post-school routes are similarly positive about their IT skills and similarly negative about their knowledge of foreign languages. Some differences also emerge across the groups. Young people who entered the labour market directly upon leaving school are less positive about their oral and written communication skills than those who took some form of post-school education/training. Those who took apprenticeships are more positive than other groups about their knowledge of their field, ability to work well under pressure, capacity to come up with new ideas and ability to work well with others, though these results should be interpreted with some caution due to the small numbers involved. Those who have taken a higher education course (either directly upon leaving school or after completing a PLC course) are more positive about their analytical skills than other groups but this group of young people report relatively low levels of being able to work well with others and being able to come up with new ideas. They are also less likely to report having knowledge of their field of study 'to a great extent' than those who had taken apprenticeships or PLC courses.

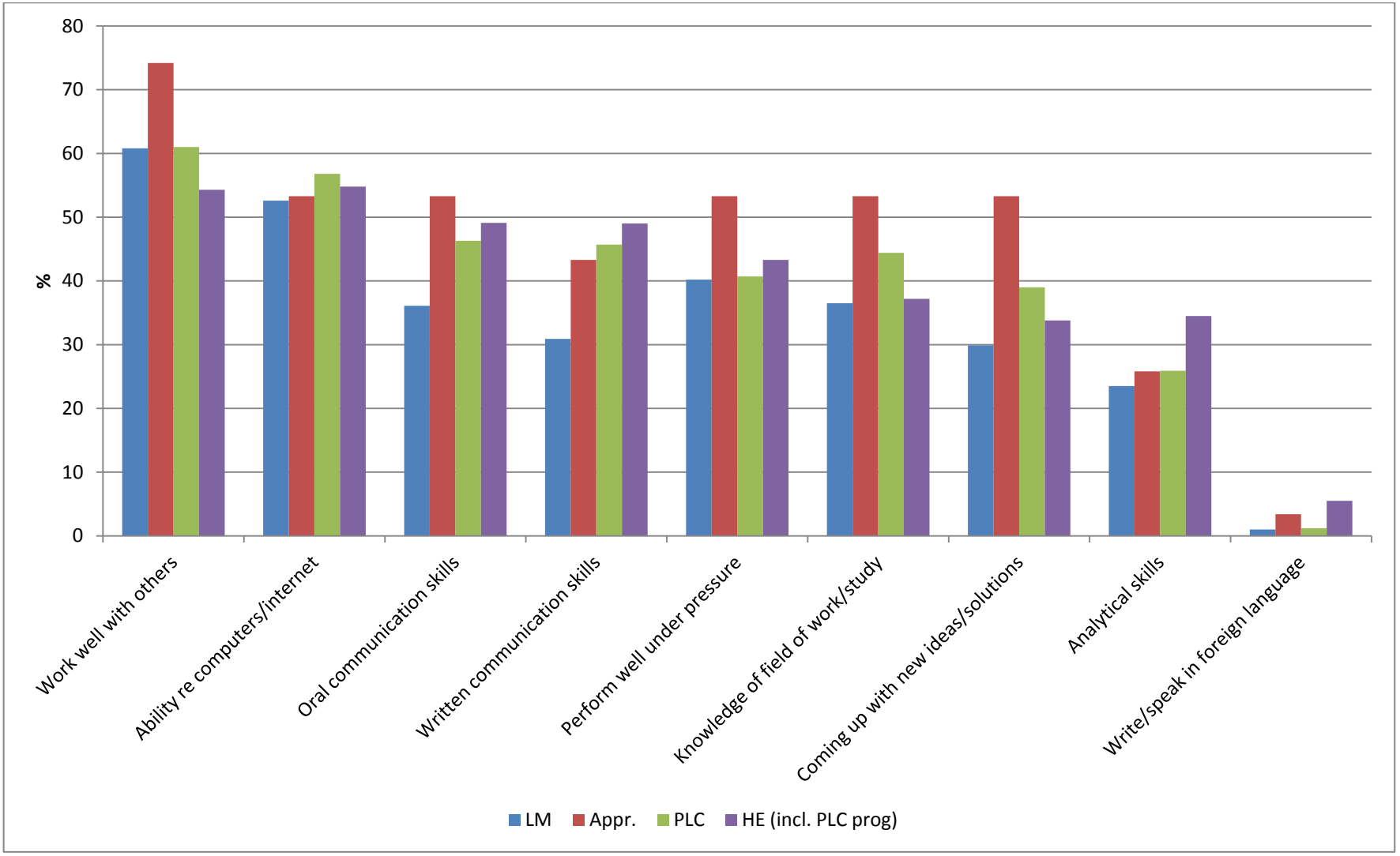
In reflecting on their skills and competencies, for the most part students' views do not vary across the different sectors and fields of study. However, students attending courses in the university sector rate their written communication skills significantly more highly than other students (57 per cent of those in universities feeling they have these skills 'to a great extent' compared with 42 per cent of those in the Institute of Technology sector). The pattern was similar for oral communication skills but the difference between the two sectors was not statistically significant.

FIGURE 7.5 Main Skills and Competencies Acquired by School Leavers



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 7.6 Main Skills and Competencies Acquired by School Leavers by Post-School Pathway



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

7.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter explored experiences of unemployment and employment among the cohort of school leavers. Unemployment was a common feature of the transitions process with more than four in ten of all young people having at least one spell of unemployment. Among those in employment, the majority are in lower sales and service occupations and routine occupations, that is, working-class jobs. Even among those who had completed higher education at the time of the survey, only one in six are engaged in the types of managerial and professional positions which might be considered commensurate with their qualifications, with the majority in sales and services jobs. In fact, half of the higher education graduates and 40 per cent of the PLC leavers surveyed felt that they did not use the knowledge and skills acquired through their education in their current job and around half of both groups rated their job as 'not at all' appropriate to their level of education. This pattern may be explained by the recent graduation of these young people; furthermore, the fact that many of the cohort were still in higher education at the time of the survey means that we cannot give a full picture of post-graduation outcomes. However, the pattern will be of concern if it persists beyond the early stages of labour market integration and young people become 'stuck' in these stop-gap jobs.

In reflecting upon their skills, young people are broadly positive about their ability to work well with others, ability to use computers/the internet, written communication skills and oral communication skills. However, they are much less positive about their analytical skills and report very low levels of being able to speak or write in a foreign language.

Chapter 8

Young People's Well-Being

8.1 Introduction

There has been a lack of research in Ireland on dimensions of young people's lives other than their educational and labour market experiences (for an exception, see Hannan, Ó Riain, 1993). The *Leaving School in Ireland* study has adopted a broader view of young people's experiences after leaving school, not only looking at the pathways they pursued but also looking at their health and well-being. Section 8.2 looks at the extent to which young people have established independent households and had children. Section 8.3 explores ratings of physical and mental health among the leavers. Section 8.4 looks at the extent to which young people are satisfied with key aspects of their lives while Section 8.5 looks at financial well-being in greater detail. Section 8.6 examines stress levels among the school leavers, comparing these to their stress levels while at school and relating them to aspects of life satisfaction.

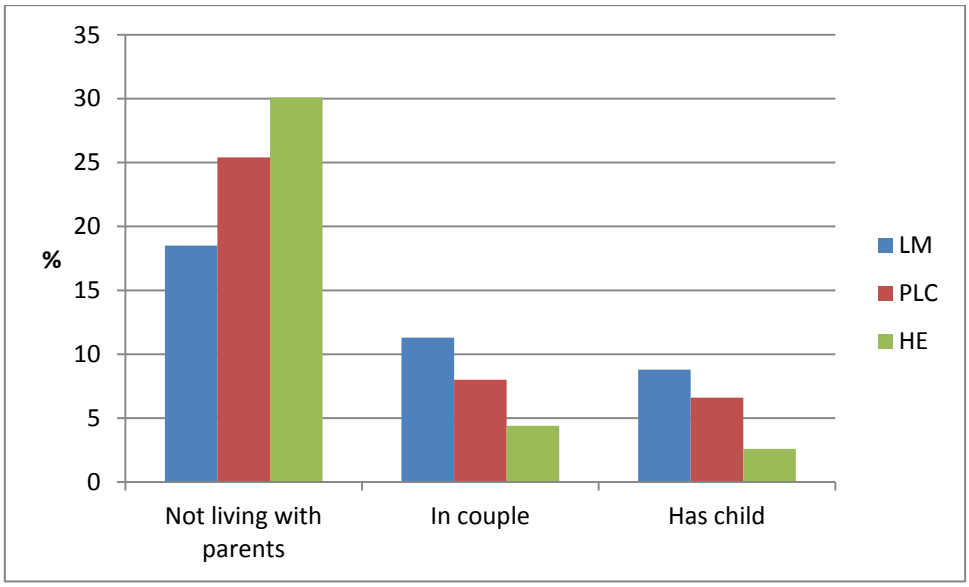
8.2 Household Formation

Almost three-quarters of the young people surveyed were living with their parents at the time of the survey, with the remainder in independent households (including college accommodation). Young men were somewhat less likely to live with their parents than their female peers, though these gender differences were not marked (76 per cent compared with 71 per cent). Young people whose mothers had lower levels of education were more likely to live with their parents than their peers were; 84 per cent of those whose mothers had lower secondary education (or less) lived with their parents compared with 65 per cent of those with graduate mothers. There were no significant differences in living arrangements by whether young people had special educational needs. Young people from immigrant families were somewhat less likely to live with their parents (64 per cent compared with 75 per cent).

The vast majority (94 per cent) of young people were single at the time of the survey, with the largest proportion of the remainder living as a couple rather than married or separated/divorced. Of the young people 5 per cent had children. Young men were somewhat more likely to be single than young women (95 per cent compared with 92 per cent) but the proportion who were parents did not vary by gender. Being single did not vary by social class, parental education,

immigrant status or whether the young person had a SEN. In contrast, having a child varied significantly by social class; 12 per cent of the most disadvantaged group, those of unknown social class origins, had a child compared with 2 per cent of those from middle-class (salariat) families. The likelihood of having a child also varied by parental education; 1 per cent of those with graduate mothers had a child compared with 8 per cent of those whose mothers had lower secondary education. Young people from immigrant families were somewhat more likely to have had a child by the time of the survey (9 per cent compared with 4 per cent).

