

NO WAY BACK?

THE DYNAMICS OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

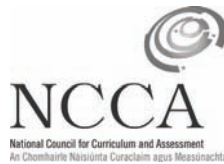


DELMA BYRNE AND EMER SMYTH



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NO WAY BACK?

The Dynamics of Early School Leaving

Delma Byrne and Emer Smyth

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Education is a key determinant of adult life chances across Western societies and is especially so in Ireland. Young people with higher levels of educational qualifications are more likely to access high quality employment and receive higher pay levels in the immediate period after leaving school, and these advantages persist into adult life. Furthermore, more highly educated adults have broader social advantages, including improved health status (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). While the majority of Irish young people now stay on in education until the Leaving Certificate stage, a significant minority still leave school before the end of senior cycle, with a smaller but persistent proportion leaving during the junior cycle or even earlier (Byrne *et al.*, 2009).

The persistent issue of early school leaving¹ has received considerable research and policy attention in Ireland and internationally. Since the mid-1990s, educational disadvantage has featured prominently in policy discourse in Ireland, with the prevention of early school leaving forming a central aim of policy initiatives. To date, research studies have focused on the characteristics of early school leavers or the characteristics of their schools. However, there have

¹ The terms ‘early school leaving’ and ‘drop-out’ are used interchangeably in this report. It is acknowledged from the outset that early leavers comprise two distinct groups (pre- and post-Junior Certificate leavers) and every effort is made to indicate any differences between these two groups in discussing the study findings.

been relatively few studies which explore the processes shaping early school leaving in the Irish context. This study addresses this deficit and forms part of the larger Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS), which has followed a cohort of young people in twelve case-study schools from their entry into second-level education. In this study, we supplement Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) data on young people's experiences before they leave school with a specific follow-up of those young people who left school before the completion of senior cycle.

This study explores the experiences of members of the cohort of young people in the longitudinal study who left school before completing the Leaving Certificate. In so doing, it presents findings from the first mixed methods longitudinal research study of early school leaving to be carried out in the Republic of Ireland. The findings advance our understanding of early school leaving in two key respects. Firstly, the longitudinal nature of the study means that we have quite detailed information on the personal and school characteristics of early leavers *before* they leave the school system. This allows us to further compare those who left school early with those who stayed on to complete second-level education. Secondly, by focusing on young people's own accounts and reflections of their educational and life experiences, this research offers a unique insight into the experiences and perceptions of early school leavers themselves. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

- How do early school leavers describe their experiences within primary and post-primary education? What were their attitudes to schoolwork? How do they describe their relations with their teachers and peers?
- What are the main reasons behind the decision to leave school early? How do young people make the decision to leave school? With whom do they discuss their decision?
- What are the post-school plans and pathways of early school leavers?

- What are the implications for policy development of the study findings?

A clear answer to these questions emerges from the analyses presented in the following chapters. The remainder of this chapter sets the scene by outlining trends in early leaving and related policy responses in Ireland.

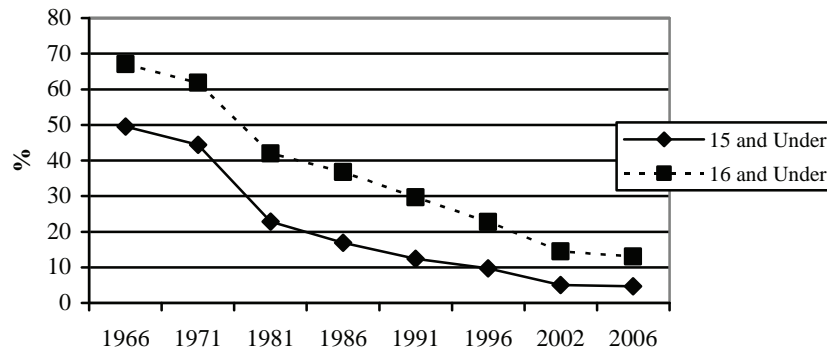
1.2 Trends in, and Incidence of, Early School Leaving

Defining early school leaving is by no means unproblematic. Research and policy reports have used a variety of definitions, including those who leave school without any qualifications, those who leave school before the compulsory school-leaving age and so on. Official data from the Department of Education and Science (DES) generally refer to retention within the full-time State-aided schooling system, thus those pursuing alternative pathways, such as Youthreach, FÁS programmes including apprenticeship training and Community Training Workshops and even those taking a Leaving Certificate course at a non-recognised ‘grind’ school, are generally considered as early school leavers. An alternative definition of ‘early school leaving’ proposed by the European Commission counters some of these difficulties and focuses on those aged 18 to 24 who have attained the equivalent of upper secondary qualifications and are not still in education and training. This definition typically identifies lower numbers of early leavers than DES figures since they exclude those who have attained upper secondary qualifications by other routes.

In this study, we define early school leaving as leaving full-time second-level education before completion of the Leaving Certificate (Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme or Leaving Certificate Applied programme) examination. Empirical research has indicated that this represents the minimum threshold for the successful attainment of a range of adult outcomes (see Smyth and McCoy, 2009). However, we recognise that important differences in experiences and outcomes may arise within the early

leaver group, for example, between those who leave without any qualifications and those who complete the Junior Certificate.

Figure 1.1: Proportion of 20-24 Year Olds Who Had Left School at 15 or Under and 16 or Under, 1966-2006

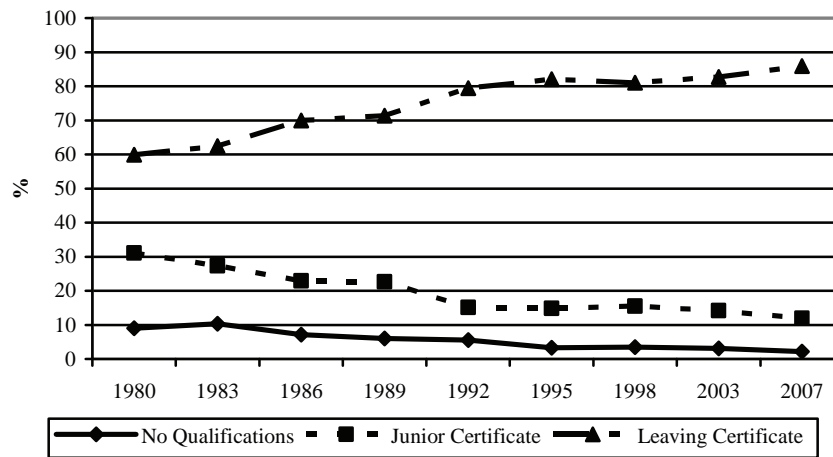


Source: Census of Population, various years.

As mentioned, early school leaving can be defined in terms of age or stage at leaving school. Census data on the stage of education completed are only available for more recent years. However, data on the age at leaving school are available from 1966 onwards. Figure 1.1 illustrates that in 1966, half of 20 to 24 year olds had left school at the age of 15 or younger while two-thirds had left school at the age of 16 or under. The introduction of free second-level education in 1967 appears to influence the sharp decline in leaving school before 15 or 16 found in the 1970s. Rates of leaving school before 16 years of age continued to decline in the 1980s and 1990s but plateaued somewhat between 2002 and 2006.

While Figure 1.1 shows clear trends in retention by age, the figures tell us little about the qualifications attained by young people over the period. School Leavers' Survey data allow us to explore in greater detail the stage at which young people left school over the period since the 1980 survey. Figure 1.2 illustrates that the percentage of those leaving school without completing second-level education fell significantly between 1980 and the mid-1990s.

Figure 1.2: Educational Qualifications among School Leavers, 1980-2007



Source: Byrne, McCoy, and Watson 2009, using School Leavers' Survey data.

In 1980, 9 per cent of students left second-level education without any qualifications (pre-Junior Certificate) while 31 per cent left after completing the Junior Certificate examination. By 1995, the corresponding figures had dropped to 3 per cent and 15 per cent respectively, indicating an overall drop-out rate of 18 per cent among the cohort. In spite of a range of educational interventions to counter early leaving (see below), the level of school completion remained relatively stable from the mid-1990s onwards, at 80 to 83 per cent; there is some indication of an increase in school completion to 86 per cent in 2007 but further data would be needed to confirm whether this indeed represents an upward trend. It is possible that the lack of any significant improvement in school completion may reflect general labour market conditions over the period rather than the lack of impact of policy measures. The 'pull' of available employment opportunities during the boom years may have countered any effect of measures designed to improve retention.

In real terms, the scale of early school leaving is significant. Estimates of the number of young people who leave second-level educa-

tion at different stages are presented in Table 1.1 below. We find that just over 800 males and almost 600 females left second-level education without any qualifications in the academic year 2004/05. A further 4,500 males and 2,500 females also left school in that year with the Junior Certificate as their highest level of education. In total, almost 9,000 young people leave school before the Leaving Certificate every year.

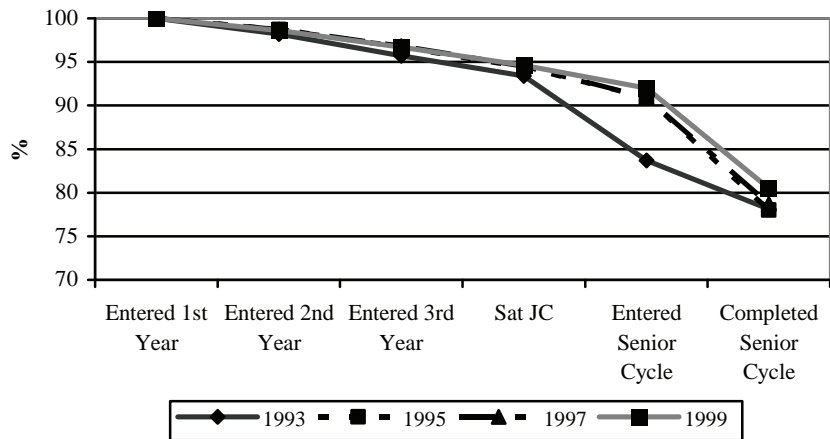
Table 1.1: Qualification Levels of Male and Female School Leavers, 2007

	No Qualifications	Junior Certificate	Leaving Certificate	Total
Total	2%	12%	86%	100%
Number of Males	819	4,764	25,515	31,098
% of Males	2.6%	15.3%	82.0%	100%
Number of Females	583	2,666	28,340	31,589
% Female	1.8%	8.4%	89.7%	100%

Source: Byrne, McCoy, and Watson 2009, using School Leavers' Survey data.

Department of Education and Science reports on school retention rates represent an alternative source of information on the prevalence of early leaving (DES 2003, 2005, 2008). These reports track a cohort of young people through their second-level education to identify the proportions that drop out of school at different stages and the findings are illustrated in Figure 1.3. It is clear from these data that early leaving occurs at every stage within post-primary education. There is little evidence of any significant increase in overall school completion rates over the period shown among those entering second-level education between 1993 and 1999, replicating findings from School Leavers' Survey data. However, the rate of entry into senior cycle seems to have increased somewhat after the 1993/4 cohort. Thus, more recent cohorts appear to have postponed leaving school from directly after the Junior Certificate exam until some time after entering fifth year.

Figure 1.3: Retention over the School Career, Entrants to Second-Level Education 1993 to 1999



Source: *Retention Rates of Pupils in Second-level Schools*, DES, 2003; 2005; 2008.

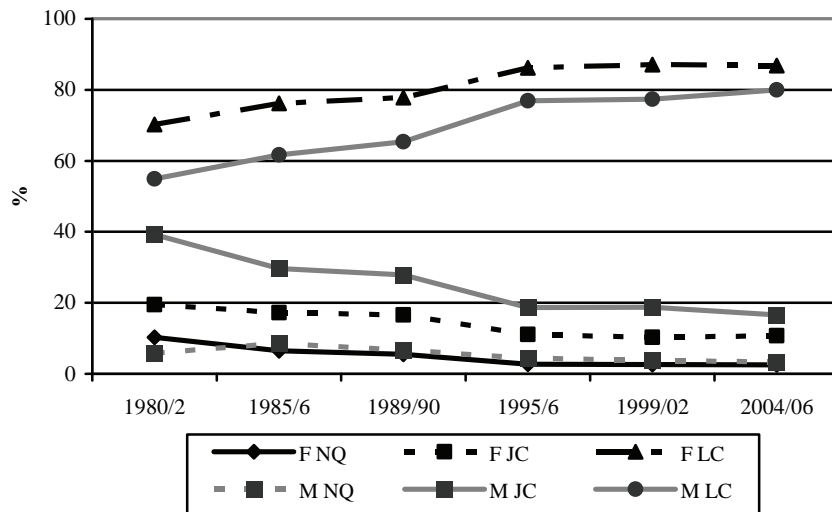
Analyses of early school leaving have generally focused on drop-out from second-level education. However, a number of commentators have highlighted a group of young people who do not transfer from primary to post-primary education (see, for example, NESF, 2002). While this issue has not been subject to systematic research in recent years, official data from the DES provide a basis for estimating the numbers involved. Two groups of potential drop-outs from primary schools can be identified: those (excluding emigrants) who do not transfer to any school in the State and those whose destination is unknown. For the period 2000 to 2008, the number of children falling into these categories varied from a low of 724 in 2001 to a high of 1,165 in 2007. Thus, it appears that a small but not insignificant group of young people do not enter second-level education at all.

This section has explored overall trends in early school leaving within the Irish context. We now move on to consider the extent to which patterns of early leaving vary by gender and social class background.

1.3 Variation in Early School Leaving by Gender and Social Class

Existing research and official data indicate that early school leaving patterns in Ireland differ significantly by gender (Byrne *et al.*, 2009; DES, 2007; Smyth, 1999). DES (2007) examined retention rates within second-level education since the 1930s and found that girls began to outnumber boys among Intermediate Certificate candidates from the 1950s onwards. From the 1960s onwards, female participation in senior cycle education accelerated at a faster pace than the level among males. Since that time to the present day, girls persistently outnumber boys among Leaving Certificate leavers (see Figure 1.4). While the gender difference in retention to Leaving Certificate was very large in the early 1980s (15 percentage points), the gap has narrowed somewhat over time, though it currently remains substantial at 7-8 percentage points (Byrne *et al.*, 2009). As a result, young men are consistently overrepresented in the early leaver group.