FIGURE 8.1 Household Situation by Post-School Pathway



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

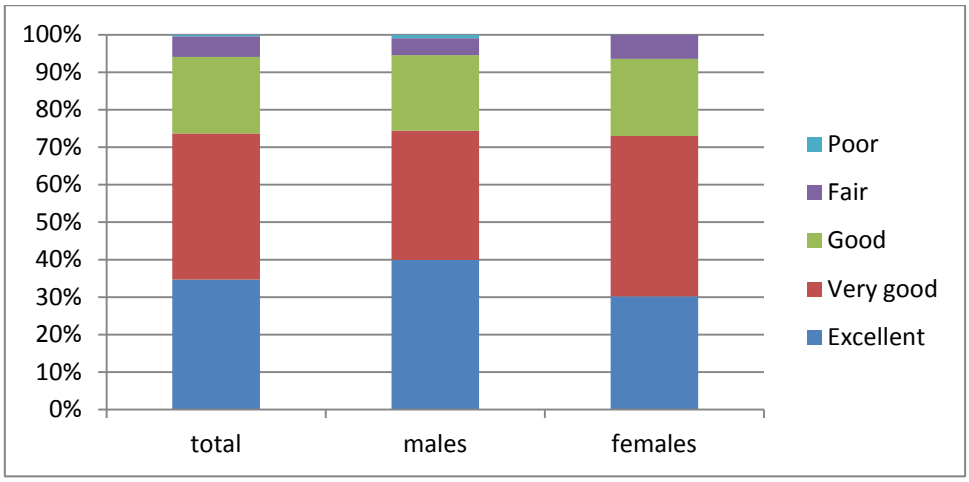
Young people's household situation varied significantly by the main post-school pathway they had pursued. Taking a post-school education course appears to be associated with moving out of the parental home, with the highest incidence of living with parents found among those who entered the labour market directly upon leaving school (Figure 8.1). The labour market group are most likely to be living as a couple and to have a child while the higher education group are least likely to have a child or be living as a couple.

8.3 HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

School leavers were asked to rate their overall health and mental health on a five-point scale from excellent to poor. Over one-third rate their health as excellent, with an additional 40 per cent rating it very good (Figure 8.2). Just 6 per cent of young people rate their health as fair or poor. Evaluations of mental health status are broadly comparable, with 43 per cent rating their mental health as excellent

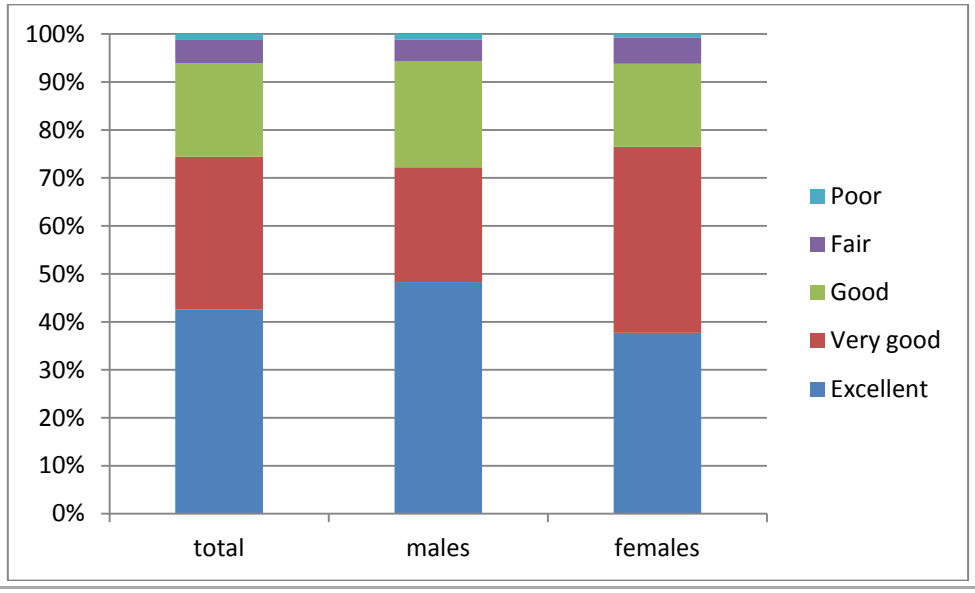
and 32 per cent as very good (Figure 8.3). Again just 6 per cent rate their mental health as fair or poor. For both health and mental health, males are more likely to rate them as excellent; in the case of mental health, for example, 48 per cent of males rate themselves as excellent compared to 38 per cent of females. Females, on the other hand, are more likely to rate themselves as very good. There is no gender differential in the proportions rating themselves as fair or poor.

FIGURE 8.2 Evaluation of Physical Health



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 8.3 Evaluation of Mental Health



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Young people with special educational needs were significantly less likely to report their physical health as excellent and more likely to describe it as fair or poor (Figure 8.4). In contrast, there were no significant differences by SEN status in self-reported mental health. Nor was there any significant variation by

individual social class background in self-reported physical or mental health. However, young people who had attended working-class schools gave more negative evaluations of their overall physical health than those who had been in socially mixed or middle-class schools (Figure 8.5). Although differences in self-reported mental health were not marked, those from working-class schools were somewhat less likely to rate their mental health as 'excellent' than those from other schools (35 per cent doing so compared with 46 per cent in mixed schools and 41 per cent in middle-class schools).

FIGURE 8.4 Evaluation of Physical Health by SEN Status

Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 8.5 Evaluation of Physical Health by School Social Mix

Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

8.4 SATISFACTION WITH LIFE

When we consider young people's satisfaction with different aspects of their lives, it appears they are much more positive about their friendships and accommodation, but less positive about their financial well-being and employment prospects. Just over half of the school leavers are satisfied with their financial situation and 60 per cent are satisfied with their employment prospects (Figure 8.6). Close to 70 per cent are satisfied with their current course/job and a similar proportion are satisfied with their workload. Females are more likely to be dissatisfied with their financial well-being and workload, but for the most part satisfaction levels do not vary significantly across young people from different social class backgrounds. Young people with special educational needs do not differ from other young people in their average life satisfaction levels. It appears that young people currently unemployed or economically inactive are least satisfied with their current situation, their financial well-being and their employment prospects. Young people who attended working-class schools are less satisfied than other young people with their current situation, workload and accommodation, a pattern related to the greater prevalence of unemployment and inactivity among these young people.

FIGURE 8.6 Satisfaction with Different Aspects of Life

Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

The small number of young people who had children were less satisfied than their peers with their accommodation, workload, employment prospects and, to some extent, financial situation. Interestingly, satisfaction with accommodation did not vary by whether the respondent lived with their parents or not. Mixed views on living with their parents were evident among the young people interviewed for the study. Those young people who were living away from the family home emphasised the value of being independent:

> I always said I'd move out when I was eighteen, always did. You know you don't want to be living with your parents when you're young and partying and everything. (Niamh, Belmore Street, employed)

> I like my independence and I like to feel I'm my own person. (Gerard, Park Street, higher education)

In contrast, others stressed the convenience of living in the parental home:

> I've nobody annoying me, I get dinner made for me, so it's handy for me. (Rosemary, Harris Street, employed)

> It's comfortable at home, I get my dinners made for me. I get on really well with my parents. (Brendan, Lang Street, unemployed)

As Brendan points out, strong family ties make it easier to remain in the parental home. Similarly, Siobhan, who described herself as a 'home bird' (see Chapter 6), saw leaving the parental home as occurring sometime in the future, but not immediately:

> Maybe when I kind of like, you know, had a good job and, you know, a good wage probably I'd move out like, when I'm a bit older like. (Siobhan, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

In contrast, others would prefer not to be living at home because of the constraints they felt it placed on them:

> If I was to pick ... I probably would [live alone], you know, just to be that more independent ... I feel like I'm being held back a bit by living at home and, you know that kind of way, but I mean it's not that bad. (Moira, Harris Street, employed)

In many cases, financial circumstances meant it was not feasible for young people to establish an independent household: 'I would like to move out but it's unrealistic at the moment' (Robert, Lang Street, unemployed).

8.5 FINANCIAL WELL-BEING

Only 13 per cent of the young people surveyed were 'very satisfied' with their financial situation, with a further 40 per cent describing themselves as 'satisfied'. Satisfaction levels were highest among those working or on apprenticeships and lowest among those who were unemployed or outside the labour market. Money worries were highlighted by several young people in the qualitative sample. Brian, who was unemployed, emphasised the lack of money he had to deal with his day-to-day needs:

> I think I have about €25 at the end of the week after I pay everything I owe. It's unheard of to try and live on that. (Brian, Dawes Point, unemployed)

Brian's financial situation was seen as impinging on the activities in which he could engage, making it difficult to socialise with his friends:

> If anybody says do you want to go and do this, I say no, I don't have it [the money]. All my friends now, they've started up a football team for the summer ... I said I'd be on it and but then it's like €25 a week and go into town, I'm not going to do that. ... It's only little things but it gets you like. (Brian, Dawes Point, unemployed)

Money difficulties were not confined to the unemployed, however, with some of the employees reporting their financial situation to be 'a struggle' (Bridget, Barrack Street, employed), reflecting the fact that many were working in routine service and sales jobs:

> Poor, definitely and I work really hard. I work from nine to seven five days a week and I'd be lucky to come out with three hundred euros. ... Yeah. It's really bad, really bad. (Deirdre, Harris Street, employee)

Catherine, a student with a child, reported that:

> I struggle a bit at the moment but it's because I have different loans out so I'm trying to clear them. (Catherine, Harris Street, PLC)

The interviewees who described their financial situation as 'satisfactory' were either working or drawing on their family for support. Moira (Harris Street), who was employed in a shop, noted that she is 'very good' with her money and always has some savings, making her situation 'very comfortable'. For Patrick, who also worked in a shop, the level of his wages was very important to him:

> I like having a weekly wage where I don't have to worry about paying bills or anything like that you know because after everything is paid like I have money left over for myself and I like having that. I don't want to go to a job where all my money is gone on bills. (Patrick, Park Street, PLC, employed)

Carol (Harris Street) reported that her job pays her 'a good bit of money' but her financial situation is affected by the student loans she is repaying. Although Niamh (Belmore Street) was unemployed at the time of the interview, she reported her financial situation to be satisfactory as 'my husband's job is good and pretty well paid'. Robert, also unemployed, reported his situation as 'comfortable' but he was dependent on his parents for indirect support and was not in a position to move out of the parental home (see above). The contrast between the situation of those living in the parental home and those trying to establish an independent household was described by Catherine:

> If you are living on your own, it's quite difficult but if you are in your family home leaving school or college and there's no work out there, you are kind of okay, but not if you are on your own. If you have to pay bills and that, if you want to finish college and your head is set to get a job and then if you can't get a job, it's all more got to do with financial worries you'd be thinking about. That's what it all comes down to at the end of the day. If you don't have money, you can't do anything. (Catherine, Harris Street, PLC)

Young people who had taken part in post-school education and training were asked how they had funded their participation. Across all students, money from parents/family is the source cited by most, followed by income from employment and indirect support from family (Figure 8.7). Just under 70 per cent of school leavers indicate that their parents provide money to assist them in their studies, with 37 per cent indicating that their family assists indirectly with food or accommodation. Just under half indicate that they draw on income from employment, while one-quarter receive State support through a grant. One in five relies on savings and 7 and 6 per cent avail of a bank loan or rely on social welfare payments respectively. Males and females do not differ greatly in their source of funding, although females are more likely to cite money from family or a bank loan, while males are more likely to indicate income from employment and the State grant.

In the qualitative sample, many students reported receiving financial assistance from their parents. In addition, most students were engaged in part-time work that contributed towards their expenses in college.

> My parents [contributed]. Well the registration fee is two thousand, so that's not so bad. (Karen, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

> My mother [contributed]. For first year and then second year I took out a loan out of the Credit Union, third year I did the same thing and I worked weekends. (Sandra, Belmore Street, higher education)

> Yeah, well they, my parents like when I started college we made the agreement that they would pay for it like. So I have that and I just work on the weekends and that. (Gerard, Park Street, higher education)

> ... the registration fees would be about fifteen hundred and my parents paid them alright but let's say I would have paid, I would have paid all my petrol in and out and I would have paid for books and stuff like that but other than that, you know, my parents paid the registration which would have been a good, you know, fifteen hundred or so, so that was every year so that was a good whack of it, but other than that I'd say I financed it myself really. (Ronan, Park Street, PLC and higher education)

Anthony worked a 20 hour week throughout his college course, which covered all of his living expenses and his fees as he did not qualify for a State maintenance grant.

> I'd always have money to be able to buy let's say my own text books, clothes for myself, to be able to buy, you know lunch for myself every day in the college, to be able to have fees, you know pay my fees. And I'd always be able to, let's say in the summer I'd be able to maybe go on a holiday for myself and all that. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)

Some young people were eligible for a State maintenance grant but supplemented this by other sources of income.

> Yeah, yeah, the grant, that's paying for me to go and then I get like a small bit of pocket money every month off them as well ... they pay for me to go to college, the registration fee, and then I get about, money every month which works out at about thirty euro a week, which isn't really a whole lot, especially when I have my own car to commute, for petrol and stuff ... but then having my own job kind of helps in that kind of way because I couldn't really rely on that [grant] money, you know, it's very little, like I couldn't rely on that money on its own so working is kind of a help to me. ((Siobhan, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

> Yeah, well this year I'll get the grant, please God, touch wood, in anyway so, but last year I had to just work the whole Summer to pay it and pay for me own bills. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

While most people mentioned working part-time, one interviewee noted that combining work with study can have a negative effect on progress in college.

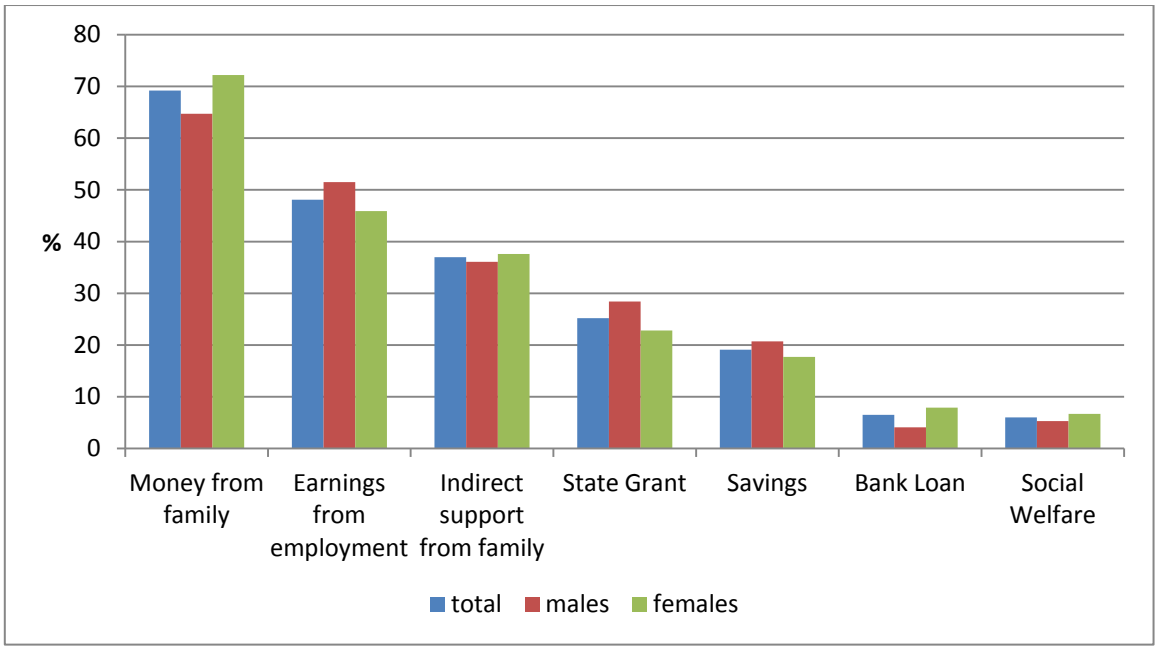
> I was always able to pay my own way, I was always able to get my fees together and I would always have money for, you know have money for

> socialising, I'd have money to keep myself, you know having nice clothes, so I'd really always have money to be able to do whatever I needed ... So I found working part time I could do it, it would take a bit of a strain on your education. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)

Dermot found juggling work and study/college difficult; he goes to his part-time job directly from college every weekday and does not get home until 9.30pm. He feels that this impacts on his college work, so around exam time he cuts down on the number of hours he works, but still finds it very difficult to get all of the required material covered before the exams:

> ... some people in my class would probably be studying more during the year than I'd probably be doing, most of the times I'm too tired [with working part-time], but then I'm cramming it all in but I try and take, leave enough time off around exam periods but it is very tough. (Dermot, Dixon Street, higher education)

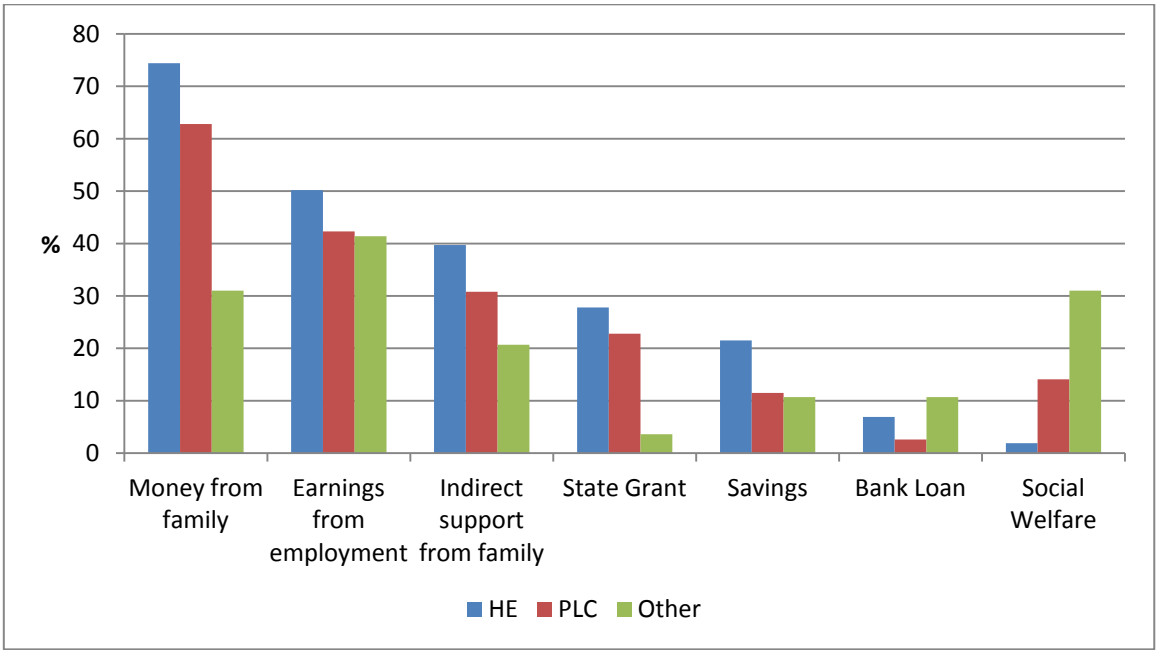
FIGURE 8.7 Funding Post-School Education



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

Figure 8.7 shows the sources of funding drawn on by the group of young people who took part in post-school education. Results from the survey illustrate considerable variation across education sectors in terms of main income sources, with HE participants more likely to cite money from family, indirect support from family, the State grant and savings (Figure 8.8). Participants in 'other' courses, which include State-sponsored training and apprenticeships, rely heavily on social welfare support – with nearly one-third indicating this as a source of income. Direct support from family is much lower for this group, with just 31 per cent indicating money from family as a source of income.