Figure 1.4: Educational Qualifications by Gender, 1980-2006

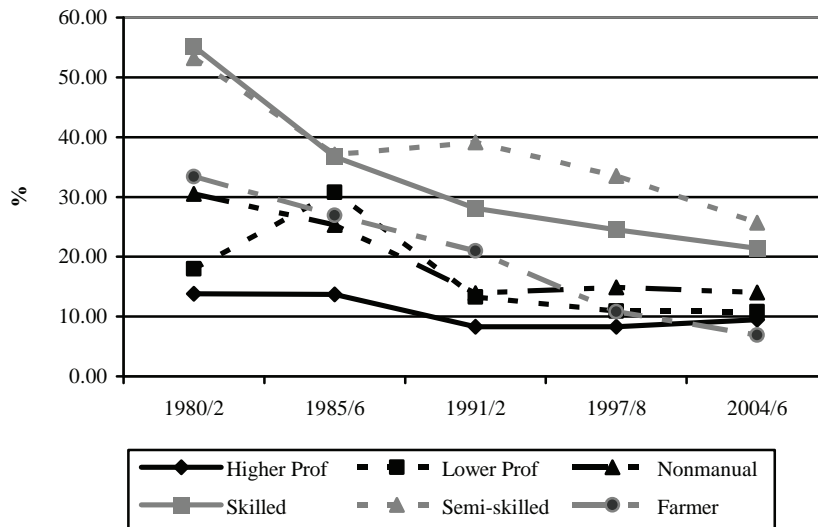


Source: School Leavers' Survey data, various years.

Note: NQ no qualifications; JC Junior Certificate; LC Leaving Certificate.

International research has consistently indicated the existence of social class inequalities in educational attainment (see, for example, Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993); and potential explanations for these differences are discussed in Chapter 2. In the Irish context too, the likelihood of early school leaving is significantly structured by parental social class background. Figure 1.5 shows the proportion of the cohort leaving school before Leaving Certificate level across social classes over time. At the beginning of the 1980s, the vast majority of those from professional backgrounds completed senior cycle while this was the case for less than half of their working-class counterparts. Early leaving rates have declined for all social classes over time. The greatest decline in early leaving has taken place among those from skilled and semi-skilled/unskilled social class backgrounds, and substantial improvement in retention levels has been made by those from farm households, with these young people now having rates of school completion equal to, or even surpassing, those from professional backgrounds.

Figure 1.5: Early School Leaving by Social Class Background, 1980-2006



Source: School Leavers' Survey data, various years.

In spite of an improvement in retention rates among working-class young people over time, early school leaving remains structured by social class background, and the degree of inequality in school completion between social strata has remained quite stable over time.

So far we have examined the influence of gender and social class separately. However, it is worth exploring whether gender differences are similar across social classes. Table 1.2 presents findings from an ordinal logistic regression model which explores the influence of gender and social class on the stage of education reached among three recent cohorts of school leavers.² A positive coefficient indicates that young people in a particular category are more likely to stay on in school than those in the reference group, while a negative coefficient indicates that this group is less likely to stay on in school. In keeping with the results discussed above, Model 1 indicates lower completion rates among males than females, controlling for social class. The chances of staying on in school for all social classes are contrasted with the likelihood for those from higher professional backgrounds. Those from other non-manual, skilled manual, semi-skilled manual and unskilled manual groups all have lower rates of school completion than the higher professional group. Young people from non-employed households are found to experience an additional disadvantage in relation to Leaving Certificate attainment, over and above the effects of social class. Model 2 allows the effects of social class to vary by gender. The gender gap is evident across all social classes. However, the gender gap is greatest for the farmer group; in other words, farm daughters resemble those from professional backgrounds in their school completion patterns but farm sons have much lower rates of retention. The gender gap in early school leaving appears to be least evident among the higher professional group.

² An ordinal logistic regression model is used because there are three progressive stages in the Irish system: leaving before the Junior Certificate, leaving after the Junior Certificate and leaving after the Leaving Certificate. This approach allows for fuller use of available information than dichotomising Leaving Certificate leavers versus all others.

Table 1.2: Ordinal Logistic Regression Model of Stage Reached in Education, Pooled Data of 2002/3, 2003/4 and 2004/5 School Leavers

	Model 1: Gender, Social Class		Model 2: Interaction Effects	
	Coeff.	Robust SE	Coeff.	Robust SE
Male	-1.017	0.087	-0.452	0.208
Ref: Female				
Farmer	-0.146	0.173	0.639	0.362
Lower Professional	-0.138	0.127	0.140	0.189
Non Manual	-0.621	0.131	0.000	0.207
Skilled Manual	-0.904	0.132	0.000	0.209
Semi-Skilled Manual	-0.897	0.141	0.000	0.214
Unskilled Manual	-1.237	0.160	0.000	0.254
Non Employed	-1.578	0.134	0.000	0.198
Ref: Higher Professional				
Gender*Farmer			-1.141	0.416
Gender*Lower Professional			-0.456	0.247
Gender*Non Manual			-0.843	0.251
Gender*Skilled Manual			-0.841	0.260
Gender*Semi-Skilled Manual			-0.362	0.277
Gender*Unskilled Manual			-0.703	0.301
Gender*Unemployed			-0.394	0.251
Chi ²			462.06***	
Pseudo R ²			.061	
5,222 pupils in 653 schools				
				0.030
				0.078
				0.459
				0.677
				0.079
				0.002
				0.001
				0.000
				0.006
				<i>0.064</i>
				0.001
				0.001
				0.191
				0.019
				0.117
				521.83***
				.063

Source: Derived from School Leavers' Survey data.

1.4 Variation across School Sectors

Data from the Department of Education and Science indicate that early school leaving patterns vary by school sector. Voluntary secondary schools persistently have the highest retention rates at both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate stages. For example, the retention rate to Junior Certificate for the 1999 cohort in secondary schools was 96 per cent compared with 92 per cent for vocational schools and 94 per cent for community and comprehensive schools. The Leaving Certificate retention rate for the 1999 cohort for secondary schools was 85 per cent, which was 5 percentage points higher than the rate for community and comprehensive schools and 13 percentage points higher than the rate for vocational schools (DES, 2008). While overall retention rates have remained stable over time (see above), there has been some improvement in retention to both Junior and Leaving Certificate levels in vocational schools while an improvement in Leaving Certificate retention is evident in the community/comprehensive sector. It is important, however, to note that differences in retention rates between school sectors are likely to reflect the composition of the student body rather than the impact of school sector per se. Previous research has indicated that vocational schools have a disproportionate number of working-class students and those with lower academic ability levels (see Hannan *et al.*, 1996), groups that are more likely to drop out of the school system.

Furthermore, DES reports indicate that across all school types, males are less likely to complete their Leaving Certificate than females, with the difference in retention across sectors greater for males than for females. For males, senior cycle drop-out was greatest in vocational schools, with a drop of over 20 percentage points being recorded between entry and exam completion. This is likely to reflect the transfer of many young men from vocational schools to apprenticeships and other forms of training.

Regional disparities are also evident in relation to early school leaving (DES, 2008). Retention rates in cities are lower than elsewhere; Dublin City had the lowest retention rate in the country, at 72

per cent, while Leitrim has the highest retention rate, at 91 per cent for the 1999 cohort. Further school-level variation is considered in the literature review in Chapter 2.

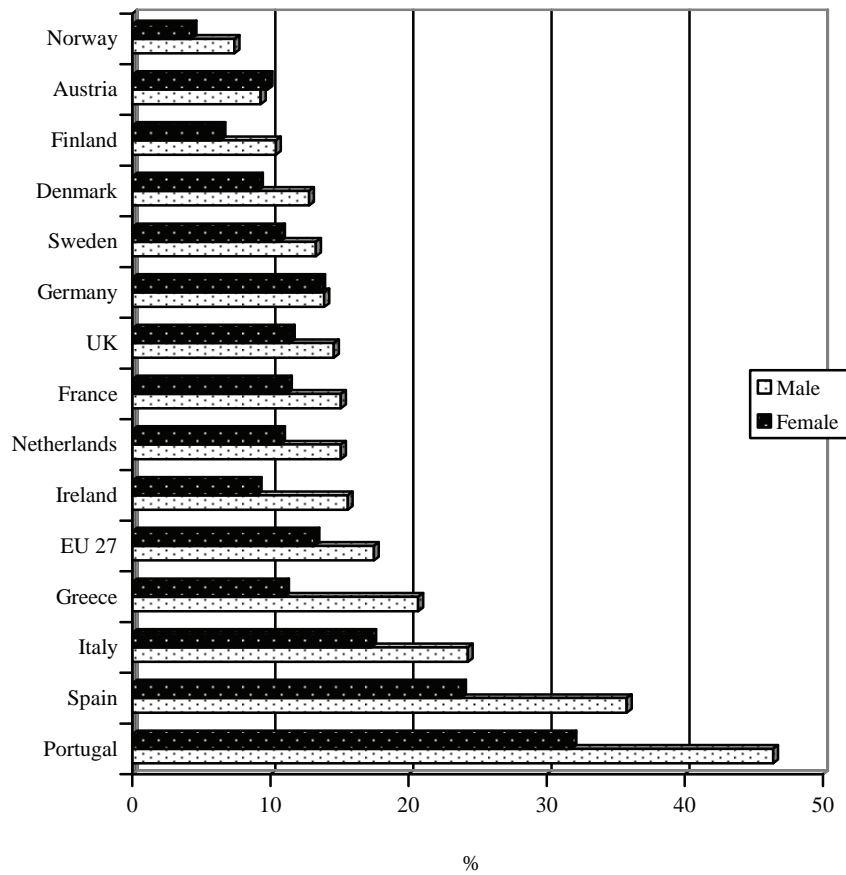
1.5 Early School Leaving in Comparative Context

This section now places Irish patterns of early school leaving in the context of levels in other European countries. For comparative purposes, the definition used is slightly different than that used in the rest of the study. Here early school leavers comprise those aged 18 to 24 who have not attained (the equivalent of) upper second-level education and were not in education/training in the previous month. Using this definition, 16 per cent of young men and 9 per cent of young women in Ireland are classified as early school leavers. Figure 1.6 shows comparable figures for a selected group of European countries. Ireland is found to have lower rates of early leaving than the average for EU 27 countries, occupying an intermediate position alongside the UK, France and the Netherlands. Rates of early leaving are much higher in Southern European countries than in the rest of Europe. Although early leaving levels are lower in Ireland than the European average, rates in Ireland remain significantly higher than in the Nordic Countries, Austria and (for males) Germany.

Smyth (2007a) has argued that cross-national variation in rates of early leaving reflects, at least in part, the structure of the educational system. Two sets of models appear to be associated with lower rates of early leaving: the Nordic model and the dual system model. The Nordic model (found in Norway, Sweden and Finland) is based on a comprehensive system with students taking the same pathway, at least until the end of compulsory schooling. This approach, coupled with a strong policy commitment to equity, results in smaller differences between social groups and schools in educational outcomes (see also Willms, 2006, on PISA achievement scores). The dual system model (evident in Germany, Austria and Denmark) on the other hand, involves a rigid differentiation into academic and vocational tracks, the latter usually combining in-school education with on-the-job training.

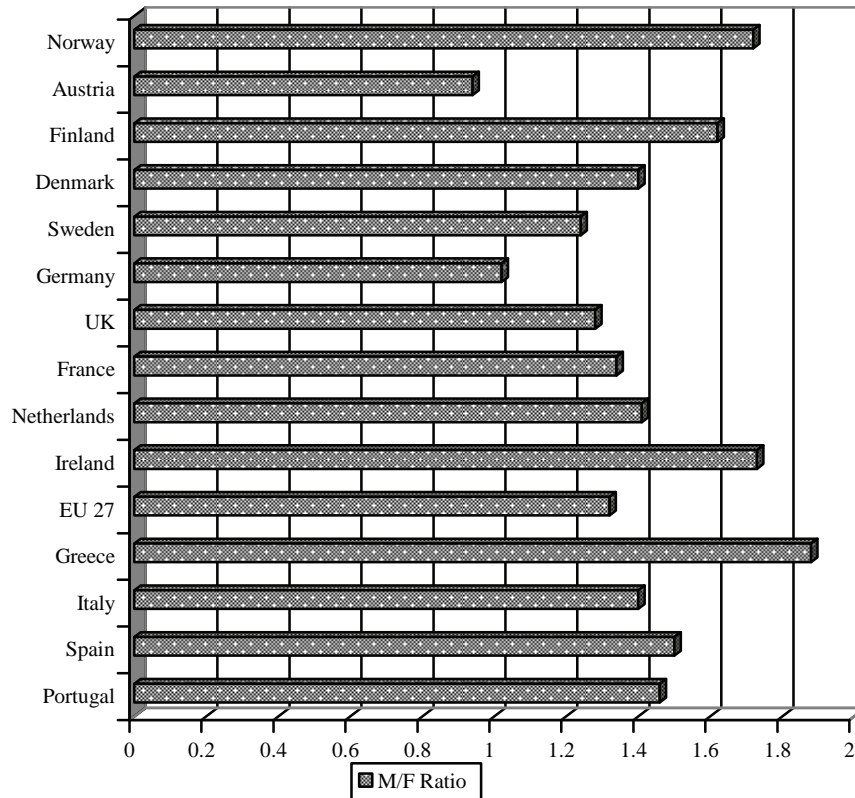
This model appears to provide a pathway for students who might otherwise drop out of school, albeit at the expense of more restricted career pathways in the longer run (Gangl, 2003). High rates of early school leaving in Southern Europe may be attributed to historical trends in educational attainment and the lack of clear trajectories and returns from education.

Figure 1.6: Early School Leaving in Selected European Countries, 2006



Source: Eurostat (2008) *Europe in Figures*.

Figure 1.7: Ratio of Male to Female Early Leaving Rates across Selected European Countries, 2006



Source: Eurostat (2008) *Europe in Figures*.

Countries vary not only in the overall level of early school leaving but in the extent to which patterns differ by gender. Figure 1.7 illustrates that rates of early leaving are generally higher among males than females across European countries (with the exception of Austria and Germany). However, the size of the gender gap differs across systems. The gender gap is relatively high in Ireland, with male rates 1.7 times those among females. The gender gap is also large in Greece and Norway, countries with very different levels of early leaving. The lack

of a gender gap in Austria and Germany may reflect the role of the dual system model in retaining young men within vocational pathways.

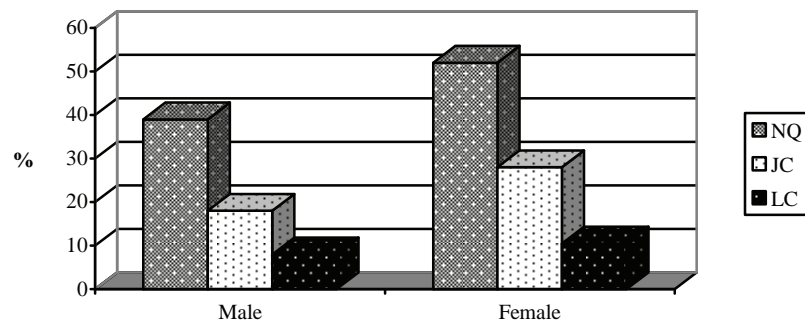
1.6 Consequences of Early School Leaving

A number of research studies have examined the consequences of early school leaving for a range of later outcomes in Ireland and internationally (see, for example, Levin, 2009; Smyth and McCoy, 2009). In particular, early leavers in Ireland are found to experience disadvantages in relation to access to further education/training, employment chances, employment quality and broader social outcomes.