FIGURE 8.8 Funding Post-School Education by Education Sector



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

For some not being eligible for a State maintenance grant or losing eligibility either after failing exams or after a change in the eligibility thresholds created substantial additional pressure for the entire family:

> You don't get the grant at all when you're a repeat student, which is fair enough, if they're paying the grant you need to work, so it was fine, my first year was paid for and then, so fair enough, but then the next year they were like 'no, we dropped the thing or whatever', I said I got it two years ago, one year I spent like nearly five grand on college out of my own pocket, even though only one parent works, my other one is on early retirement pension, which is pittance, and she has two other jobs as well, but somehow we managed. (Carol, Harris Street, higher education)

A number of young people commented on perceived inequities in the system of eligibility for the current state maintenance grant system, perhaps best expressed by Anthony:

> Yeah, I'd know people who got the grant as well, it's very good, ... it's more fair to some people than others but some people miss out ... if their parents are like even a few hundred over what the threshold is, they can't get it whereas people who are just under get it or people who have, let's say their parents split up, pretty much get it straight away regardless of what money they make. Or people who can hide their money, where parents are self-employed, they can hide their money and that way they can get the grant as

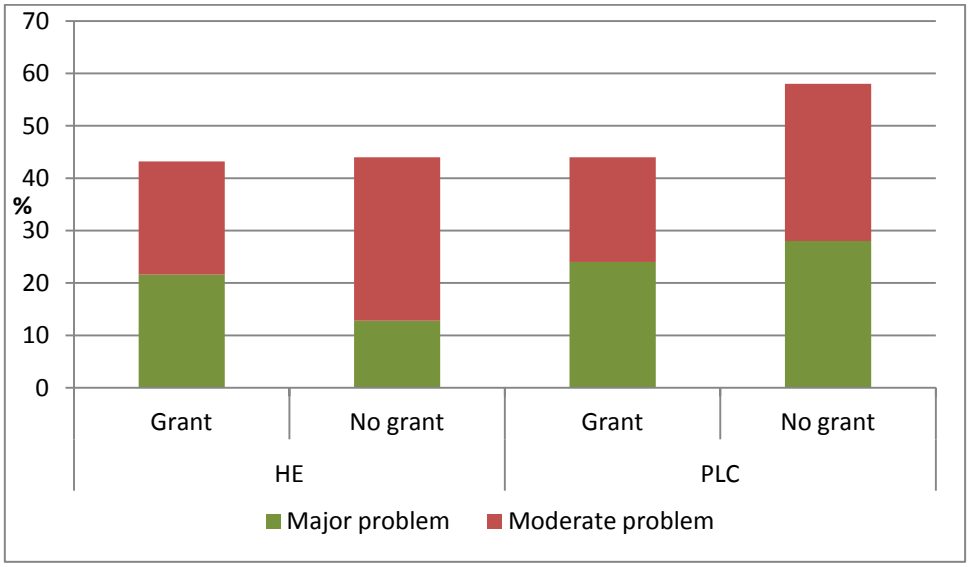
> well even though their parents have well enough money to send them to college. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)

Similarly, Sandra feels that the system has been unfair for her:

> And I had to work, whereas people who are maybe just a couple of thousand below they get full grants, get paid, don't have to work, it's unfair ... I'm going to have to pay five thousand euro this year, I'm going to have to take out a full loan myself, I'm going to have to work while I'm doing it, whereas my cousin, he's going back to College, he didn't even complete it and he's getting everything paid for and it just seems very unfair, unbalanced. (Sandra, Belmore Street, higher education)

However, results from the survey show that higher education students in receipt of some form of State financial support (including maintenance grants) were found to be more likely to consider financial difficulties a major problem than other students (Figure 8.9). In total, 22 per cent of higher education students in receipt of a grant indicated that financial difficulties during their first year of study were a major problem. Those not in receipt of a grant were more likely to indicate such difficulties to be a moderate problem. Among PLC participants, the patterns are less clear – although those not in receipt of financial support are more likely to indicate financial difficulties to be at least a moderate problem. These results may well relate to the living situation of the different groups of school leavers, with over three-quarters of PLC participants still living with their parents, while a significant share (nearly one-third) of higher education students are living independently.

FIGURE 8.9 Extent to which Financial Difficulties are a Problem and Whether in Receipt of Grant

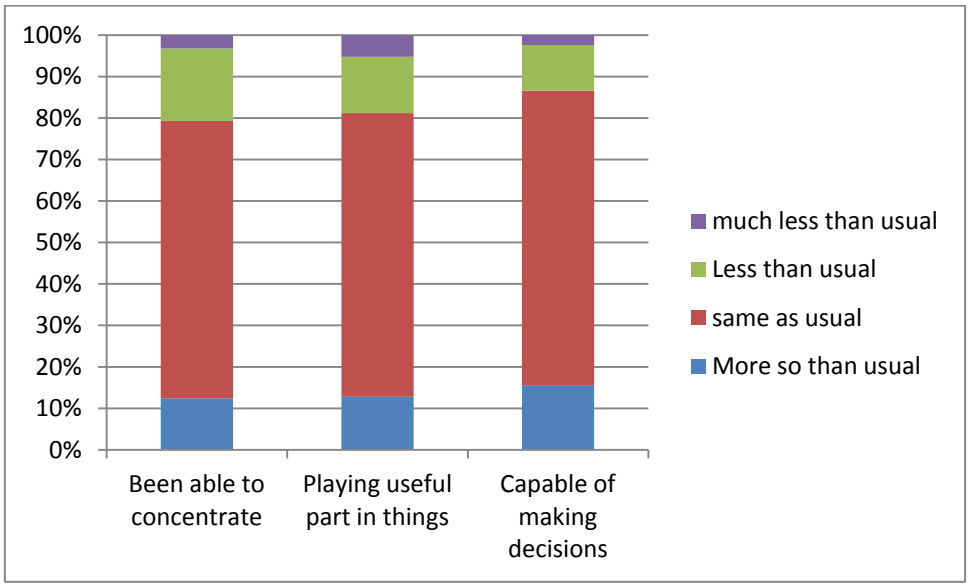


Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

8.5 Well-Being and Stress

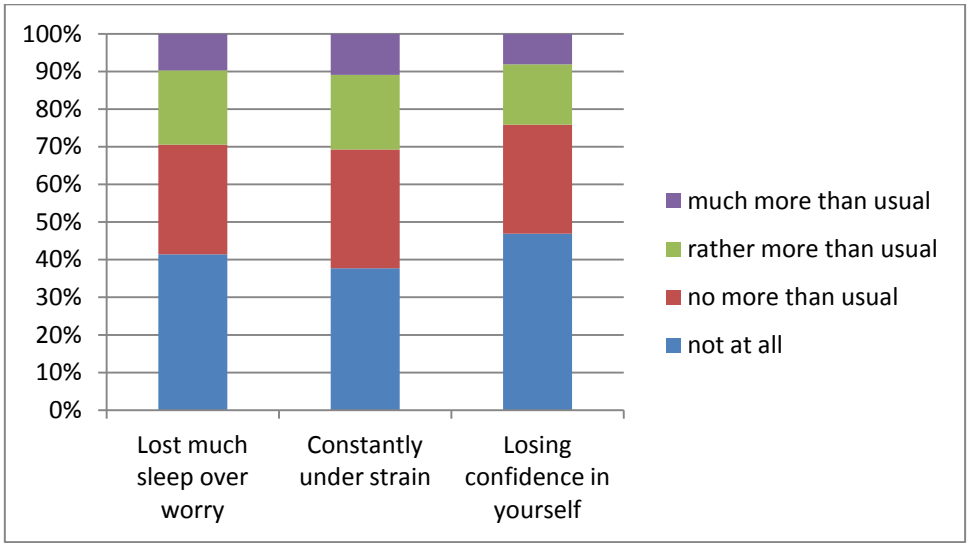
As part of the survey, school leavers were presented with a set of statements and asked whether they experienced feelings of stress more or less than usual in the few weeks prior to the survey. These items are based on a modified version of the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1978), designed to reflect current stress levels. This scale was used in the *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study* with sixth year students. In terms of the individual statements, Figures 8.9a and 8.9b present the results for the full sample of school leavers. Overall, one fifth of school leavers indicate that in relation to being able to concentrate on things, they are able to do so 'less' or 'much less than usual'. Similarly one-fifth feel that they have been playing a useful part in things less than usual. In relation to losing sleep over worry recently, 10 per cent feel they have done so much more than usual and 20 per cent more than usual. Similarly, 30 per cent feel that they have felt under strain more than usual, while one-quarter report losing confidence in themselves.

Figure 8.9a Stress Levels Among School Leavers



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

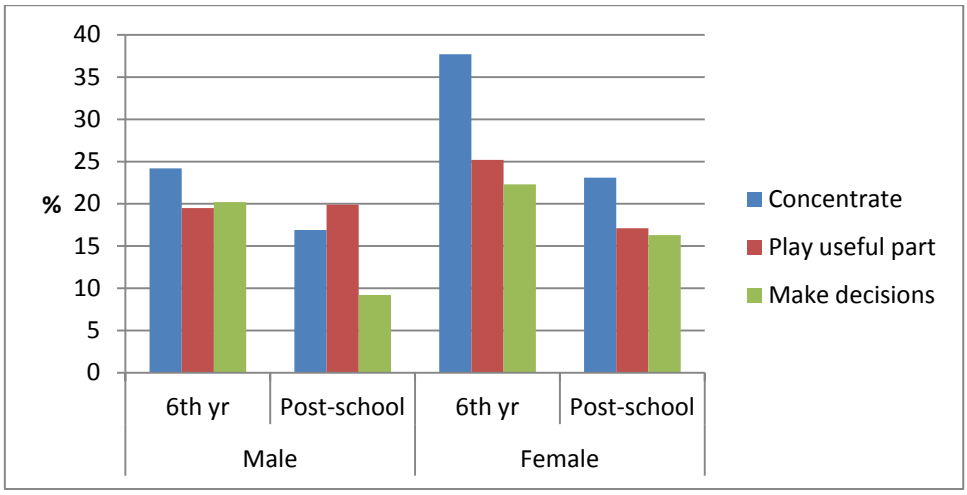
FIGURE 8.9b Stress Levels Among School Leavers



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

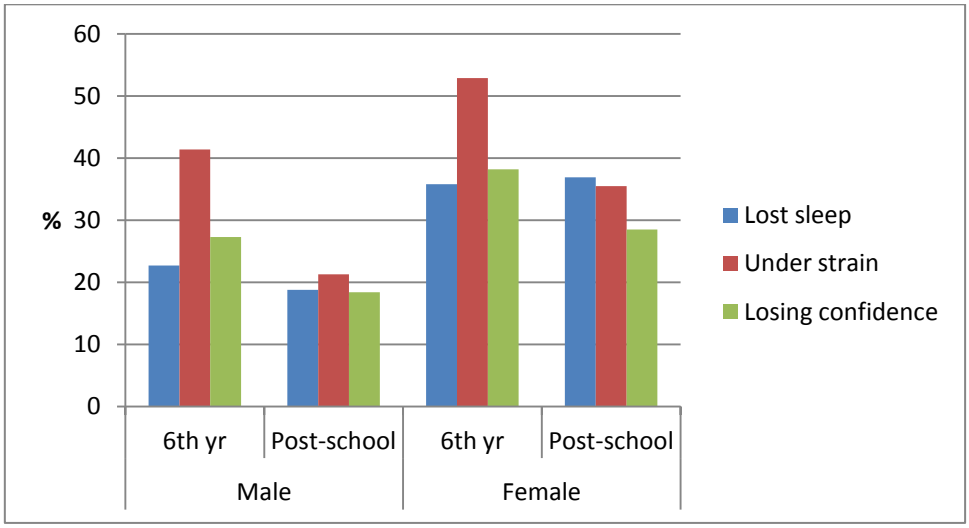
Figures 8.10a and 8.10b show stress levels in sixth year and at the time of the survey (3-4 years later) for those young people who participated in both surveys. Gender differences are found at both time-points, with young women reporting higher levels of stress for most items than young men. Overall, current stress levels are found to be substantially lower than those found at sixth year, though the pattern of change varies across different dimensions of stress. While 53 per cent of female students in sixth year reported that they feel constantly under strain 'more' or 'much more' than usual, this has fallen to 36 per cent at this point 3-4 years after having left school. Among males, 41 per cent reported being constantly under strain more than usual in sixth year, falling to 21 per cent in the post-school period. Interestingly, the proportion of young women indicating that they lose sleep over worry is fairly stable between the two time-points.

FIGURE 8.10a Stress Levels in Sixth Year and Post-School (% 'less'/'much less than usual')



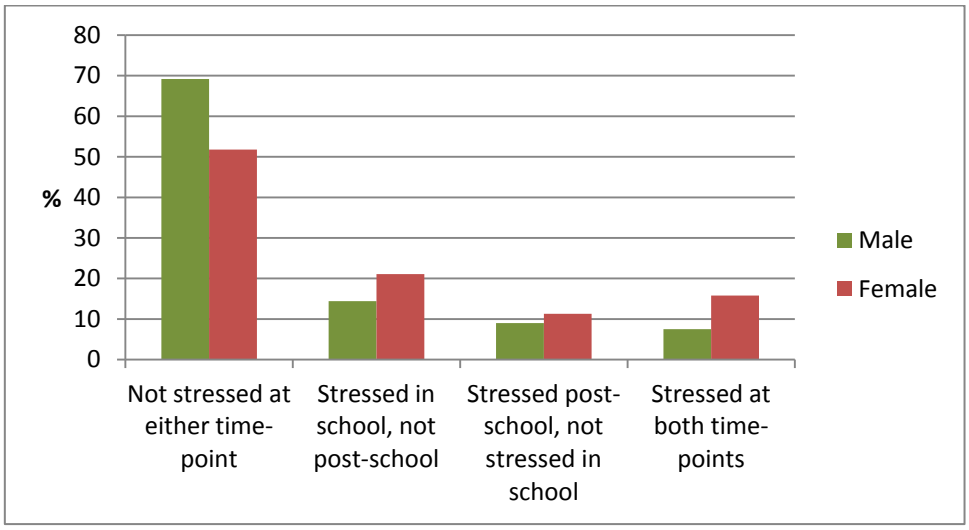
Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 8.10b Stress Levels in Sixth Year and Post-School (% 'rather'/'much more than usual')



Source: *Leaving School in Ireland* study.

FIGURE 8.11 Comparison of 'High' Stress Levels at Both Time-Points



Although overall levels of stress reduce over time, this may not be the case for all young people. To explore the dynamics of stress, the six items presented above were used to form a scale of current stress at both time-points. This scale is reliable with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.79. Reflecting previous international research using GHQ scores to measure stress, a threshold of 2.5 from a maximum of 4 is used to designate 'high' stress levels. The majority (69 per cent) of young men and just over half (52 per cent) of young women do not fall into the high stress category in either year. A significant proportion of young people report a change in stress levels between the two time-points (Figure 8.11); the most common pattern is to move from reporting high stress levels at school to indicating lower stress levels after leaving school (21 per cent of women and 14 per cent of men). A certain proportion of young people report very high stress

levels at both time-points, and this is twice as common among young women as men (16 per cent compared with 8 per cent).

Table 8.1 presents a series of multivariate multilevel models of the factors affecting overall stress levels. In keeping with the descriptive results, males have lower stress levels than females, even controlling for social background characteristics, Leaving Certificate performance and post-school pathways. It appears that stress continues to be a more serious concern for females in the post-school period. It is interesting to note that stress levels do not vary according to individual social class, having a SEN or immigrant status. School social mix relates to stress levels – young people who attended middle-class or socially mixed school contexts are less likely to report stress than those who attended working-class school contexts. These findings hold even when we take account of young people's status at the time of the survey. Adverse life events experienced while at school are significantly associated with later stress levels; those who had a family member who was ill or disabled and those who had a family member in prison report higher stress levels than other young people. Those who achieved higher Leaving Certificate grades have somewhat higher stress levels in the post-school period than other leavers, a pattern which is related to the fact that this group is disproportionately found in higher education (compare Models 1 and 2). Stress levels reported mid-way through sixth year are strongly predictive of stress levels three to four years after leaving school.[21]

Chapter 6 explored the proportion of young people who would select a different pathway if they could choose again. Those who would not choose the same pathway and those who would choose the same route 'to some extent' have higher stress levels than other young people, even taking account of their status at the time of the survey. Participants in higher education report significantly higher stress levels than those in employment, while young people currently unemployed also report higher stress levels.[22] Young people who are not currently economically active (predominantly those who are disabled or engaged in caring responsibilities) also report somewhat higher stress levels (Model 2). This variation in psychological distress by employment status is consistent with the patterns found among young people in the late 1980s (Hannan, Ó Riain, 1993).

[21] Information on sixth year stress levels was not available for 53 respondents. These are included in the model with a dummy variable estimating the impact of having missing information. The model was also calculated excluding this group but the coefficient estimates were similar to those presented here.

[22] Additional analyses (not reported here) explored the extent to which living situation (that is, living with parents or not) was associated with current stress levels. The impact was not significant so this factor is not included in the final model.

TABLE 8.1 Multilevel Regression Models of Factors Associated with Stress (GHQ Scale)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	1.433	1.333	1.314
Male	-0.165**	-0.206***	-0.190***
Social Class (ref: working class)			
Salariat	-0.064	-0.067	-0.046
Intermediate	0.034	0.027	0.051
Missing	-0.112	-0.120	-0.066
SEN	-0.019	0.005	0.051
Immigrant	-0.005	0.006	0.002
Adverse life events while at school:			
Family/self ill/disabled	0.236***	0.229***	0.185**
Family/self in prison	0.335*	0.305±	0.296*
Stress levels in 6th year	0.278***	0.256***	0.198***
School Social Mix (ref: working class)			
Mixed/Middle class	-0.188**	-0.208**	-0.190**
LC Grade Point Average	0.011±	0.007	-0.116
LCA programme	-0.125	-0.213	0.005
Take same pathway again (ref. Yes)			
To some extent		0.146*	0.106±
No		0.217***	0.150**
Current Status (ref: employed)			
HE		0.247***	0.192***
PLC		-0.029	-0.057
Unemployed		0.341***	0.295*
Other		0.205*	-0.010
Satisfaction with financial situation (ref. Very satisfied):			
Satisfied			0.137±
Dissatisfied			0.266**
Very dissatisfied			0.360***
Satisfaction with employment prospects (ref. Very satisfied):			
Satisfied			-0.059
Dissatisfied			0.117
Very dissatisfied			0.246**
Individual-level variance explained	15.2	21.0	28.9
		497 young people within 12 schools	

Note: *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10.

Model 3 looks at the extent to which young people's stress levels are associated with dissatisfaction with their financial situation or their employment prospects.[23] Compared to those who are 'very satisfied' with their financial situation, all other groups report higher stress levels. Stress levels are also higher among those who are 'very dissatisfied' with their employment prospects. Perceptions of their financial situation and of their employment prospects account for the higher stress levels reported by the economically inactive (compare Models 2 and 3). Some of the higher stress levels found among the unemployed and higher education students appears partly related to their perceived financial situation and employment prospects but these groups continue to have significantly higher stress levels than other young people even taking these factors into account.

The in-depth interviews with young people provided further insights into the factors influencing their stress levels. For those who were unemployed, their poor financial situation and 'sitting at home doing nothing' (Niamh, Belmore Street) resulted in stress. As in sixth year, exams were seen as a major driver of stress for students, with increased pressure felt in the run-up to exams, especially in the final year.

> I suppose coming up to the exams, you know, and you're talking to lecturers and they tell you what they want from you and what they expect from you and you're kind of like, you know, that's probably when you, if they start telling you what they expect from you and you're kind of like, you know, that, probably listening to that and you're getting stressed out. (Siobhan, Belmore Street, PLC and higher education)

Managing project deadlines were also seen as source of stress in combination with final year exams (see Chapter 7):

> It was just fourth year ... it was just a lot of, lot of stress and work you know, to go for what you wanted and stuff like that. (Denise, Harris Street, higher education)

However, not all young people reacted to impending exams in the same way:

> I'd be fairly laid back enough about it, even exams. Of course you'd have a certain amount of stress, have I studied the right thing, have I done enough work, but once you go in and you sit down you do it like, you have the work done and I got it done. And it was fine, you know. (Thomas, Park Street, higher education)

[23] This relationship should not be interpreted as causal since stress and satisfaction are measured at the same point in time. However, controlling for previous stress levels and a range of other factors means that we can suggest whether stress may be related to broader feelings of dissatisfaction.