Research has highlighted the ‘one way’ nature of the Irish educational system. Access to further and higher education is generally restricted to Leaving Certificate completers, especially those with higher grades (Byrne *et al.*, 2009), and participation in life-long learning is more prevalent among those who already have higher levels of education (O’Connell, 1999). Even apprenticeship training, a traditional route for male Junior Certificate leavers, now attracts a significant proportion of young men with Leaving Certificate qualifications. Only certain State education/training programmes, such as Youthreach, are specifically targeted at those who leave school early (Byrne *et al.*, 2009).

In terms of labour market outcomes, early leavers are much more likely to experience unemployment than their more highly educated counterparts in the immediate post-school period (Figure 1.8). Among male leavers, almost four in ten of those with no qualifications are unemployed compared with only 7 per cent of those with a Leaving Certificate. For female leavers, the disparity is even greater: over half of those with no qualifications are unemployed compared with 12 per cent of their Leaving Certificate peers. Furthermore, the gap in unemployment rates by education has increased over time, even during the boom years (Byrne *et al.*, 2009).

Figure 1.8: Unemployment Rates by Educational Level among School Leavers, 2007

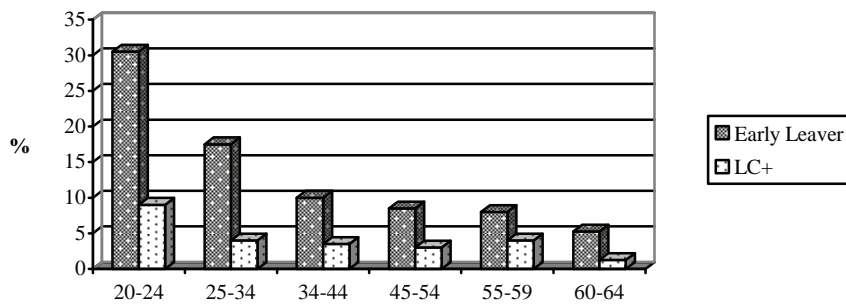


Source: School Leavers' Survey, 2007, presented in Smyth and McCoy (2009).

Note: NQ no qualifications; JC Junior Certificate; LC Leaving Certificate.

Such differences persist into adult life, with higher rates of overall and long-term unemployment among early leavers across all age groups (see Figure 1.9). These differences are quite marked in comparative context, with a greater disparity in unemployment risks between the early leaver group and those with higher levels of education in Ireland compared with many other OECD countries (OECD, 2008). Early leaving is also associated with lower job quality, with early leavers disproportionately found in less skilled manual and service occupations, and lower earning levels (Smyth and McCoy, 2009).

Figure 1.9: Unemployment Rates by Educational Level across Age Groups, 2008



Source: Quarterly National Household Survey, 2008, presented in Smyth and McCoy (2009).

Note: LC+ means Leaving Certificate or higher.

Early school leaving is also predictive of a range of broader social outcomes (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). Early leavers tend to experience poorer health status, even controlling for age, gender and current social class (Layte *et al.*, 2007). Young women who leave school early are more likely to become lone mothers. In addition, imprisonment rates differ markedly between early leavers and other groups of men.

In sum, early leavers experience a range of disadvantages in relation to adult life-chances. Such disadvantages involve substantial costs to society as a whole in the form of social welfare expenditure, health services and imprisonment rates (see Levin, 2009; Smyth and McCoy, 2009; Morgenroth, 1999).

1.7 Policy Context

It is hardly surprising, given its substantial costs to individuals and to society as a whole, that early school leaving has attracted a good deal of policy attention in the Irish context. The *Investment in Education Report* (1966) indicated significant socio-economic and regional disparities in school completion, thus providing a basis for the introduc-

tion of free second-level education. Participation rates increased subsequently (see above), though by the mid-1990s there was a growing concern with the persistent inequality in school completion levels. Interestingly, over the recent period, policy discourse has tended to draw on the notion of 'educational disadvantage'.

Two sets of general measures have been introduced to address disadvantage: curricular reform, and targeted funding for schools catering to disadvantaged populations. In terms of curricular reform, the period since the mid-1990s has seen the introduction of two programmes targeting potentially at-risk students. The Junior Certificate School Programme (JSCP) has been 'aimed at those young people who show signs of school failure or early leaving'. The emphasis is on cross-curricular work, using teamwork among teachers, basic skills development, and personal and social development, along with an individualised record of achievement for students. The programme was taken by 4 per cent of the cohort in 2008 but JSCP has not yet been subject to systematic evaluation. At senior cycle, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme was also aimed at students who were not catered for by the traditional academic curriculum. The focus of the programme is to prepare students for adult life with the curriculum consisting of three main elements - general education, vocational education and vocational preparation. The programme, taken by around 7 per cent of the Leaving Certificate cohort, is centred on project and task work and is based on continuous assessment. Research on the LCA programme indicates that many young people attribute their remaining in school to their positive experiences of the programme (see Banks *et al.*, 2010). However, it is difficult to assess the net impact of curricular change on overall rates of early leaving. The period since the introduction of JSCP and LCA was one of a plateau in retention rates but also one of rapid employment growth which may have attracted some young people out of school. Furthermore, the young people who enter these programmes are deemed 'at risk' youth with a high propensity to leave school early (see Byrne, 2008).

In terms of targeted funding, measures to target additional expenditure at disadvantaged schools cover both primary and second-level

education. These initiatives (including Breaking the Cycle, the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme, and Giving Children an Even Break), now all subsumed into DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools), involve the provision of extra funding per student along with additional teacher allocation for schools which are designated 'disadvantaged' in terms of their student profile. Evaluations of earlier such initiatives have indicated mixed results (see, for example, Weir, Milis and Ryan, 2002a, 2002b; Weir, 2003), with no direct assessment of the impact on school retention. An evaluation of the DEIS programme is due to be published in 2010. However, the potential impact of the programme may be limited by the fact that a significant proportion of students in 'at risk' social groups do not attend disadvantaged schools (Smyth and McCoy, 2009).

Within the overall context of initiatives to counter educational disadvantage, specific measures to address early leaving have taken two forms: a national agency to address student attendance, and funding for schools to develop their own policies to promote retention.

National Educational Welfare Board

The Educational Welfare Act of 2000 raised the legal school leaving age to 16 years of age (with a requirement to complete three years of junior cycle education) and provided a statutory basis for the new National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), a regularisation and development of pre-existing school attendance services. The operation of the Board has not been evaluated to date. However, this area is likely to be crucial to preventing early school leaving since existing research indicates a strong association between school absence and later drop-out (Smyth, 1999; McCoy *et al.*, 2007). The main emphasis of the NEWB is on the welfare of the child and the family, and on ensuring that concerns and problems are dealt with before school attendance becomes a crisis issue. However, in some cases, court proceedings do occur. A School Attendance Notice (SAN) is the first step in enforcing the law. When a SAN is issued, an Education Welfare Officer (EWO) then begins a formal monitoring process of the child's situation, and the parent or guardian is given an opportunity to address

the underlying issues with the EWO and the school. Occasionally, the involvement of other State services to give additional support to the family may be sufficient to bring about change. In exceptional cases, where there is no progress being made and the child remains out of school, the Board will consider taking a prosecution. Table 1.3 shows the number of School Attendance Notices that have been issued since 2005 and the summons that were issued for court proceedings.

Table 1.3: Number of School Attendance Notices and Summons Issued by NEWB

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Total
SANS	36	196	228	315	89	864
<i>Children</i>		137	160	195	52	
Summons		34	55	51		161
<i>Children</i>		17	36	35		100

Source: NEWB Prosecutions Status Report, March 2009.

School Completion Programme

The School Completion Programme (SCP) is a Department of Education and Science initiative which replaced the earlier 8-15 Year Old Early School Leaver Initiative and the Stay-in-School Retention Initiative. It focuses on young people aged 4-18 who are at risk of leaving school early and in 2008 covered 124 projects, comprising 464 primary schools and 227 second-level schools, which include DEIS and non-DEIS schools (School Completion Programme Composite Report, 2008). In the 2007/2008 academic year, 35,688 young people were targeted by the School Completion Programme. Thus, almost 20 per cent of all students in primary and post-primary schools were participating in the initiative, with most young people supported by SCP being targeted at primary level. The selected schools have been provided with funds to develop appropriate intervention strategies including in-school, after school, and holiday supports to support 'at risk' young people and support is based on the concept of integrated ser-

vices. In 2006/7, the SCP was subsumed under the DEIS programme for designated disadvantaged schools and, at the time of writing, the remit of the National Educational Welfare Board is being extended to incorporate the School Completion Programme. The School Completion Programme was not subject to systematic evaluation so its net effect on retention cannot be assessed.

More general policy measures may impact on the rates of early school leaving. In the Supplementary Budget for 2009, for example, welfare payments were reduced for new claimants under 20 years of age. While this measure may promote school retention, other education expenditure cuts which impact disproportionately on disadvantaged groups may have the opposite effect (see Smyth and McCoy, 2009).

Explicit targets for both school completion and early school leaving have been set as part of successive national action plans on poverty and social exclusion. For the period 2001/3, the target was:

to eliminate the problem of early school leaving before the Junior Certificate ... and reduce early school leaving such that the percentage of those completing the senior cycle will increase to at least 90 per cent by the year 2000 and 98 per cent by the year 2007. (Department of Social Inclusion, 2001: 8)

By 2002, these targets had been adjusted downwards with the revised aim being:

To reduce the number of young people who leave the school system early, so that the percentage of those who complete upper second level or equivalent will reach 85 per cent by 2003 and 90 per cent by 2006. (Department of Social Inclusion, 2002: 12)

By 2005, concerns were being raised about the prospect of reaching this new (lower) target:

Progress is being made on the early school-leaving target but it is unlikely that the target of a school completion rate of 90 per cent will be met by 2006. (Department of Social Inclusion, 2005: 15)

In the context of lifelong learning and the promotion of economic growth, the Council of Europe set a common goal in 2007 to limit early school leaving to no more than 10 per cent and to increase upper second-level education completion to at least 85 per cent as part of the Lisbon Strategy. This target of 10 per cent was subsequently incorporated into the Irish National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. A review of progress towards the Lisbon objectives in 2008 indicated that Ireland had reached the target on upper second-level completion but, like a number of other countries, failed to reach the early school leaving target. It is difficult to predict what the rate of early school leaving is likely to be in the near future due to the rapidly changing labour market and policy context.

1.8 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have shown that early school leaving remains a significant policy issue since it incurs high costs not only for individuals but for society as a whole. Patterns of early school leaving in Ireland are strongly differentiated by gender and social class, with early leavers more likely to be male and from working-class and/or unemployed households. However, describing such patterns does not yield an explanation of the processes influencing early school leaving. In the next chapter, therefore, we assess existing theoretical frameworks which seek to understand the process of early leaving, drawing on both international and Irish research. The data used and methodological approach taken in this study are described in detail in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 uses data from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study to identify the individual and school factors associated with early school leaving. In doing so, it provides an overview of how early school leavers differ from those who stay on to complete second-level education in terms of their school experiences in junior cycle and in terms of school organisation characteristics. Chapter 5 draws on in-depth interviews with early leavers to document their own perspectives on their school experiences and to draw inferences about school culture. In doing so, it derives a typology of the early educational experiences

of early school leavers, and provides an account of the dominant themes which have emerged. Chapter 6 then draws on the qualitative interviews to consider the school-leaving decision, the process of leaving school, and how young people communicate with their families and schools in the course of this process. This chapter is informed by the theoretical orientations outlined in Chapter 2. The post-school plans and pathways pursued by this group of young people are examined in Chapter 7 as well as their views as to whether they regret leaving school. Finally, Chapter 8 summarises the main findings of the study and discusses the implications of these findings for policy development.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE ON SCHOOL RETENTION

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a brief overview of the Irish and international empirical and theoretical literature on early school leaving. Section 2.2 considers existing theoretical frameworks which account for individual and social class differences in educational participation. Section 2.3 then considers research on school influences on early school leaving while section 2.4 provides an overview of studies on young people's perspective on the process. Section 2.5 looks at the extent to which early leaving should be conceptualised as a dynamic process while section 2.6 concludes.

2.2 Individual and Structural Differences in Rates of School Completion

Research from a psychological perspective has often focused on the influence of early childhood and family factors on young people's later educational careers. This research has frequently focused on identifying a set of 'risk' factors which contribute to the likelihood of school drop-out. Thus, the child's early home environment, including family stress, and the quality of care-giving are found to significantly influence school retention (Garnier *et al.*, 1997; Jimerson *et al.*, 2000). As well as family factors, Cairns *et al.* (1989) highlight factors such as

the young person's personality (especially aggression levels) and poor academic performance in shaping later dropout. Such an approach has, however, been criticised for neglecting the role of societal structures as well as for a tendency to 'blame the victim' by shifting the focus towards the 'failure' of young people and their families (see, for example, Smyth, 2005; Brown and Rodriguez, 2008).

Sociological research has expanded upon this research to look at the way in which educational outcomes are shaped by broader social structures, particularly social class. Earlier studies of social inequality focused on social class differences in the role of aspirations in educational attainment. This body of literature was grounded in the observation that class differences exist in levels of aspirations (see, for example, Hyman, 1953; Kahl, 1953; Riessman, 1953). Thus, such studies argued that working-class families accord less priority to a college education and are less ambitious than middle-class families. These class-based differences in educational and occupational aspirations were viewed as contributing to the reproduction of inequality. Further research in the 1960s and 1970s, which became commonly known as the 'status attainment' perspective, similarly argued that aspirations are a central part of maintaining social position from one generation to the next. These studies suggested that educational attainment is the outcome of the joint effects of family background and academic ability (Blau and Duncan, 1967), which are brought about by the mutual reinforcing influences of expectations and aspirations for the future (Sewell *et al.*, 1969, 1970). Thus, significant others, such as parents, teachers and peers, base their expectations on a student's family background and observable academic performance. Students then internalise the expectations crafted by these significant others. In the process, the expectations become the individual's own aspirations, which then compel achievement motivation. Status attainment theory, however, has been criticised for failing to take account of the way in which educational outcomes are shaped by broader social structures rather than individual socialisation processes. Theories which focus on social structure can be broadly characterised as those which emphasise cul-

tural factors, and those which adopt a rational action perspective; these frameworks are discussed in the following subsections.