For Fiona, the transition to higher education was seen as more stressful than later stages, with the combination of the college workload, part-time employment and lack of friends on the same course causing her difficulties:

> It was just all the pressure from everything, it was horrible, that's why I would say that was just my darkest kind of moment was at the beginning because of not having people around. ... I hardly had any sleep because of all the travel and everything ... You're drained from the travelling, from the whole day, having to wake up so early and being in class and trying to concentrate for those nine or ten classes of the day, so there was too much pressure like. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

Other young people reported personal issues that in some cases impinged on their studying, with Anthony repeating a year in college as a result of such difficulties:

> I would have been stressed because, it wasn't anything to do with study, it was actually a relationship that went pretty badly but I kind of didn't have the maturity to deal with it well with regards to college. I actually let it get me down a lot and I kind of ended up not really doing the college work I was supposed to be doing. (Anthony, Park Street, higher education)

8.6 Conclusions

This chapter has looked at young people's well-being and health three to four years after leaving school. Young people are found to be broadly positive about their physical and mental health. They are also positive about different domains of their lives, especially accommodation, friendships, their course/job, and their workload. They are somewhat less positive about their employment prospects and financial well-being than about other aspects of their lives. Young people who are unemployed or economically inactive are less satisfied with several different aspects of their lives. The small proportion of young people, 5 per cent, who are parents report less satisfaction than their peers with their accommodation, workload, employment prospects and, to some extent, financial situation.

Stress levels are found to be lower in the post-school period than in sixth year. However, having higher stress levels while at school is associated with higher stress at a later date. There is a persistent gender difference in reported stress, with higher levels found among female leavers. Stress levels are higher among the unemployed and the economically inactive, in keeping with previous Irish research (Hannan, Ó Riain, 1993). Those in higher education had higher stress levels than those in employment, with preparation for the final year exams

emerging as a driver of stress for many. Stress levels were also associated with experiencing adverse life events, regretting the pathway taken, as well as dissatisfaction with the financial situation and employment prospects.

Chapter 9

Conclusions

This report contains the findings of the *Leaving School in Ireland* study, a mixed methods study drawing on a survey of 753 young people three to four years after completing the Leaving Certificate and in-depth interviews with 27 of this group. The study has collected detailed information on post-school pathways and experiences among the cohort of young people who took part in the *Post-Primary Longitudinal Study*, which followed a cohort of around 900 young people from first to sixth year in 12 case-study schools, selected to capture variation in school organisation and school social mix. The *Leaving School in Ireland* study is thus the first of its kind allowing us to link school experiences to post-school outcomes in the Irish context. This cohort of young people is of particular interest as they went through the second-level educational system during a period of economic boom but left school at the onset of a period of recession. The first section of this chapter outlines the main findings of the study while the second section highlights the implications of the findings for policy development.

9.1 Main Findings

9.1.1 Social Inequalities in Post-School Pathways

Taking account of both the initial pathways pursued by young people on completing school and their trajectories over the early post-school years, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the pathways and decisions young people take during the post-school period. Higher education was the dominant pathway pursued by those who completed the Leaving Certificate, accounting for 61 per cent of young people in the sample, with a minority engaged in further education (apprenticeship or PLC course, 22 per cent) or entering the labour market directly (17 per cent). Entry to further education was found to be highly gendered, with no females taking apprenticeships and females over-represented in PLC courses. Young people from working-class backgrounds were less likely than their middle-class peers to go on to higher education, a pattern that was largely related to their lower levels of Leaving Certificate performance, which in turn reflected earlier processes of disengagement from school and negative interaction with teachers. Again largely because of lower Leaving Certificate grades, young people with a special educational need (SEN) were less likely than their peers to go on to higher education. As might be expected, Leaving Certificate performance was highly predictive of entry to higher education, with lower-achieving young people more likely to enter the labour market directly.

There is also evidence to show that LCA leavers faced greater difficulty in accessing paid employment, with higher unemployment levels.

In line with earlier work (McCoy *et al.*, 2010a), the findings show that school context and experiences made a significant difference to the pathways pursued upon leaving school and were particularly significant in influencing whether young people progressed to some form of post-school education and training and in the nature of education pursued. Young people who attended a school with a concentration of working-class students were much less likely to go on to higher education than those who attended middle-class or socially mixed schools, even controlling for individual social background and Leaving Certificate grades. Overall, those who attended mixed schools and, even more strikingly, middle-class schools were more likely than those from working-class schools to go on to some form of post-school education and training, with leavers from working-class schools more likely to enter the labour market directly.

Attitudes to school were found to be predictive of the pathways pursued. Those who in hindsight found schoolwork engaging were more likely to go on to higher education or a PLC course, as were those who found schoolwork demanding. The significant value of this study is that we can investigate the impact of attitudes developed as young people moved through the school system on their later outcomes. Educational aspirations were found to be formed relatively early on in second-level education, with third year students reporting that they hoped to go on to a sub-degree or degree course much more likely to actually enter higher education two to three years later. Post-school pathways were also largely predicated on earlier educational success, with those who achieved higher Junior Certificate grades more likely to go on to higher education or to an apprenticeship. Post-school education and training was found to attract those who already had a positive experience of second-level education – those who liked school and who did not have negative interaction with their teachers. Students with a more positive academic self-image (that is, positive perceptions of their own ability to cope with schoolwork) in third year were also more likely to progress. Those reporting more positive attitudes towards school in sixth year were also more likely to progress to further study, all else being equal. Earlier reports have shown that the quality of teacher-student interaction is highly predictive of completing second-level education and of exam performance (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Smyth *et al*., 2011b). A key finding of this study is that school climate is also important in post-school transitions. Students reporting negative interaction with teachers in third year were much less likely to pursue post-school education (higher education or PLC).

The results also show important differences across young people in the extent to which they reflected positively on the levels of encouragement and support they received from their teachers. In particular, there was a clear social gradient in the extent to which the school leavers felt that their teachers held high expectations for them – middle-class young people being more likely to reflect positively. Progression to post-school education and training for many was underpinned by positive views of the nature of expectation and encouragement received from teachers. The study highlights the importance of having a school climate that fosters high expectations and positive engagement among students from early on in junior cycle, a climate that would enhance post-school outcomes for young people.

The social mix of the school setting also played a role, particularly in terms of levels of motivation and engagement while at school. Young people who attended schools with a predominately working-class intake or socially mixed intake were more likely to report that they could have done better in the Leaving Certificate examination than their peers in middle-class school settings. In sum, the results highlight the importance of a culture of high expectations and support in promoting successful post-school transitions for second-level students. In line with earlier research (McCoy *et al*., 2010a; Smyth and Banks, 2012), higher education assumes a more 'taken for granted' status in middle-class school settings, enhancing the chances of successful progression for these students.

9.1.2 Guidance and Decision Making

Young people relied on both formal and informal sources of information, guidance counsellors and parents, in making decisions about what to do after leaving school. Middle-class young people were more reliant on their parents as a source of information while working-class students and immigrant groups were more reliant on school-based forms of guidance. Survey responses indicated that almost two-thirds of the young people were happy with the guidance they had received at school, with somewhat more nuanced responses emerging from the in-depth interviews. Young people valued the detailed information offered and the personal qualities of the guidance counsellor, highlighting in particular the importance of one-to-one sessions. However, issues were raised by interviewees regarding constraints on time for guidance, particularly for more personalised, one-to-one discussion. Concerns were also expressed about the absence of information on options other than higher education and on the employment opportunities following from the courses in which they were interested. Those who had been uncertain of their future direction were more critical of guidance provision than their peers.

In making decisions about their post-school pathways, most young people highlighted the importance of intrinsic reasons – wanting to study a subject they were interested in, personal fulfilment and being able to get an interesting job. However, young people who had attended working-class schools were more likely to value extrinsic reasons – an income and a secure job, suggesting greater risk aversion among this group (McCoy *et al*., 2010a; Reay *et al*., 2005)

While the vast majority (78%) of the leavers had applied to attend higher education, there were important processes shaping the decision not to apply among those who did not. Financial concerns and a desire to earn an income featured strongly, as did a lack of intrinsic motivation. Levels of application were much lower among young people from working-class backgrounds and just half of those from working-class school contexts applied, reflecting a climate of lower expectations in the school and local area. The course chosen was often based on liking related subjects at school with the choice of institution linked to proximity in many cases, in line with recent research (Cullinan *et al*., 2013). Those who progressed to higher education placed a greater weight on studying a subject of interest to them than those who took a PLC course.

9.1.3 Realising Goals and Regrets

Not all young people were able to realise their plans upon leaving school – one in six did not realise their plans at all while over a fifth only did so 'to some extent'. Leavers with lower LCE/LCVP grades or those who had taken the LCA programme were much less likely to realise their goals than those with higher grades. Working-class young people were much less likely to attain their goals, largely because of their lower Leaving Certificate grades.

In terms of regrets, almost half (47%) would not choose the same post-school pathway if they could choose again either completely or 'to some extent'. Middle-class school leavers, and those who attended middle-class schools, were less likely to regret the pathway taken than working-class leavers. Higher-performing leavers were also less likely to regret their pathways. Young people who entered the labour market directly upon leaving school had disproportionately experienced frustrated goals and had more regrets about their route. This is likely to reflect the fact that they left school during a period of recession, making it difficult to obtain (stable) employment. In contrast, higher-performing students who went on to higher education were less likely to have regrets about the pathway pursued. For many young people, PLC courses appeared to have been a compromise rather than a specific goal, especially where they did not go on to further study on completion. Regrets reflected a

number of different processes: not being able to realise their desired goal, largely because of lower Leaving Certificate grades; courses not being what was anticipated, in some cases, resulting in non-completion; and completing a course before realising the specific field of study was 'not for them'.

Looking to the future, the majority of the young people surveyed expected to be in full-time employment in five years' time. Those in higher education were more likely to expect to be in employment, while those in apprenticeships/training schemes were more likely to anticipate unemployment. Emigration figured significantly on young people's horizons, with 43 per cent considering it unlikely or very unlikely that they would be living in Ireland in five years' time. The prospect of emigration was salient across all groups of leavers, with dissatisfaction with their current situation and financial well-being emerging as the main drivers of emigration intentions.

9.1.4 Transition to Post-School Education

There has been a lack of empirical evidence to date on how young people in Ireland experience the transition to post-school education, although this has been flagged as an important policy issue (see HEA, NCCA, 2011) and is being specifically examined by the Transition Reform Steering Group, which is discussed in section 9.2.

In reflecting on their experiences at school, young people characterised their Leaving Certificate exam as requiring 'too much writing' and memory work, with a significant proportion finding the exam schedule too demanding and feeling under too much pressure. Many felt ill-prepared for the world of work, for adult life and for going on to college. Just over half felt that their second-level schooling prepared them for their course. A large majority of those who continued their education beyond school reported significant differences in teaching and learning between their second-level education and their post-school course. They highlighted particular difficulties in relation to the standard expected of them, the difficulty of the course and managing their workload. A key factor emerging from the in-depth interviews was the need in post-school education to engage in self-directed learning, especially the challenges in managing deadlines, which was contrasted with the more directive approach adopted in school. Young people were also faced with the challenges of the larger scale of the college, the structure of the day and a new peer group.

Actual Leaving Certificate grades were not associated with academic difficulties in the first year of post-school education but being disappointed with these grades

was. Those who had experienced higher stress levels in sixth year had more academic difficulties as did those who had relied on studying at home as the most helpful way of learning while at school. Difficulties for the latter group may indicate a greater reliance on rote learning among those who favoured home study for exam preparation; thus, they may have found adjusting to the more self-directed learning style in college more challenging. The nature of the current course also made a difference, with greater difficulties reported among those on science/engineering courses and attending an Institute of Technology. Those who were working part-time reported greater academic difficulties than other young people, reflecting constraints on their time for studying. The level of support available to students in their institution appeared to help to reduce the prevalence of academic difficulties.

Social difficulties over the transition, in terms of making new friends, were greater among those who had felt more isolated in sixth year and who had relied on studying at home. Experience of the Leaving Certificate also made a difference, with greater social difficulties among higher performers, those who were disappointed with their results and those who felt put under pressure by others (parents and teachers). As with academic difficulties, support within the institution appeared to reduce the prevalence of difficulties integrating socially.

Young people who experienced greater academic difficulties were more likely to leave their course early, with 'the course was not what I expected' being the most commonly cited reason for departure.

9.1.5 Employment and Unemployment

Overall, levels of unemployment exposure among this cohort rose over the post-school period – as initial employment, perhaps of a casual and temporary nature, declined to be replaced by persistent or intermittent unemployment, mirroring the broader economic decline in the period since these young people left school. Of particular interest is which groups are most vulnerable in the current climate. Analyses of *Quarterly National Household survey* data for 2011 indicate that, among young people (aged 20-24 years), those who left school prior to the Leaving Certificate had the highest unemployment rates with the lowest rates among those with higher education qualifications. Among those who completed the Leaving Certificate, analyses of the *Leaving School in Ireland* survey data indicated that 43 per cent had been unemployed at some point since leaving school, with higher levels among young men. Again educational qualifications mattered, with LCA leavers and those with the lowest LCE/LCVP grades being more likely to experience unemployment than those with higher grades. Young

people who had attended working-class schools were more likely to have experienced unemployment than those who had been in socially mixed or middle-class schools, even taking account of grades, gender and individual social class.

Among those in employment, the majority were in lower sales and service occupations and routine occupations, that is, working-class jobs. Even among those who had completed higher education at the time of the survey, only one in six was engaged in the types of managerial and professional positions which might be considered commensurate with their qualifications, with the majority in sales and services jobs. In fact, half of the higher education graduates surveyed felt that they did not use the knowledge and skills acquired through their education in their current job and over half rated their job as 'not at all' appropriate to their level of education. These patterns should be interpreted with caution as many young people had not yet graduated from higher education and entered the labour market at the time of the survey. However, the placement of graduates in lower service jobs will be of concern if it becomes a longer term phenomenon rather than a temporary part of early labour market integration.

Reflecting on their skills and competencies, young people were generally positive about their ability to work well with others, ability to use computers/the internet, written communication skills and oral communication skills. School leavers were less positive about their analytical skills and ability to come up with new ideas/solutions. Less than 5 per cent of the young people indicated strong foreign language skills.

9.1.6 Health and Well-Being

Almost three-quarters of the young people surveyed were living with their parents at the time of the survey, with the remainder in independent households (including college accommodation). The vast majority (94%) of young people were single at the time of the survey, with the largest proportion of the remainder living as a couple rather than married or separated/divorced. Five per cent of the young people had children. Having a child varied by social background, being slightly more prevalent for those from less educated families, those whose social class was unknown and those from immigrant families.

The majority of the young people surveyed rated their physical and mental health positively. Young people were largely positive about many aspects of their lives, including friendships, accommodation, their course/job, and workload. Six in ten were positive about their employment prospects while around half were satisfied

with their financial well-being. As might be expected, those who were unemployed or economically inactive were less satisfied with their situation, their financial well-being and employment prospects. The small proportion of young people who had children reported less satisfaction than their peers with their accommodation, workload, employment prospects and, to some extent, financial situation.

The young people reported considerable reliance on money from parents/family to fund their post-school studies. Just one-quarter indicated they used income from (part-time) employment; such employment was seen to create difficulties for some young people in terms of meeting the demands of higher education courses. Higher education students in receipt of a financial support (such as a maintenance grant) were more likely to consider financial difficulties a major problem than their counterparts not in receipt of state support.

Although young people were largely positive about their mental health, a significant minority reported relatively high stress levels, for example, losing sleep over worry or feeling constantly under strain. It should be noted, however, that the stress levels were lower than those reported while the young people were in sixth year. Stress levels were higher among those who were unemployed and those in higher education, in the latter case being related to preparation for final exams. Those who reported higher stress levels in sixth year had higher stress levels three to four years later.

9.2 Implications for Policy Development

The study findings have important implications for a broad range of policy issues across the domains of education, labour market and health. Here we focus on outlining the implications for three key areas: the impact of school experiences on later outcomes; the role of guidance in young people's decision making; and the nature of the transition to post-school education. We conclude with a discussion of some policy implications of social inequality in post-school transitions and the potential of current system reforms to address these issues.

9.2.1 Impact of School Experiences

The study clearly highlights the importance of school experiences in facilitating participation in post-school education and training, especially higher education. Those who found school a positive experience and who felt confident about their ability to cope with school-work were much more likely to go on to post-school education. Conversely, those who experienced negative interaction with their

teachers, being frequently reprimanded from junior cycle onwards, were less likely to engage in education once they leave school. Early educational success emerged as key in the later transition to higher education. These findings point to the necessity of providing a positive and engaging school experience for all students in order to enhance later education opportunities. However, research on the same cohort of young people (Smyth *et al*., 2006) highlighted the way in many young people, especially working-class boys, drifted and disengaged as they moved through junior cycle. The reform of the junior cycle involves a shift away from an exam-dominated mode of assessment, less detailed curriculum specifications, fewer subjects to be assessed than currently, a focus on embedding key skills in teaching and learning, and a concern with more innovative approaches to teaching and learning (NCCA, 2011). Effective curriculum implementation will require a significant broadening of the repertoire of teaching and assessment methods used in the classroom in order to engage all groups of young people in learning. Our research also points to the importance of creating a positive climate as negative relations between teachers and students have deleterious long-term effects on student outcomes, including the transition to higher education.

The study presents new findings on the impact of school social mix on young people's post-school outcomes, effects which are much stronger than the impact of individual family background. Given that this study focuses on just twelve case-study schools, the differences by school social mix are especially noteworthy. Young people who attended schools with a concentration of working-class peers were much less likely to go on to any form of post-school education/training, with striking differences in the extent to which they applied for and entered higher education. When they entered the labour market directly upon leaving school, they were more likely to be unemployed than their peers. Some of these differences were related to lower levels of achievement among students in working-class schools, all else being equal. However, the findings point to the strong impact of the expectational culture which develops within schools and local areas, a culture which means that young people do not necessarily access the higher level courses which will channel them towards post-school education. Strong parental support was found to be a crucial factor in working-class young people going on to higher education, but many young people pointed to the lack of detailed knowledge of the system among parents who had not themselves attended third-level education (see below). From a policy perspective, the findings point to the importance of longer-term school processes in enhancing equity of access to higher education.

9.2.2 Guidance and Decision Making

The study shows that the orientation to post-school education, particularly higher education, emerges as early as junior cycle. However, even prior to the recent changes in guidance allocation, scarce resources meant that guidance provision was targeted towards senior cycle, particularly towards the Central Applications Office (CAO) application process during sixth year. Liking related school subjects also played an important part in orienting young people towards particular post-school courses, highlighting the importance of facilitating an informed choice of subjects (perhaps after subject sampling) and challenging stereotyped subject selection. These processes meant that young people often had quite fixed views of their likely pathways even before they were exposed to formal guidance provision. Throughout their second-level education, young people reported being highly reliant on their parents for advice on which subjects to take, which subject levels to pursue, and on the possible options after leaving school. However, many parents (and older siblings) had not achieved third-level qualifications and thus lacked the 'insider' knowledge of the higher education system which could help young people negotiate their way into their desired courses.

The findings, therefore, point to the importance of a whole-school approach to guidance, in which advice from teachers on which subjects and levels to study keeps options open for the future and in which the expectational climate of the school encourages young people to have high aspirations. However, the findings also point to the importance of specialist guidance advice. Young people valued the detailed information they were given by their guidance counsellor on the multiplicity of options open to them, in particular, emphasising the need for a more personalised approach designed to address their needs and aspirations through one-to-one sessions.