2.2.1 Cultural Perspectives

Reproduction theory, most famously advanced by Pierre Bourdieu (1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), focuses on the unequal distribution of economic, social and cultural resources across classes and their transmission from parents to children. Familiarity with the dominant culture operates as a form of 'cultural capital' and influences an individual's 'habitus', that is, their disposition in terms of values, motivations and so on. Family life provides resources which yield important social dividends. In particular, cultural resources, such as values, attitudes, language skills and styles of interaction, are acquired in school more quickly by children already familiar with them. School success is predicated on such cultural capital so that middle-class students who are more familiar with the dominant culture will fare better academically. From this perspective, early school leaving and/or underperformance among working-class children is seen as a product of a 'mismatch' between the cultures of home and school. In contrast to the status attainment theorists, therefore, Bourdieu discounts the role of educational and occupational aspirations since the unequal opportunity structures of society 'determine aspirations by determining the extent to which they can be satisfied' (Bourdieu, 1973: 83). As such, aspirations have no autonomous explanatory power because they are nothing other than alternative indicators of structural opportunities.

Reproduction theory has been criticised for being overly deterministic (for an account, see Jenkins, 2002). However, a number of commentators have refined Bourdieu's concepts to look at the ways in which cultural resources are translated into social advantage at the micro level (see, for example, Reay, 2004; Lareau, 2000). Thus, Lareau (2000) argues that people are not 'passive' since social class provides individuals with resources which they can effectively utilise in the social sorting process.

2.2.2 Rational Action Theory

Perhaps the strongest critique of cultural reproduction perspectives has come from rational action theory. The latter perspective was originally developed by Raymond Boudon (1974) to account for social class differences in school completion, and later refined by Goldthorpe (1996, 1998) and Breen and Goldthorpe (1997). In his study of educational participation, Boudon (1974) distinguishes between primary and secondary effects. Primary effects are the different academic abilities of children demonstrated through achievement in school. Secondary effects, upon which he places more emphasis, are the varying educational choices made by children and their families from different social classes at various transition points in their educational careers, controlling for initial 'ability'. Boudon sees these choices as being determined by the evaluations that children and their parents make of the costs and benefits of, and the chances of success in, the different options they might pursue.

The rational choice perspective argues that class inequalities in educational attainment arise from the fact that, in pursuing any given goal, different social distances have to be travelled (Goldthorpe, 1996), or different opportunities and constraints navigated, depending on one's class origins (Boudon, 1974; Keller and Zavalloni, 1964). Thus, differential costs and benefits will be involved for different social groups. Middle-class families, for example, are more likely to risk social demotion from professional occupations by not going on to college while working-class students may evaluate their chances of college success more negatively (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996).

From the perspective of rational action theory, large-scale change in social class differentiation in educational outcomes will only arise when the relative costs and benefits of educational participation alter significantly. Thus, Erikson and Jonsson (1996) trace the way in which comprehensive reform of the school system coupled with redistributive tax policies resulted in a greater social equalisation of school completion in the Swedish context. The persistence of social class inequalities in school completion in the Irish context, in spite of edu-

cational reforms designed to promote retention, could perhaps be accounted for by the lack of change in the relative costs and benefits of educational participation (see Smyth and McCoy, 2003).

In general, gender differences in patterns of early school leaving have received less attention in sociological research than social class differences.³ This is despite the fact that female retention rates now exceed male rates in most Western countries (OECD, 2008). Rational action theorists have sought to explain this shift in terms of the greater labour market opportunities recently open to women (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997). Other commentators have related the gender gap in retention and achievement to a wide variety of factors, including broader social and labour market factors, the approach taken to student assessment, the feminisation of teaching, the pattern of classroom interaction, the 'laddish' culture among boys and the gender mix of the school (see Smyth, 2007b, for an overview). In the Irish context, the rapid expansion in female educational participation can be seen as related, at least in part, to the expansion in employment opportunities for women (Smyth, 1999). However, this does not fully account for the timing of the expansion of junior cycle completion among young women described in Chapter 1.

While rational action theory contributes to our understanding of the factors shaping early school leaving, it can be criticised on two counts. Firstly, rational action accounts rarely explicitly focus on the potential impact of schools on early school leaving. Secondly, they often fail to take account of the perspective of the young person in the whole process. Becker (2003) and Stocké (2007), for example, both apply the rational choice framework to decision-making regarding school tracks in the German educational system. However, both studies do so solely from the perspective of parents and their beliefs and evaluations. In the remainder of this chapter, we consider insights

³ A central concern in educational research has been with gender differences in exam performance rather than school completion, though the two processes are naturally interrelated.

from research on school processes and on young people's own perspectives.

2.3 School Organisation and School Process

The impact of the school on student outcomes has been the subject of much debate internationally (for an overview, see Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). Earlier studies indicated that schools had little impact on student outcomes compared with family background (Coleman, 1966; Plowden Report, 1967). However, emerging research on school effects from the 1970s onwards highlighted significant variation across schools in relation to a range of student outcomes. While such studies have generally focused on achievement (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000), a number of studies have focused on the influence of school organisation and process on school retention.

Research has indicated differences by school sector and by school composition in early school leaving rates. In the US context, substantial differences in drop-out rates have been found between public and Catholic schools. Even when controlling for student characteristics, dropout is substantially less in Catholic schools than in public schools (Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Bryk and Thum, 1989; Rumberger, 1995). In the UK context, Cheng's (1995) study suggests lower drop-out rates in single-sex schools. Other studies have focused on the social composition of the school, finding that a concentration of students from working-class backgrounds is associated with higher rates of early school leaving for all students (Kerckhoff, 1986; Ryan, 1999; Ayalon, 1994; Goldsmith, 2003; Foskett *et al.*, 2007)

A number of studies went further by exploring the way in which school policy and practice could contribute to, or counter, school drop-out (see for example Rutter *et al.*, 1979; Coleman *et al.*, 1982). In terms of formal structures, the differentiation of students into separate tracks or ability groups is found to contribute to early school leaving (Berends, 1995; Bryk and Thum, 1989). Social distance from other students, along with lower teacher expectations, fosters student alienation and disengagement, leading to school dropout (Newman,

1981; Oakes, 2005; Bryk and Thum, 1989; Pittman and Haughwout, 1987; Rumberger, 1995; Goldschmidt and Wang, 1999; Cheng, 1995). The school climate, in particular, the nature of student-teacher relations, is found to be key in shaping school retention (Bryk and Thum, 1989; Davis and Dupper, 2004; Lee and Burkam, 2003). Students are half as likely to drop out if they feel their teachers support their efforts to succeed in school and provide guidance to them about school and personal issues (Croninger and Lee, 2001). Furthermore, students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and those who have experienced academic difficulties are the most responsive to teacher support. Similarly, Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) found that dropout is lower where students perceive school discipline to be fair.

Less often considered perhaps is the way in which schools can directly trigger student departure. Fine (1986) in the United States reported the way in which some students in a disadvantaged urban school were coerced out when they reached the statutory leaving age or were at least discouraged from remaining in school, a process she characterises as 'exporting dissent' (Fine, 1990).

In the Irish context, studies support the view that the social mix of the school has an impact on student retention (Smyth, 1999; McCoy, 2000; Byrne, 2008). Smyth (1999) found that the social class composition of a school has a significant impact on potential drop-out, with higher rates reported in predominantly working-class than middle-class schools, even controlling for the individual social background of students. School policy and practice have a significant influence on student drop-out, with greater retention in schools where there is a positive school climate with good relations between teachers and students, and a greater sense of ownership on the part of students over school life. A 'strict but fair' disciplinary climate also contributes to student retention. Ability grouping, in contrast, is associated with greater drop-out of students from lower stream classes, in keeping with international research on tracking (see Oakes, 2005).

In exploring variation in early leaving rates across case-study schools, Malone and McCoy (2003) similarly highlight the centrality of care in the life of the school, with disciplinary issues often contrib-

uting to the development of negative relations between teachers and students, while parental and student involvement, in contrast, facilitates school completion.

2.4 The Young Person's Perspective

Many studies of early school leaving have been quantitative in focus and could be considered to take an 'external' perspective on the lives of young people. More recently, a number of qualitative studies have considered school leaving from a student perspective. Smyth and Hattam (2001, 2002) argue that the recent emphasis on 'student voice' within educational research should be extended to early school leavers and the authors maintain that young people can clearly identify the complex reasons behind their decision.

Such studies highlight the relative role of 'push' and 'pull' factors in young people's decision to leave school. Many researchers highlight the centrality of disaffection with school, resulting from a mixture of social and institutional factors, including the influence of peers, relationships with teachers, curriculum content, and the classroom context (see for example Kinder *et al.*, 1996; Archer and Yamashita, 2003). Thus, boredom with school and learning have been identified as the main reasons for young people not attending school and not wanting to continue in education:

Their decisions are made consciously and often amount to the perceived cultural irrelevance of the school and an absence of respect by the school for the lives, experiences and aspirations of young people. (Smyth, 2005: 121)

Young people cannot be regarded as passive in the process; in particular, 'acting out' through misbehaviour can contribute to the process of disengagement, thus (ironically) reinforcing social differentiation in outcomes (Willis, 1977; Brown and Rodriguez, 2008).

Taking account of young people's perspectives can also allow us to understand how the experience of school culture may differ for students in the same school. Smyth and Hattam (2002) identify two kinds of

school culture which can contribute to early leaving. Firstly, an aggressive school culture is characterised by hierarchical relations between teachers and students, with those who speak out being deemed 'troublemakers'. In contrast, a passive school culture may be 'pleasant' in terms of social relations but fails to engage students with curriculum and learning.

In the Irish context, a number of studies have found that differences are evident between early school leavers and school completers in terms of their orientation towards school life (Smyth, 1999; McCoy, 2000; McCoy and Smyth, 2004). Students who had more negative interaction with teachers during junior cycle were found to be more likely to drop out while those who view their school life as happy were less likely to drop out, as were those who had more positive views of their own abilities. Educational aspirations at age 14 are highly predictive of subsequent behaviour regarding participation in education. The influences of student-teacher interaction and academic self-image are mediated through Junior Certificate performance; that is, students who experience negative interaction with teachers and have negative views of their own abilities are more likely to drop out of school because they underperform in their Junior Certificate examination. Students who are less satisfied with school, who have low aspirations and a poor attendance record are more likely to drop out of school, even when their educational performance is taken into account.

Life outside school can operate as a 'pull' away from engagement with education. Early school leaving can be triggered by events such as pregnancy and parenthood (Fine, 1986; Cairns *et al.*, 1989). Delinquency and crime may contribute to, as well as result from, early school leaving (Battin-Pearson *et al.*, 2000). In particular, part-time employment while at school may serve to ease a young person's pathway into full-time employment (Smyth and McCoy 2004; Byrne, 2008). In contrast, the absence of employment opportunities in the local area may discourage young people from leaving school (Raffe and Willms, 1989).

2.5 Towards a Dynamic Perspective

It is not always easy to determine whether certain sets of factors 'cause' school drop-out. However, the advent of longitudinal studies has yielded significant insights into the causal processes at play. In particular, it is clear that school leaving reflects a longer term process of withdrawal from school rather than a single decision (Dryfoos, 1990; Franklin, 1992; Garnier *et al.*, 1997; Alexander *et al.*, 1997). Adopting a life course perspective, Alexander *et al.* (2001) suggest that 'high school dropout culminates a long-term process of disengagement from school' (p. 760; see also Jimerson *et al.*, 2000). They find that experiences dating back to the first grade of primary education influence the likelihood of early school leaving, with individual, family and school factors having a cumulative impact over the whole of the educational career. Fine (1990) in the American context has shown that school leavers who leave at the age of 16 have started disengaging from school three, four or five years earlier (see also Finn, 1989). Processes of disengagement involve gradual withdrawal from school-sponsored events, with young people becoming increasingly alienated from other students who are doing well by the standards of the school and bonding with other potential 'failures'. As a result, there is no one single decision to leave school; rather, young people who become disengaged from school are likely to truant more and more frequently, leaving and returning several times in a process that Kelly (1995) describes as 'fading-out'. Irish research similarly indicates that school leaving tends to be preceded by absenteeism and truancy (Smyth, 1999; McCoy *et al.*, 2007; Darmody *et al.*, 2008). Students with poor attendance records in their Junior Certificate year, for example, are over twice as likely as those with an average or good record to drop out of school after the end of the year.

2.6 Conclusions

To date, much of the international research on early school leaving has been informed by a focus on individual-level 'risk' factors or the cultural influences on school completion. This focus may result in a defi-

cit perspective on early school leaving, potentially 'blaming' young people and their families for school dropout. The emergence of longitudinal studies has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of early leaving, with the interaction of family, individual and school factors found to shape a gradual process of disengagement from school. Qualitative research has yielded further insights into how young people themselves withdraw from school and articulate their frustration with the educational system.

A number of Irish studies have explored the factors associated with early school leaving (Hannan, 1968; Rudd, 1972; Greaney, 1973; Breen, 1984; Hannan *et al.*, 1995; Boldt, 1997; Smyth, 1999; Smyth and Hannan, 2000; McCoy, 2000; Malone and McCoy, 2003; Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004; McCoy and Smyth, 2004; Byrne, 2008). Just three studies have concentrated on pupils who do not progress beyond primary level (Greaney, 1973; Hannan, 1968; Rudd, 1972), with much more attention being placed on leavers from second-level education (Breen, 1984; Boldt, 1997; Smyth, 1999; McCoy, 2000; Smyth and Hannan, 2000; Smyth, Byrne and Hannan, 2004; Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004; McCoy and Smyth, 2004; Byrne, 2008). For the most part, these studies have been quantitative in nature, with the exception of Boldt (1977) and Malone and McCoy (2003).

Existing Irish studies have been limited in two respects. Firstly, studies have generally been cross-sectional in nature, measuring student characteristics and experiences a short time before their withdrawal from school (see, for example, Smyth, 1999). This makes it difficult to disentangle the complex processes at play over a period of time. Secondly, qualitative accounts of early leaving have relied on retrospective accounts of the process, which may be coloured either negatively or positively by the post-school experiences of young people. In this study, we attempt to combine the insights from longitudinal research with young people's own accounts to advance our understanding of early school leaving in the Irish context. The methodology used in this study is discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the data and methodology used in this study of early school leaving. It begins by outlining the appropriateness of mixed methods research to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. Section 3.3 provides an overview of the quantitative data that were used for this study. Section 3.4 then describes the process of contacting and interviewing early school leavers, given that they comprise a 'hard to reach' population.

3.2 Mixed Methods Research

This study employs a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative data from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study with in-depth qualitative interviews with young people who left school before senior cycle completion. This mixed method approach is very much to the fore of educational research today, with these methods seen as yielding a more holistic understanding of a range of phenomena than a reliance on either quantitative or qualitative methods alone (Day *et al.*, 2008; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, 2003; Cresswell, 2003; Greene and Caracelli, 1997).

In adopting a mixed method approach, it is our view that our understanding of early school leaving can benefit from the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of both research strategies on their own to provide greater insight into the views and experiences of early school leavers. International research on school retention has, in the past,

been criticised for the dominance of quantitative methods, which are viewed as ‘silencing’ the critical voice of school drop-outs themselves (see for example Fine, 1990). In contrast, qualitative researchers argue that interviews with young people enable the phenomenon of early school leaving to be ‘named’ in a different way, which is more inclusive of the lives, experiences, aspirations and complexities of what was occurring at the point these young people decided to exit school (Smyth *et al.*, 2000; Smyth and Hattam, 2001, 2002). Furthermore, they argue that there is a need for different ways to interrogate the issue of ‘dropping out’ of school that are more informative, more insightful, more compelling and more ‘respectful’ of young people’s perspectives (Smyth and Hattam, 2001: 402). While such research undoubtedly yields significant insights into the experience of early school leaving, it has two limitations. Firstly, qualitative research is often based on the perceptions of young people *after* they leave school, and thus their accounts may be coloured by their post-school experiences. Secondly, it is difficult to place the accounts of this group of young people within the overall pattern of early school leaving, since information on the broader context may be lacking. This study combines the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative methods, by using longitudinal data on young people before they leave the school situation to identify early school leavers for in-depth follow-up interviews. The longitudinal part of the study is described in the following section.

3.3 Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS)

The Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) draws on data gathered from a theoretical sample of twelve case-study schools, identified on the basis of a postal survey of all post-primary principals. These schools were selected to capture varying approaches to ability grouping, subject choice and student integration, and encompass a range of sectors, sizes, locations and student characteristics. A profile of the twelve case-study schools is presented in Table 3.1 as context for the study.

Table 3.1: Profile of the Case-Study Schools

	Dixon St	Hay St	Daves Point	Lang St	Dawson St	Barrack St	Park St	Wattle St	Harris St	Argyle St	Belmore St	Fig Lane
Student Intake												
School Social Mix	Working Class	Working Class	Working Class	Working Class	Mixed	Working Class	Mixed	Mixed	Middle Class	Mixed	Mixed	Middle Class
School Organisation/Curriculum												
Ability Grouping	Streamed	Streamed	Streamed	Streamed	Mixed Ability	Mixed Ability	Streamed	Mixed Ability	Mixed Ability	Banded	Mixed Ability	Mixed Ability
Transition Year provided	No	No	No	Quasi-Compulsory	No	Optional	No	Compulsory	Compulsory	Optional	Optional	Optional
Leaving Cert Applied provided	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Leaving Cert Vocational Programme provided	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Drop Out Rate¹												
Drop Out	High	High	High	High	Mid/Low	Mid	Mid	Mid	Mid/Low	Low	Low	Low
School Performance												
Test Scores on Entry to First Year	Lowest	Lowest	Lowest	Lowest	Mid	Mid	Highest	Highest	-	-	Highest	Highest
School Junior Certificate Grade Point Average	Lowest	Lowest	Mid	Lowest	Mid	Mid	Highest	Mid	Highest	Highest	Highest	Highest

Note: Schools are identified by pseudonyms. Information is derived from previous reports on the PPLS study; drop-out rates are based on analyses presented in Chapter 4.

¹ High = >20% of cohort, Mid=0-20% of cohort, Mid/Low=<10% of cohort.

The study has followed a cohort of approximately 1,000 students from their entry to first year to their completion of second-level education. Students completed a written questionnaire each year (twice in first year) covering their attitudes to schools, their choice of programmes and subjects, and their aspirations for the future. In addition, in-depth interviews were carried out with groups of the students, and with key personnel in the school, including principals and guidance counsellors. This is the first such longitudinal study in the Irish context and it allows us to identify the characteristics of young people who leave school early relative to those who complete second-level education. This study and its methodology have been described extensively in previous reports (Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004; Smyth *et al.*, 2006; Smyth *et al.*, 2007) so the discussion here is limited to factors relevant to early school leaving.

Because the cohort of students is followed in every school year, information from the PPLS can be used to identify students who leave school before Leaving Certificate level (see section 3.4). The twelve case-study schools differ markedly in their early leaving rates (see Table 3.1), an issue which is discussed further in Chapter 4. Such data allow us to compare young people who left school early with those who completed second-level education on a range of dimensions, including:

- Background characteristics (gender, social class, assessed academic ability on entry to second-level);
- Aspects of the transition to post-primary education (expectations of the new school, friends in the new school, continuity between primary and second-level curriculum, degree of subject choice);
- School experiences in junior cycle (relations with teachers, relations with other students, student attitudes, time spent on homework, parental involvement);
- Ability grouping;
- Out of school activities (including part-time work during term time).

Data from six waves of the student survey, covering the period from first to fifth year, were matched across individuals. The resulting database included all students in the years surveyed; for example, where Transition Year is optional in the school, we include information on all students in fifth year, not only those students from the original cohort. This yields information on 1,630 young people, 184 of who left the school system before Leaving Certificate level. Chapter 4 presents information on this comparison between early leavers and school completers. In the following section, we outline the methodology used for contacting and interviewing early leavers.

3.4 In-depth Interviews with Early School Leavers

3.4.1 Identifying Early Leavers

Potential early school leavers were identified from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study; that is, going through the year-on-year completion of questionnaires, potential early school leavers were identified in each of the twelve case-study schools by the research team. This yielded a potential list of young people that had left the school. However, the reason for departure may have been transfer to another school or emigration rather than leaving the school system altogether. This list was then sent to the principal of each school in May 2007. The principal was asked to indicate the following:

- Whether the young person is still attending the school;
- For each young person who has left the school:
 - o The destination of the young person immediately upon leaving the school (if known);
 - o The point in time at which the young person left school (for example May 2004 or academic year 2003/2004);
 - o Contact details for the young person.

If school principals were not comfortable with offering information on the contact details of the early school leaver, we asked the principal whether we could address a letter to the young person through the school.

Information provided by the school principals was then used to distinguish between young people who had left the school system, that is, early leavers, and those who had transferred to another school (in Ireland or abroad). One school was not in a position to enable us to contact early leavers so the pool of early leavers was drawn from eleven schools.

Contact was then made with the early school leavers in November 2007 and again in April 2008. In all, attempts were made to contact 145 early school leavers across the schools. Because of their circumstances, some groups of young people and adults can be deemed 'hard to reach'. Hard to reach populations provide challenges for researchers, since it may be hard to estimate their numbers and to involve them in research (Rossi, 2008). Early school leavers may be considered a hard to reach population for a number of reasons. Firstly, they may have left the parental home and thus be more difficult to contact. Secondly, they may be less willing to discuss their school experiences since they view them in a negative light. Thirdly, a certain proportion of early leavers are likely to have literacy difficulties, making it more difficult to contact them by letter. Because of the difficulties in making contact with this hard to reach group, interviews with early school leavers were conducted over a wider time-span than would normally be adhered to. All interviews were conducted between January 2008 and May 2008. As an incentive to participate in the study and in order to maximise response, we offered each school leaver 50 euro for the expenses involved in travelling to the place of interview.

3.4.2 Interviewing Early Leavers

In-depth life history interviews were conducted with 25 young people to provide a detailed understanding of their school experiences, the school-leaving decision and their post-school plans and pathways. The framework of the interview schedule was within the life/oral history context.

In other words, the interviews sought to allow respondents to reflect upon and analyse past events. As Thompson (1988) highlights, using a life/oral history framework allows researchers to explore the underpinnings of the 'decisions which individuals make' (Thompson, 1988: 298). The study was also informed by 'voiced research' (Smyth and Hattam, 2002), which seeks to take account of the perspectives of groups who are otherwise 'silent' or 'invisible'. Using this framework enabled this study to investigate the reflections and opinions of young people about their experiences prior to the school-leaving decision. The interviews were semi-structured so that they covered certain topics but were sufficiently flexible to explore the individual circumstances of each young person and the issues of concern to them. Topics covered in the interviews included:

- Family characteristics and relations;
- Perceptions of school and teachers;
- The decision to leave school; the role and involvement of their family and teachers;
- Experiences after leaving school, including employment and unemployment;
- Plans for the future.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed and entered into Nvivo software. The interviews were analysed in a two-stage process. Firstly, each interview was read and reread in order to capture the complexity of each individual's situation. Secondly, interviews were coded according to the main themes and patterns emerging from young people's accounts.

Table 3.2 presents an overview of the 25 young people interviewed for the study. Respondents left school across a span of ages and years, with seven of the young people dropping out prior to Junior Certificate level. In the chapters which follow, we will provide much more detail on the lives and experiences of these young people, revealing the complexity behind their pathways out of school. Through-

out the text, quotes are labelled using the pseudonym from Table 3.2 along with the stage at which the young person left school (that is, 'junior cycle leaver' or 'senior cycle leaver').

Table 3.2: Profile of the Early School Leavers

Name	School	Age Left School	Age at Time of Interview	Stage Left School	Year Left School	Qualifications
Brian	Dixon St.	16	18	Senior Cycle Leaver*	2006	Junior Certificate
Chris	Hay St.	16	19	Junior Cycle Leaver	2005	Junior Certificate
Christine	Dawson St.	16	18	Senior Cycle Leaver*	2006	Junior Certificate
Clare	Dawson St.	15	17	Senior Cycle Leaver*	2006	Junior Certificate
Colin	Dawes Point	16	18	Senior Cycle Leaver	2005	Junior Certificate
Elaine	Dixon St.	15	17	Senior Cycle Leaver*	2006	Junior Certificate
Emma	Dixon St.	14	18	Junior Cycle Leaver	2005	No Qualifications
Eric	Argyle St.	17	18	Senior Cycle Leaver	2007	Junior Certificate
Frank	Park St.	14	19	Junior Cycle Leaver	2004	No Qualifications

George	Dawson St.	16	18	Senior Cycle Leaver*	2006	Junior Certificate
Helen	Barrack St.	18	19	Senior Cycle Leaver	2007	Junior Certificate
Ian	Dixon St.	17	19	Senior Cycle Leaver*	2006	Junior Certificate
Isobel	Barrack St.	16	18	Senior Cycle Leaver	2006	Junior Certificate
John	Hay St.	15	18	Junior Cycle Leaver	2006	No Qualifications
Julie	Belmore St.	16	19	Junior Cycle Leaver	1998/2005	No Qualifications
Liam	Park St.	14	17	Junior Cycle Leaver	2005	No Qualifications
Lisa	Dawson St.	16	17	Senior Cycle Leaver*	2007	Junior Certificate
Louise	Belmore St.	17	18	Senior Cycle Leaver	2006	No Qualifications
Oliver	Hay St.	18	17	Senior Cycle Leaver	2007	Junior Certificate
Paul	Dixon St.	13	18	Junior Cycle Leaver	2003	No Qualifications
Rachel	Barrack St.	17	19	Senior Cycle Leaver	2006	Junior Certificate

Richard	Dixon St.	17	18	Senior Cycle Leaver	2007	Junior Certificate
Sean	Hay St.	16	19	Junior Cycle Leaver	2006	No Qualifications
Steve	Dixon St.	16	18	Senior Cycle Leaver*	2006	Junior Certificate
Thomas	Argyle St.	16	18	Senior Cycle Leaver*	2006	Junior Certificate

Note: All participants are identified by pseudonyms; * indicates participation in the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme.

As with all research studies, this study has some limitations. The early leavers interviewed come from just eight of the twelve case-study schools. Two of the other schools, Fig Lane and Harris Street, were middle-class in composition and so had very few early leavers, none of whom chose to participate in the study. Wattle Street was similar to other mixed intake schools, such as Park Street, in student composition and rates of early leaving. The remaining school, Lang Street, was very similar in profile to three working-class schools, Dixon Street, Hay Street, and Dawes Point, in terms of student intake, the use of streaming and drop-out rates (see Table 3.1). It could be argued, therefore, that the experiences of early leavers from Lang Street are likely to be similar to leavers from these three schools, twelve of whom were interviewed for the study. The eight case-study schools from which respondents are drawn capture variation in school organisation and process and in student intake. The use of Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data on all twelve case-study schools provides a further check on the extent to which the interviews capture the diversity of early school leaving experiences.

Chapter 4

INFLUENCES ON EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING – ANALYSIS OF THE POST-PRIMARY LONGITUDINAL STUDY

4.1 Introduction

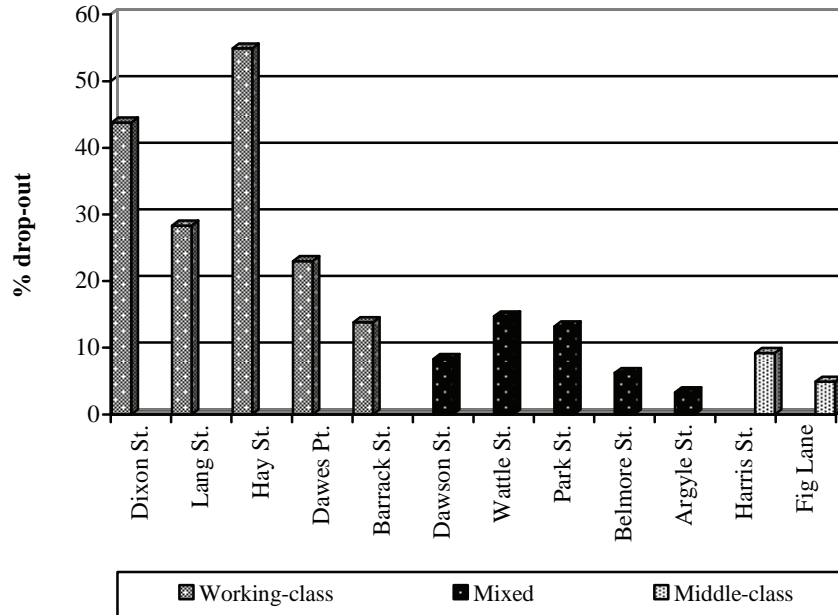
This chapter now uses data from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) to compare the cohort of early school leavers to those who stayed on in second-level education. The chapter begins by considering variation in drop-out across the case-study schools. It then considers how the school experiences of early school leavers in junior cycle differ from those who have stayed on in school. The chapter then considers the association between aspects of school organisation and early school leaving.

4.2 School Variation in Drop-Out

Chapter 2 outlined a number of studies in the Irish context that have shown considerable variation across schools in their drop-out rates (Smyth, 1999; McCoy, 2000; Byrne, 2008). Figure 4.1 illustrates significant variation across the case-study schools in the proportion of young people who drop out of school before reaching the Leaving Certificate. Drop-out rates are highest in the schools with a predominantly working-class student intake, especially in Dixon Street and Hay Street where four to five in ten of the study cohort left school early. In contrast, rates are lower among mixed and middle-class schools. However, it is worth noting that there is considerable varia-

tion among schools with the same type of student intake, with much lower rates in Barrack Street, a working-class girls' school, than in other working-class schools.