Lack of awareness of available educational and employment opportunities was an important factor in young people making decisions which they later regretted. Not knowing what a course would be like was a significant factor in not completing higher education. Furthermore, some young people reached the end of their degree before realising that their chosen field of study was 'not for them'. Lack of guidance on, and knowledge of, available options, therefore, has significant cost implications for young people, their families and, ultimately, the State. Recent proposals to reduce the number of specialist courses within higher education (DES, 2013) should have positive effects in this regard, with less necessity for young people to choose from a wide plethora of courses in the same overall field of study. However, even in the context of broader entry routes, appropriate guidance and information will continue to play a key role in shaping young people's choices.

9.2.3 Transition to Post-School Education

There has been a good deal of policy discussion of the 'mismatch' between the approaches taken in second-level and third-level education (see, for example, HEA, NCCA, 2011). This study provides the first empirical findings on how young people actually experience this transition process. The majority saw the styles and structures of the school and post-school sectors as very different, with almost half describing themselves as being unprepared by their second-level education for this transition. In particular, young people highlighted the need to develop the capacity to be self-directed in their learning, to manage deadlines and to allow for a less tightly time-tabled schedule in their new setting. Project work emerged as an important feature of post-school education, but only a minority of young people had done project work on a frequent basis within senior cycle (see Smyth *et al*., 2011b). Despite this emphasis on project work, exams remained an important feature of post-school education, with heightened stress levels evident among students in response to the impending final exams.

Research on this cohort of young people highlighted the mismatch in approaches to teaching and learning as they moved from primary to post-primary school (Smyth *et al*., 2004). They experienced a similar, if not greater, mismatch in approaches as they moved from the Leaving Certificate to further or higher education. There have been a number of policy measures introduced recently which may help to facilitate a more seamless transition between educational stages. The junior cycle reforms aim to make young people more self-directed in their learning while work is underway examining whether the Leaving Certificate exam can be made less 'predictable' in an effort to discourage rote learning. However, discussion could usefully focus on the potential role of project work and team work within senior cycle in equipping young people with the kinds of skills they need for lifelong learning and the labour market. The completion of the high-speed broadband (100Mbps) rollout across all second-level schools this year may also facilitate the greater usage of ICT within and outside the second-level classroom, potentially creating greater opportunities for independent learning, collaborative approaches and wider teaching and learning methodologies (Devitt *et al*., forthcoming).

The process should, however, not only be viewed as the need to prepare young people for the transition but also as the responsibility of post-school educational institutions to integrate and support these young people. The majority of young people reported that they could get extra help in college if they needed it and that there was someone to talk to if they required it. The availability of such supports was found to play an important role in reducing the prevalence of

academic and social transition difficulties, thereby reducing early dropout and disengagement which are key policy objectives (HEA, 2014).

The discussion so far has focused on the implications for educational policy but it is important to acknowledge the broader labour market context. Although less likely to be unemployed than early school leavers, a significant minority of the young people surveyed were unemployed, with unemployment found to result in a more difficult financial situation and increased stress levels. Where employed, the majority were working in routine sales and service positions. Although many of the higher education group had not finished college at the time of the survey, around half of those who had graduated reported that they were over-qualified for their job and underutilised the skills they acquired in college. The potential longer term scarring effects of being unemployed or over-qualified point to the necessity for labour market policy to take explicit account of the needs of young people in the current context.

9.2.4 Policy Implications of Social Inequality in Post-School Outcomes

Perhaps the main over-arching finding emerging from the *Leaving School in Ireland* study is the centrality of social inequality in educational outcomes, and particularly post-school outcomes, in Ireland. Young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and economically inactive households repeatedly emerged as least likely to make successful transitions across each stage in the educational process and ultimately in the transition to, and successful completion of, post-school education. What is perhaps a new insight into social inequality in Irish education is the importance of school social mix in shaping opportunities and outcomes for young people. Above and beyond an individual's own social background, the social mix of the school is a strong influence on exam success within second-level education and on the likelihood of progressing to post-school education and training. Higher education in particular assumes a 'taken for granted' status in middle-class school settings, reflecting an expectational climate and culture in such schools which promotes higher education from an early stage in second-level education. Social differentiation in the profile of schools reflects the interaction of parental choice and school admissions policies. School enrolment policies are the subject of forthcoming legislation and this reform is likely to have consequences for the social mix of schools. Over and above the role of admissions policies, the results clearly highlight the importance of positive school climate and high expectations across all social settings.

At the school level, earlier research has highlighted the importance of mixed ability class groupings, encouraging access to higher level subjects and providing

engaging approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom in enhancing learning for all students (Smyth *et al.*, 2011b). Furthermore, a positive school climate, with good relations between teachers and students, is key to facilitating young people in reaching their potential. This report also highlights the centrality of preparation for young people – both academically and socially – to meet the demands of post-school education. Clearly joined up thinking across the second-, further- and higher-education sectors is required to enhance opportunities and success for all. The results also highlight the importance of better information to guide young people and their families in making decisions as they progress through the education system, with a whole-school approach to guidance central to this process. Alternative pathways are to be welcomed, but this research has raised issues about the extent to which all groups in society have the opportunities and encouragement/support, at home and school, to pursue different pathways. In particular, the dominance of higher education in the Irish context has had important implications for young people in Ireland, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. As McGuinness *et al.* (2014) highlighted based on research with stakeholders across the education and training sectors, trends in post-school educational participation were seen as having established higher education as the cultural norm, with further education and training seen as a second-best option in this context. As a result of this perceived hierarchy, further education and training was seen as catering for students who failed to obtain a higher education place rather than as a valued pathway in its own right. The perceived status of further education emerged as an important issue among the school leavers included in the current study.

Higher education institutions have a key role in providing support for 'non-traditional' students; the results show the importance of academic and social supports in higher education institutions in enhancing student experience and success. Financial supports play a central role, with the relative value and coverage of the maintenance grant key policy issues impacting on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Under the chair of the Secretary General of the Department of Education and Skills, Seán Ó Foghlú, key stakeholders across the second- and higher education sectors[24] have, over a number of years, been discussing a range of key reforms within the educational system. Recent reports (DES, 2014) indicate that the *Transitions Reform Steering Group* have now reached agreement on three substantial reforms:

[24] The partners on the Transition Reform Steering Group are the Department of Education and Skills; the Higher Education Authority; the State Examinations Commission; the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment; Quality and Qualifications Ireland; the Institutes of Technology Ireland and the Irish Universities Association.

1. A commitment to address any problematic predictability emerging from an analysis of predictability in the Leaving Certificate examination;
2. A commitment to reduce the number of grading bands used in the Leaving Certificate examination;
3. A commitment to reduce the number of Level 8 programmes in higher education, particularly in the universities, bringing the number of entry routes offered back to the number available in 2011, providing broader undergraduate entry.

A number of Task Groups are also currently considering matters of selection and entry into higher education, including matriculation requirements and the use of supplementary contextual assessments. It is envisaged that a full implementation plan will be agreed by the partners by the end of 2014 and phased implementation will begin for students entering fifth year in September 2015. These reforms are intended to alleviate the 'points pressure' on students in the latter stages of second level, enhance the learning experience and student preparedness for post-school education, and improve choice and decision-making processes. However, transforming teaching and learning in senior cycle remains a challenge if young people are to be prepared better for further education, higher education and the world of work. Further, issues around academic, social and financial supports for students within higher education also remain key policy issues.

Allied to reforms of the higher education system, the further education sector is also embarking on a period of substantial reform, under the leadership of SOLAS and its recently announced *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019*. Among the main priorities outlined in the Strategy are:

1. Address the unemployment challenge and provide targeted skills programmes that support job seekers to re-skill and up-skill for areas where sustainable employment opportunities are emerging;
2. Modernise and expand the apprenticeship system;
3. Implement new structures for Further Education and Training to deliver high quality flexible and responsive programmes.

In tandem with the Government 'Pathways to Work' initiative and the Youth Guarantee Scheme, focusing in particular on long-term unemployed and young unemployed people, these reforms have the potential to enhance the quality, status, relevance and impact of a diverse range of post-school education and training opportunities for *all* young people.

9.3 POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Recent analysis by the Department of Education and Skills has highlighted the potential role of matching information from existing administrative data sources[25] to provide an insight into the status of young people who have left the second-level education system (Tickner, 2013). Other existing data sources, such as the *Quarterly National Household Survey*, as utilised in this study, are also valuable. So too is the *European Survey on Income and Living Conditions* (EU-SILC). The EU-SILC data are nationally representative, allow for comparisons with other European countries, and contain information on earnings and the economically inactive as well as employees. There has been a lack of information on employer perspectives and practices regarding recruitment, though the (now discontinued) *National Employment Survey* and the recent *HEA pilot study of employers* (HEA, 2013) show the potential of such research.

While existing data sources could provide important insights for policy development, there are gaps in Irish datasets which limit the ability to address some crucial issues. The development of an education leaver/first destination survey, which covers those leaving all stages of education (from junior cycle to doctoral level), would substantially broaden the range of research possibilities beyond that feasible with existing datasets. Questions that cannot currently be addressed span a variety of areas such as the skills developed through different credentials and fields of study, skills mismatch, the extent of skill gaps, flows from further education to higher education, progression to post-graduate education, student indebtedness etc. Data on young people's psychological well-being and mental health are not available elsewhere and could be an important focus of new data collected through a leaver survey and through future waves of the *Growing Up in Ireland* study.

Taken together, analyses of existing data sources and the collection of new data on education leavers would provide a firm basis for policy development regarding further and higher education. Understanding the labour market outcomes for young people with different educational experiences is vital in planning the educational infrastructure in terms of the levels of courses provided and the fields of study offered. Such research is also important in identifying whether the skills and competencies developed by young people at various levels of the educational system (from second-level up to higher education) reflect what is required by employers and, ultimately, what is needed to support economic

[25] This work includes the following data sources: the Higher Education Authority Student Record System, the Further Education and Training Awards Council awards database, FÁS datasets, the Central Records System of the Department of Social Protection and the P35 files of the Revenue Commissioners.

growth. Finally, such evidence would be important in terms of assessing the impact of reforms currently underway, including both junior cycle reforms within the second-level system and structural reforms in the further and higher education sectors.

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