Figure 4.1: Drop-out Rate for Case-Study Schools by Student Intake



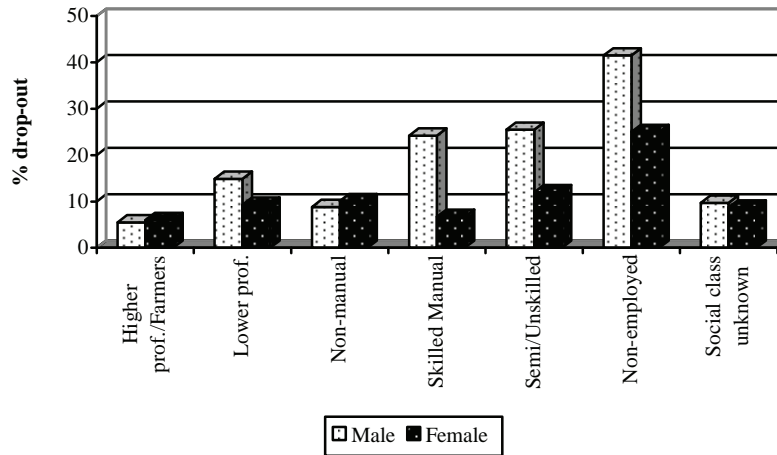
Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

4.3 Background Characteristics: Gender, Class and Prior Academic Ability on Entry to Second-Level

In keeping with the national pattern (see Chapter 1), early school leaving in the case-study schools is significantly differentiated by gender, with 15 per cent of boys in the sample dropping out of school compared with 9 per cent of girls. Even within the same schools, boys tend to be more likely to leave school early than girls (the exception to this pattern is Fig Lane, a middle-class school where rates are low for both genders). Early school leaving is strongly influenced by social class

background, with the highest rates of drop-out found among young people from non-employed, semi/unskilled manual and skilled manual households. Figure 4.2 illustrates that early school leaving is particularly prevalent among working-class boys in the case-study schools.

Figure 4.2: Early School Leaving by Social Class and Gender



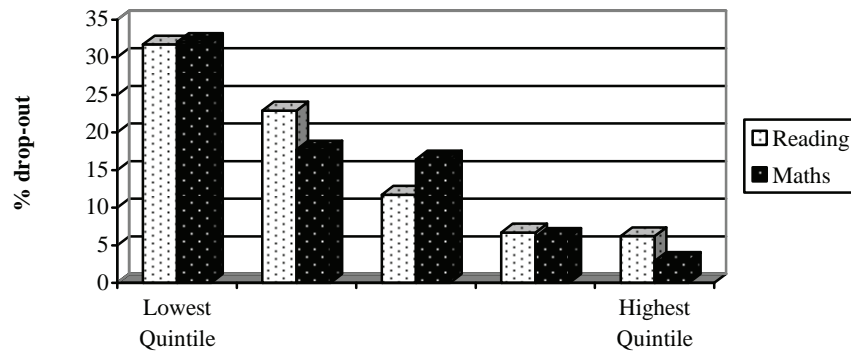
Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

Early school leaving is also influenced by membership of a minority group. Just under a quarter of Travellers drop out compared with 10 per cent of the settled population. This figure is likely to underestimate overall drop-out rates among Traveller young people since it is based only on students who made the transition to post-primary education in the first place. Similarly, one-fifth (20 per cent) of newcomer (immigrant) students⁴ drop out of school compared with 11 per cent of students with Irish parents.

⁴ Our definition of 'newcomer students' refers to students from families where both parents are from outside Ireland. This excludes children born abroad with Irish parents (return migrants), and those with one Irish and one immigrant parent.

In terms of measures of academic ‘ability’ on entry to second-level education, students who have low reading and maths test scores on entry to post-primary education are significantly more likely to drop out of school in the years that follow. A third of those in the lowest reading/maths group (the lowest fifth) leave school early as do a substantial portion of those in the second lowest group. In contrast, very few students with the highest maths scores leave school early (Figure 4.3). It is, however, worth noting that patterns of early leaving are not reducible to prior ability since school completers are found across all performance levels.

Figure 4.3: Early School Leaving by Reading and Maths Score Quintiles on Entry to Post-Primary Education



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

The case-study schools differ significantly in the types of students attending the school so it is important to try to compare like with like in looking at variation between schools. Figure 4.4 illustrates drop-out rates across the ten case-study schools for which entry reading scores were available and shows the pattern of early leaving only for those students in the lowest forty per cent of reading scores. Although ability levels on entry are quite different across the case-study schools, all of the schools have some students who fall into the lowest forty per cent in terms of reading performance. Even confining attention to this

group of lower academic ability students, considerable variation in levels of early school leaving is evident between schools. Hay Street and Dixon Street continue to have higher drop-out rates while rates are lower in Fig Lane, a middle-class school, and in two mixed schools, Dawson Street and Belmore Street. The remainder of this chapter explores the kinds of school experiences which may account for these differences.

Figure 4.4: Drop-out Rates for Case-Study Schools by Student Intake (Lowest and Second Lowest Reading Quintiles Only)



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

4.4 Experiences of Second-Level Education

4.4.1 The Transition to Second-level Education

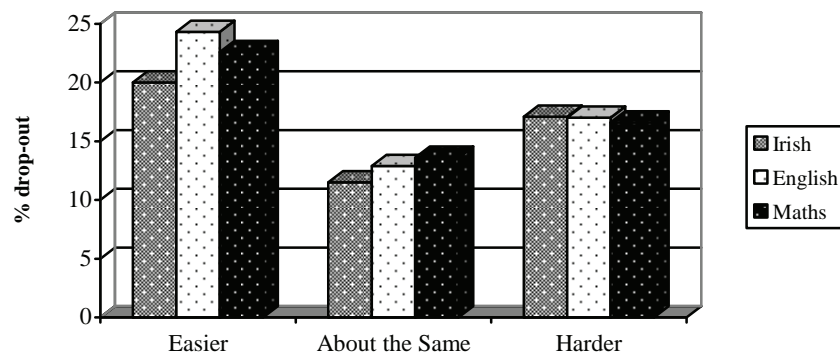
To date, findings from the longitudinal study have demonstrated the importance of making a smooth transition from primary to second-level education (Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004). On entry to post-primary education, students were asked to what extent they knew what

to expect of their new school. Twenty-seven per cent of those who had very little idea what to expect subsequently dropped out of school compared with 11 per cent of those who had 'some idea' and 19 per cent who had a 'good idea'.

Drop-out rates are found to be somewhat higher among those who did not have any of their friends from primary school in their first year class (22 per cent compared with 15 per cent) and, to some extent, among those who knew no-one in their school in first year (22 per cent compared with 16 per cent). Thus, integration into social networks within the new school setting appears to play a positive role in promoting school completion.

Continuity in curriculum between primary and second-level education is also associated with lower drop-out rates. Figure 4.5 illustrates that students who found Irish, English and/or Maths 'about the same' in first year as in sixth class of primary school had the lowest drop-out rates subsequently.

Figure 4.5: Early School Leaving by Perceptions of Curriculum (Dis)continuity Between Primary and Second-Level in Irish, English and Maths



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

Drop-out rates are somewhat higher among those who experience course material as easier in first year than in primary school. This reflects the lower level of academic challenge found among students

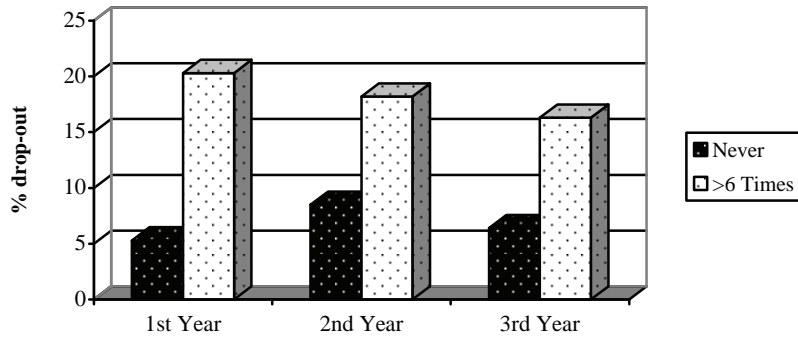
allocated to lower stream classes in streamed schools (see below). Furthermore, the degree of subject choice was also found to be influential; almost a fifth of students who did not obtain their choice of subjects went on to drop out of school compared with 9 per cent of those who did so.

4.4.2 Relations with Teachers

While there is little consistent variation in positive teacher-student interaction between early school leavers and other students, the pattern for negative teacher-student interaction is much more clear-cut, with drop-out preceded by more negative relations with teachers. This pattern has also been confirmed in national studies of early leaving (see, for example, Smyth, 1999; McCoy, 2000). Even in the early part of first year, negative teacher-student interaction is more prevalent among those who go on to drop out of school.

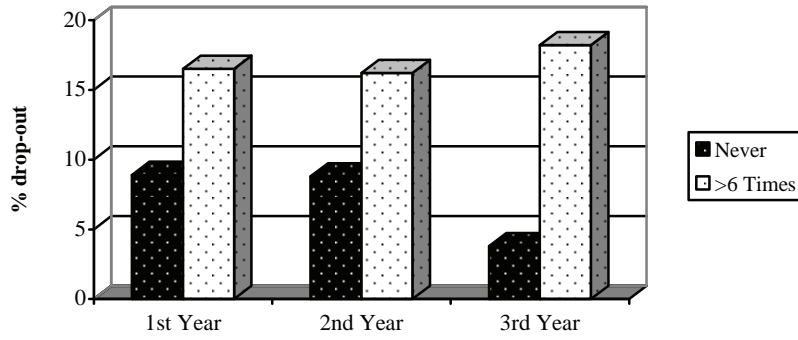
There are very significant differences in misbehaviour levels between early school leavers and those who remain in full-time education. This is apparent from as early as the end of first year. This applies across all forms of misbehaviour; the exception to this pattern is 'messing in class' which is not predictive of early school leaving. Being repeatedly late for school or repeatedly absent from school is highly predictive of later school leaving (Figures 4.6 and 4.7). Furthermore, having truanted from school is highly predictive of school drop-out; a quarter of those who truanted in first year went on to drop out of school compared with a tenth of those who never truanted (Figure 4.8). It is clear, therefore, that early school leaving is preceded by a period of gradual withdrawal from school involving being late for school, absenteeism and truancy.

Figure 4.6: Early School Leaving by Prevalence of Being Late for School (>6 times) in Junior Cycle



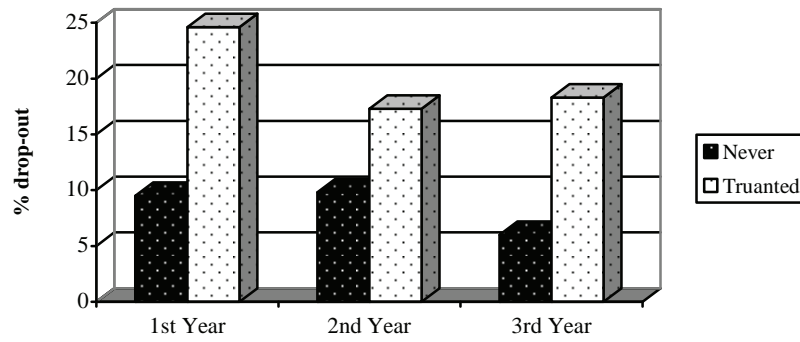
Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

Figure 4.7: Early School Leaving by Prevalence of Being Absent from School (>6 times) in Junior Cycle



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

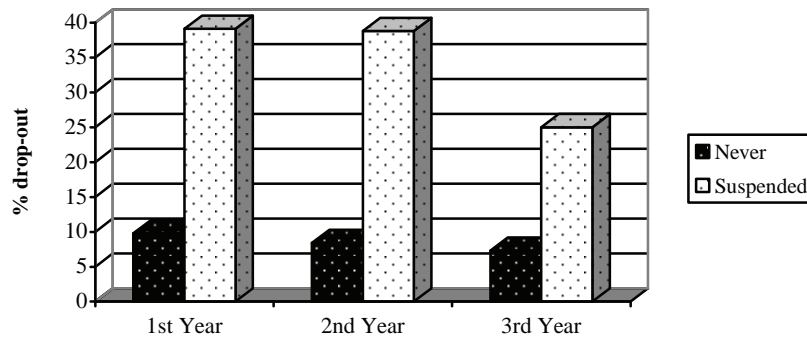
Figure 4.8: Early School Leaving by Incidence of Truancy in Junior Cycle



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

Students who had frequently been in trouble for not following the school rules were also more likely to drop out of school than other students; 17 per cent of those who repeatedly (>3 times) were in trouble in first year left school early compared with 7 per cent of those who never got into trouble. More serious forms of misbehaviour and punishment appear to be even more strongly related to early school leaving. Over a quarter of students who had received detention frequently (>3 times) in first year dropped out of school compared with 7 per cent of those who had never received detention. Being suspended from school is strongly associated with early school leaving, with four in ten of this group dropping out of school (Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.9: Early School Leaving by Incidence of Being Suspended from School in Junior Cycle

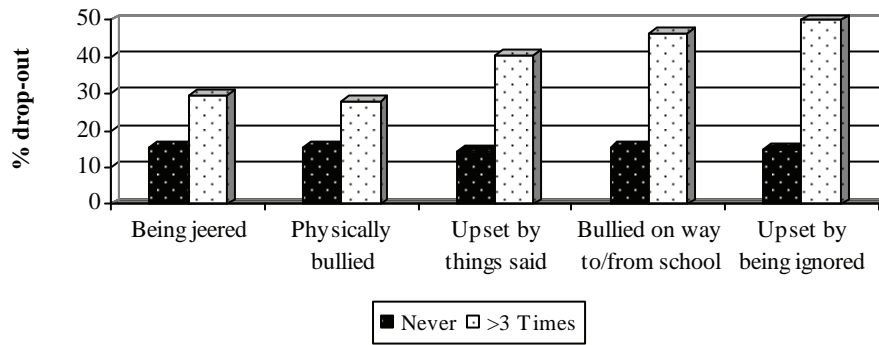


Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

4.4.3 Relations with Other Students

Being bullied at the start of first year is associated with early school leaving. A very small number of students experienced repeated bullying at this stage but this group were much more likely to drop out of school subsequently. However, there is no significant difference in the experience of being bullied at other time-points between early school leavers and students who remain in school. Similarly, being seen as (un)popular among class-mates is not associated with early school leaving (Figure 4.10). The findings in relation to bullying confirm the importance of social integration on entry to post-primary education for longer term outcomes (see 4.4.1 above).

Figure 4.10: Early School Leaving by Incidence of Being Bullied at the Start of First Year



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

4.4.4 Student Attitudes towards Teachers and School

At the beginning of first year, early school leavers do not differ from other students in the extent to which they report liking school and liking their teachers. However, over the course of the junior cycle, differences emerge between the two groups. By third year, those who go on to leave school early are more negative about school and their teachers than those who remain in school (Figure 4.11).

At the beginning of first year, early school leavers are more likely to report feeling isolated or anxious than other students, most likely because of their higher bullying levels. However, no such difference is evident at later time-points.

Figure 4.11a: Attitudes to School among Early School Leavers and Those Who Remain in School

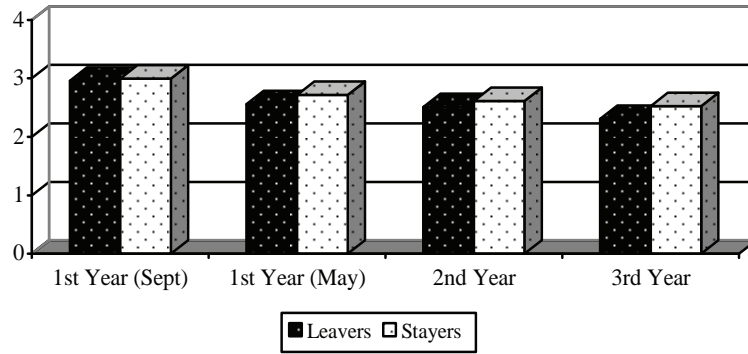
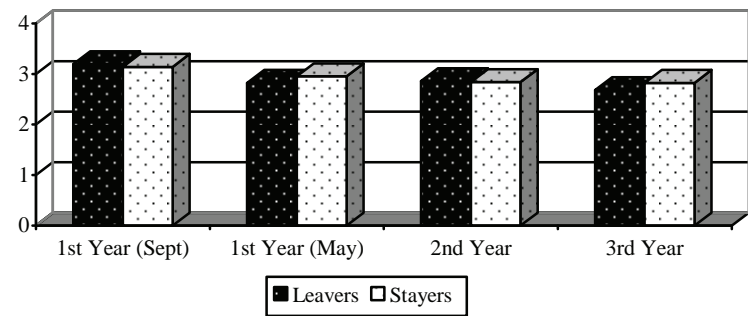


Figure 4.11b: Attitudes to Teachers among Early School Leavers and Those Who Remain in School



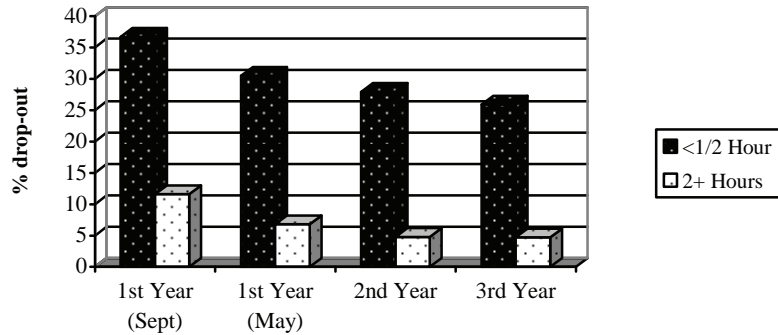
Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

4.4.5 Academic Orientation

Even from first year onwards, early school leavers have a more negative academic self-image, that is, they are more inclined to feel unable to cope with their schoolwork. The group of students who are investing very little time in homework and study are disproportionately likely to drop out of school at a later stage. More than a third who spent less than half an hour a night on homework at the start of first

year left school early compared with a tenth of those who spent more than two hours per night on homework (Figure 4.12).

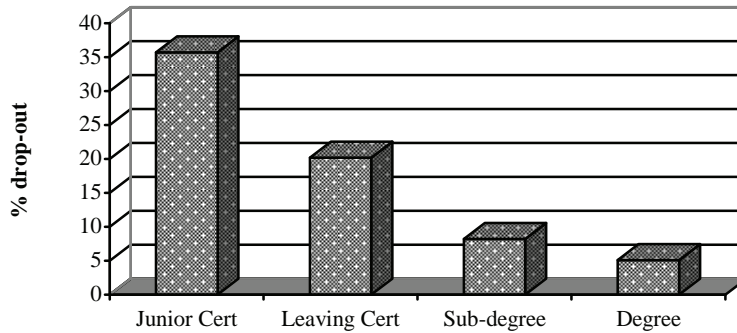
Figure 4.12: Early School Leaving by Time Spent on Homework in Junior Cycle



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

Educational aspirations in second year are predictive of subsequent behaviour with a third of those who intend to only complete the Junior Certificate dropping out of school compared with 5 per cent of those who intended to go on for a degree.

Figure 4.13: Early School Leaving by Educational Aspirations in Second Year



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

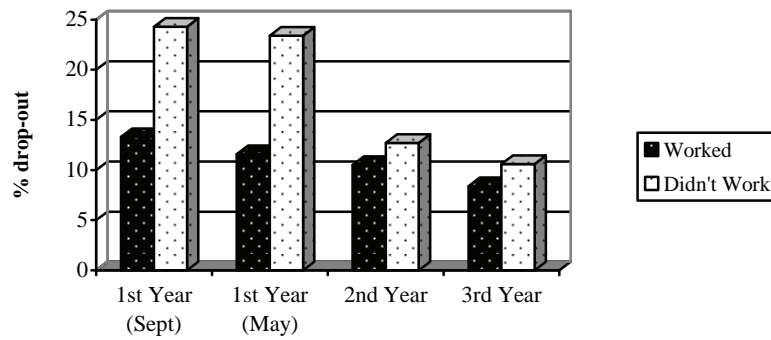
4.4.6 Parental Involvement

Somewhat surprisingly, most aspects of parental involvement in schoolwork were not significantly associated with early school leaving. However, two aspects of parental involvement were found to be predictive of subsequent behaviour. Firstly, students who reported that their parents 'never or hardly ever' discussed how they were getting on in school with them were more likely than other students to drop out of school (33 per cent compared with 16 per cent for 'several times a week'). Secondly, students who frequently had dinner with their parents were less likely to drop out of school than other students (13 per cent for 'several times a week' compared with 33 per cent for 'never/hardly ever/a few times a year'). Thus, positive and supportive relations with parents appear to facilitate school retention to some degree.

4.4.7 Out of School Activities

In addition to school experiences, early school leaving is found to be associated with experiences outside of the school context, including part-time employment during term time and aspects of a student's social life. Those who work part-time during junior cycle are more likely to drop out of school than other students; drop-out rates are particularly high for those who work during first year with a quarter of this group leaving school early. This pattern is consistent with previous national research, which shows that part-time employment may operate as a 'pull' out of school for some young people (McCoy and Smyth, 2004; Byrne, 2008).

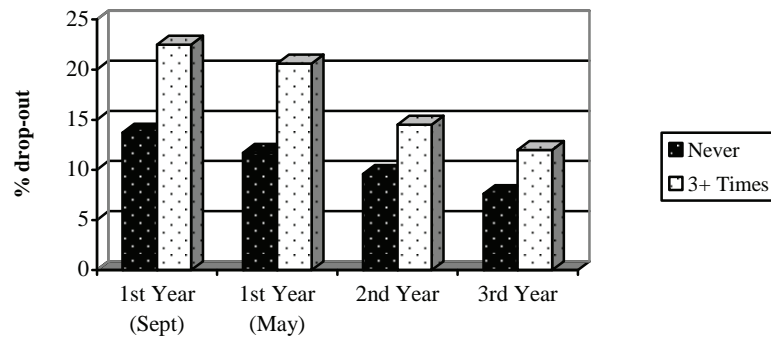
Figure 4.14: Early School Leaving by Part-time Job Status during Term Time in Junior Cycle



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

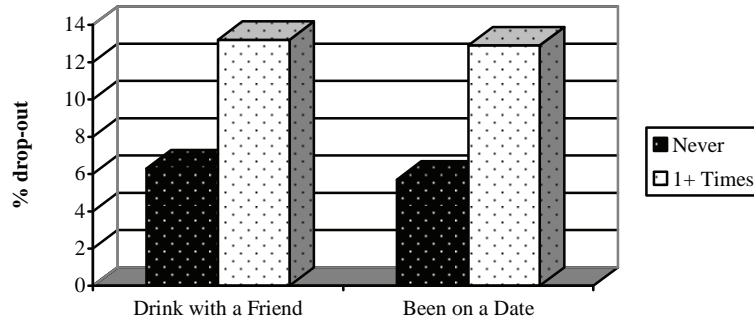
School drop-out is not significantly related to involvement in sports (either within or outside school) or extra-curricular activities. On first sight, this seems to be contrary to previous research which indicated that such involvement promoted students' sense of ownership and hence improved retention (see Smyth, 1999). The reason appears to lie in a changing policy context. The case-study schools with a predominantly working-class intake report a higher level of student involvement in school-based activities; the expansion of such activities is likely to have been facilitated by the School Completion Programme. It would appear on the basis of the study evidence, however, that extracurricular activities are unlikely to be sufficient to ensure retention unless underpinned by other elements identified by our research, including a positive school climate. Students who have more active social lives outside school, particularly as early as first year, are more likely to drop out of school than their peers. Similarly, those who took alcohol with friends or went on a date in the previous two weeks in third year were more likely to drop out of school subsequently.

Figure 4.15: Early School Leaving by Attendance at a Disco, Concert or Cinema (in previous two weeks) in Junior Cycle



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

Figure 4.16: Early School Leaving by Taking Alcohol with Friends and Being on a Date (in the previous two weeks) in Third Year



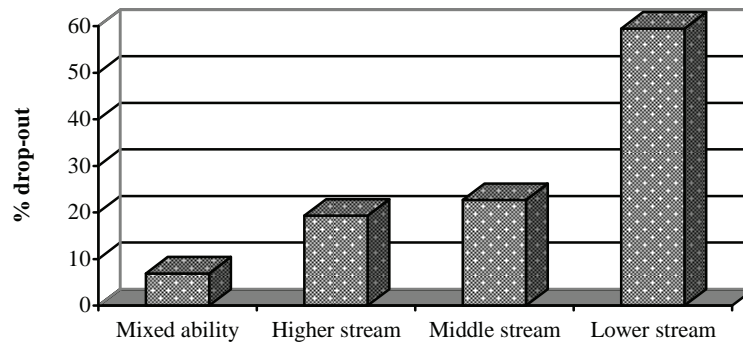
Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

4.5 School Organisation

The case-study schools varied in whether they allocated students to junior cycle classes on the basis of their assessed ability. Figure 4.17 illustrates dramatic differences in drop-out rates by such class allocation policy. Those in mixed ability classes were least likely to drop out of school (7 per cent) while the highest leaving rates were

found among those who had been allocated to a lower stream class (60 per cent).

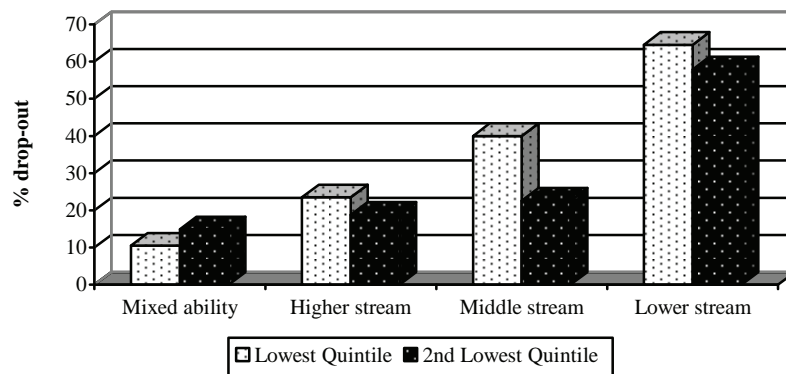
Figure 4.17: Early School Leaving by Class Allocation during Junior Cycle



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

Earlier analyses had shown that lower reading and maths scores on entry to post-primary education were associated with a greater risk of dropping out of school. It is important, therefore, to take account of the possible effect of ability grouping net of initial academic ability. Figure 4.18 shows early school leaving rates only for those in the lowest and second lowest reading quintiles, that is, those in the lowest forty per cent in terms of reading scores on entry to first year. It is clear that, even controlling for initial ability in this way, significant differences are evident across different class types, with those in the lower stream having higher drop-out rates than students of similar ability levels allocated to other classes.

Figure 4.18: Early School Leaving by Class Allocation (Lowest and second lowest reading quintiles)



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data.

4.6 Multivariate Analyses

The analyses so far have shown the association of individual variables with early school leaving. However, some factors may be predictive of school drop-out because they are associated with other aspects of young people's experiences. This section explores the factors influencing early school leaving controlling for initial differences between students.

Table 4.1 presents a logistic regression model with the likelihood of dropping out of school compared with the likelihood of staying in school. Significant positive coefficients indicate that a certain variable is associated with a greater risk of early school leaving; significant negative coefficients indicate that students in this group are less likely to drop out of school. The first model in Table 4.1 explores the relationship between background factors and early school leaving. In keeping with the descriptive analysis presented above, rates of early school leaving are highest among boys, those from the Travelling community, newcomer (immigrant) students, and those from working-class and non-employed backgrounds.

Table 4.1: Logistic Regression Model of Factors Influencing Early School Leaving

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	-1.267***	0.234	-3.529***	-2.132*
Female	-0.708***	-0.680***	0.087	0.201
Minority group:				
Traveller	0.540~	0.311	0.334	0.286
Newcomer	0.595**	0.572**	0.625**	0.561*
Social class:				
Higher professional/Farmer	-1.428***	-0.924*	-0.306	-0.164
Lower professional	-0.548~	-0.233	0.068	0.308
Non-manual	-0.775*	-0.546	-0.528	-0.449
Skilled manual	-0.219	0.042	0.112	0.490
Non-employed	0.595~	0.646~	0.724~	0.853*
(Reference: Semi/unskilled manual)				
Reading score on entry		-0.052***	-0.025***	-0.014
Class allocation:				
Higher stream			1.106***	1.056**
Middle stream			1.251***	1.341***
Lower stream			2.723***	2.554***
(Reference: Mixed ability)				
Negative interaction with teachers (2 nd year)			0.389**	0.151
Being bullied (1 st year)			0.501~	0.663*
Time on homework (2 nd year):				
0.5-1 hour				-1.095**
-1.5 hours				-0.647~
1.5-2 hours				-1.507***
2-3 hours				-1.430**
3+ hours				-2.103*
(Reference: <1/2 hour)				
Educational aspirations:				
Leaving Certificate				-0.256
Sub-degree				-0.886*
Degree				-1.011*
(Reference: Junior Certificate)				
Nagelkerke R ²	0.100	0.156	0.275	0.314

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

Source: Post Primary Longitudinal Survey data.

Model 2 adds reading score on entry to post-primary education into the model. As might be expected, students with higher reading scores are much less likely to drop out of school than those with lower scores. When reading score is entered into the model, the effect of being from the Travelling community becomes non-significant. In other words, the higher drop-out rates found among Travellers is mainly due to their lower reading scores on entry to first year. However, newcomer students are found to have higher drop-out rates even controlling for initial academic ability. Social class differences are less marked when reading scores are taken into account. However, those from higher professional or farming backgrounds have lower drop-out rates while those from non-employed families have higher drop-out rates, all else being equal.

Model 3 takes account of school experiences. The strongest impact is from class allocation at junior cycle. The lowest drop-out rates are found among those in mixed ability classes while the highest rates are found among lower stream students, even controlling for social background and initial ability. A number of school factors are predictive of early school leaving, controlling for social background, ability and class allocation. Thus, drop-out rates are higher among those who found schoolwork in first year less challenging than in primary school, those with higher levels of misbehaviour, those who reported difficulties in coping with schoolwork and those who did not like school. However, many of these factors are inter-related so only the strongest effects are included in the model. The nature of the school climate is significantly predictive of early school leaving. Thus, students are more likely to drop out of school where they were bullied during the transition to post-primary education and where they have experienced frequent negative interaction (being given out to) from their teachers.

Model 4 adds in variables relating to student motivation and engagement. The time spent on homework is significantly predictive of later behaviour; those who spend very little time (less than half an hour) on homework and study mid-way through the junior cycle are most likely to drop out while those who spend three or more hours on homework are least likely to do so. Furthermore, students with higher

educational aspirations by the time they reach second year are less likely to drop out than other students. A number of factors become non-significant when motivation and engagement is taken into account. In other words, middle-class students, and those with higher reading scores are less likely to leave school early because they have higher aspirations and greater engagement in schoolwork than other students. Furthermore, the effect of school climate appears to operate by shaping student motivation; thus, students who experience negative relations with their teachers appear to withdraw from full engagement in their schoolwork, and it is this disengagement that leads to their leaving school.

4.7 Conclusions

This chapter draws on a unique longitudinal database, the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS), to explore the factors influencing early school leaving in Ireland. The longitudinal nature of the data means that we examine the association between individual characteristics, school experiences and later drop-out.

Replicating the findings of other national and international studies, we find that males are significantly more likely to drop out of school than their female counterparts. This finding is neither original nor controversial. What the analyses do allow is an exploration of the processes which underlie this gender difference. In particular, the findings indicate that a good deal of the gender gap is accounted for by ability grouping and teacher-student interaction. Thus, young men are more likely to drop out of school because they are more frequently allocated to lower stream classes, and they are more likely to become enmeshed in a negative cycle of 'acting up' and being 'given out to' by their teachers. Thus, the higher drop-out rate of males is largely related to their school experiences.

Again in keeping with previous research, early school leaving is influenced by social class background, with the highest rates of drop-out found among young people from non-employed, semi/unskilled manual and skilled manual households. Social class should not be

considered in isolation from gender since it is largely working-class boys who leave school early. As with gender differentiation, part of the explanation of the social class gap in early leaving resides in the greater tendency of working-class students to experience the school climate as negative and to be allocated to lower stream classes (since streaming is now disproportionately prevalent in disadvantaged schools; see Smyth, McCoy and Darmody, 2004).

Measured academic ability on entry to second-level education was found to predict early school leaving: students who have low reading and maths test scores on entry to post-primary education are significantly more likely to drop out of school in the years that follow. For some young people, therefore, school drop-out has its roots in early experiences of educational failure and 'falling behind' in schoolwork, an issue which is further explored in the chapters that follow.

Analyses indicate considerable variation in drop-out rates across the case-study schools (in keeping with the national patterns, see Smyth, 1999). There is some evidence to suggest that this variation is related to the social class composition of the school as drop-out rates are highest in the schools with a predominantly working-class student intake. In contrast, rates are lower among mixed and middle-class schools. However, we also note considerable variation among schools with the same type of student intake; for example Barrack Street, a working-class girls' school, has much lower rates of drop-out than other working-class schools in our study. Similarly, variation in drop-out rates is not reducible to differences in the 'ability' level of student intake, since between-school variation remains marked when we focus attention only on students in the lowest forty per cent of reading scores.

A number of features of school organisation and process are predictive of early school leaving. In particular, the nature of ability grouping during junior cycle is significantly associated with school drop-out. Students in mixed ability classes were least likely to drop out of school while the highest leaving rates were found among those who had been allocated to a lower stream class. Those in lower stream classes were almost 13 times more likely to drop out than

those in mixed ability classes, even controlling for social class background, academic ability on entry into second-level, school climate, and student engagement.

In sum, analyses presented in this chapter point to gender and social class variation in early school leaving rates. More importantly, however, the findings highlight the way in which school experiences can serve to facilitate or constrain the chances of young people staying on in school. There are clear indications that school drop-out is the result of a long-term accumulative process of disengagement from school. Aspects of this disengagement can be shaped by the organisational features of the school, such as the practice of ability grouping and approaches to teaching and learning which do not engage young people (see Smyth *et al.*, 2007). Other aspects of disengagement lie in social relations within the school, notably the quality of relationships with teachers and peers. For many young people, leaving school is preceded by a gradual withdrawal from school life, comprising being late for school, being repeatedly absent from school, and truanting. In the chapters which follow, we explore this gradual disengagement from the viewpoint of young people themselves.

Chapter 5

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter now considers the school experiences of early school leavers in more depth, drawing on the qualitative interviews conducted with our respondents. It begins by offering a broad typology of the school experiences of early school leavers. Given this classification, it then considers the dominant themes that have emerged from the young people's school experiences, including academic struggle, relations with teachers, interaction with peers, and classroom environment.

5.2 Early Experiences of School

Adopting a life-history approach to the study facilitates capturing early experiences of school and the process of becoming disengaged from or disinterested in school. Utilising this approach, we have identified three 'types' of school leavers, based on their early experiences of school:

- Those who disliked primary school and had attendance issues or struggled academically at that early stage;
- Those who enjoyed primary school but found the transition from primary to second-level difficult;
- Those who enjoyed primary school but became disengaged in junior cycle or senior cycle.

Disliking Primary School

For some young people, the disengagement process began within primary school, with many indicating that they did want to go to school or did not like school even at this early stage. This group had generally disliked primary school and had attendance issues or struggled academically.

I never liked school, ever since I was in primary school I never liked school, I didn't like you know, I didn't want to go into school. (Liam, Park Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Steve had moved around a number of primary and second-level schools and it was clear that this mobility had implications for his learning, particularly by the time he reached junior cycle.

The whole way through before even getting to second-level, before I even went to that school like I was in and out of all different schools in [the county]. I just get frustrated in class and I don't, I don't really know what I'm doing or anything like. I just get frustrated and hate it. (Steve, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Steve spoke about how the transition from primary to second-level required negotiating a totally different environment, an environment in which he was more likely to get into trouble.

I was in a bit of trouble like now and again. In some classes I'd do my work and in some classes I'd mess about. (Steve, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Christine recalled that she had missed many days while in primary school, and put her poor attendance record in primary school down to 'feeling lazy'. When she entered second-level education, her attendance record continued to deteriorate.

In primary school and all that, I missed a load of days and all that as well, and then when I started in secondary school it was just

like, the first two years I was in most days, and then in third year I started getting bored with it. I just didn't like school at all, I think I was just quiet, and didn't like anything about it. (Christine, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Like Christine, Lisa disliked school even at primary level and indicated that she also had an issue bonding with other students in the school. In the interview, she indicated that she had a different set of friends in every year of primary school.

In primary school yeah, I just couldn't take it. In school, I didn't just bond to the school at all. I couldn't, like anytime I was in, I always wanted to stay home, I just didn't want to go, hated it so much. There was some of them that just, I didn't really get on with, that was it basically like. (Lisa, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Sean disliked school from when he attended primary school, and found the transition from primary to second-level particularly difficult.

Oh in primary school I didn't like it either no, I used to have fights with my mother trying to stay off. I just didn't like it and not just that school, just any school like because I just wouldn't like it... Then I went into first year, I sort of liked it for the first few months, because it was something new like do you know the moving around the whole day and everything like, then after that it started dragging. (Sean, Hay Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Difficulties in the Transition from Primary to Second-level Education

For others, difficulties began in the transition from primary to second-level. George had enjoyed primary school (but had already started truanting) and was expelled from school when he was in fifth year. He indicated that he found the transition from primary to second-level difficult, despite knowing many of the other students from primary school. Like Christine, he struggled with the new school subjects

when making the transition from primary to second-level and felt that he did not receive the attention he needed because the teachers perceived him as resisting learning.

I used to like it, yeah, primary school like. I liked school at the start, but then, I don't know, in secondary school even the different subjects and that, just started getting harder and stuff in first year. Like, Geography and History and that, a lot, lot different from primary school like, so it was. And out in that school, if you didn't want to learn, that was it like, they didn't really care. (George, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Many of the respondents we spoke to had enjoyed primary school and had a good attendance record, but found the transition from primary to second-level difficult because they had already been struggling with school subjects. Julie had enjoyed primary school as she knew most of the students but had struggled with some subjects, such as Maths and Irish, back then. Thus, by the time she got to second-level, she was somewhat out of her depth and family members did not have the resources to help her. She felt that there were too many pupils in the classroom at primary school.

In primary school I did [get extra help] but it wasn't much help so it wasn't.

What kind of help did you get when you were in primary?

Some Maths like but they wouldn't be showing you everything like because there would be about 15 of us in the class like. (Julie, Belmore Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

When Julie went to second-level she felt that, like Christine, she was falling behind. She also felt that while she enjoyed school, she did not receive the help she needed.

It is not that I didn't like school, I did like school but I couldn't cope because I wasn't getting the help I needed. I was always left

to kind of the back of the class. (Julie, Belmore Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

For others, the struggle with schoolwork began once the transition to second-level had been made. Clare had enjoyed primary school, but found the transition from primary to second-level quite challenging. It was at this stage that she began to struggle academically.

First year it kind of got a bit hard [compared to primary school].
First year was alright but after that it was getting too hard. I didn't like it, too much homework. (Clare, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Emma's attendance was good in primary school and she enjoyed primary school but her attendance began to decline in the second year of junior cycle. Like some of the other early leavers, she did not like some of the people in her class.

I would have had a good attendance in primary school because I used to love that, I used to love going like, but then when I just came to the school like I just, I got bad attendance. Maybe in first year I had a good attendance. I loved primary school but I never liked the secondary school. No I didn't like a few people in my classroom, I just didn't like them. (Emma, Dixon Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Disengagement Later in Junior Cycle/Senior Cycle

For others, the struggle with school began during junior or senior cycle, mostly in second or third year, for an array of reasons which will be discussed later in more depth: as a result, senior cycle was then a negative experience for many.

I was grand [in second and third year] but when it hit third year I didn't like it at all, I hated it, first year was alright, I was very good at first year and second year and I hit third year and I just started not getting on with the teachers and all. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Yeah at the start I loved it. First, second, third year just, and then fifth year, I hated fifth year.

What was different?

Everybody, just people in my class and all, and then just everything about it. It was just horrible it was and it was too hard.
(Rachel, Barrack Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

The next section now explores these educational experiences in more depth. In doing so, it arranges the educational experiences of young people around key themes. It considers the notion of school culture as it is constructed by young people as they struggle to make sense of their educational experiences and subsequent early departure from second-level education. These themes and experiences have emerged from the voices of young people as they have navigated their transitions from school. We make the point that none of the following representations mean that a particular school culture is fixed; they are contested notions and representations of a particular group of young people who left school early and therefore may not capture the view of what the 'norm' for the school is among other young people attending the same school. We begin with the theme of academic struggle.

5.3 Academic Struggle

Students from each of the groups identified in the previous section indicated that they began to struggle academically at school. Academic struggle is a dominant theme in the educational experiences of school leavers. For some this struggle came early in the education process in primary school, for others it became apparent in the transition from primary to second-level while for the third group it became an issue later in junior or senior cycle. This section now examines young people's experiences of academic struggle, their constructions of it, how it began, how it manifests and what action was taken either on the part of the school or the individual. We begin with academic struggle as a theme as this is an issue which can be potentially addressed at the level of policy and practice.

Academic struggle was articulated by the early school leavers in many forms, including struggle in the transition from primary to second-level, feelings of having fallen behind from the beginning of first year onwards, perceiving subjects to be more difficult, not obtaining subject choices and perceiving the learning environment as different to that in primary school. Furthermore, the interviews indicated that teachers across the schools react differently to academic struggle and this can in some way be linked to the school culture as it was perceived by the young people we interviewed. The following section gives examples of how this was articulated in the interviews.

Julie attended a relatively high-attaining school with a mixed social class intake and a low drop-out rate. Julie felt that she had always been 'left to the back of the class' and did not receive the help that she needed from primary onwards. She had moved schools a number of times and, when she did settle into one of the case-study schools, she felt that she was singled out by her teachers. The struggle she faced at school was compounded by her situation at home as she had no resources to help her there; her mother died, she had only younger siblings, and consequently no back-up. Julie felt isolated from school and felt that she was not getting the same support as some of the other students in the school because of how her teachers perceived her and the area that she came from.

No you see, some of the teachers didn't bother, they didn't like the areas where we came from as well like. They just didn't like the areas because they thought they were trouble like. (Julie, Belmore Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Julie gave the impression that her isolation and academic struggle were compounded by the academic environment in which she was placed, where she occupied a low status relative to other high-achieving students. This was also the impression given by students in Dawson Street. George also struggled academically in primary school and felt that school subjects became a lot harder when he made the transition from primary to second-level. He felt that he was falling behind from first year onwards, and that the environment in second-

level was very different to the environment in primary school. It was at this stage that his behaviour also became an issue, as he began to act out.

It was grand for the first while, but just, it was different, a lot, lot different from national school like, a lot more people, a lot more trouble going on, and I was always in the middle of it, that's what's wrong with me. (George, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

As well as the subjects becoming more difficult, like Julie, George felt that the teachers were not supportive of all students and treated students differently. He attended a school with a low/moderate drop-out rate and expressed the same sense of isolation and academic struggle that Julie had. He articulated the view that if a student was perceived by a teacher as 'not wanting to learn' or resisting learning, then that teacher would show little interest in the student and expect little of them. Partly as a result of his poor relationship with some of the teachers, George was frequently in trouble for talking in class, was often 'bored' in class and often did not complete the assigned homework. In the end, he felt the teachers had given up on him as he was not assigned any homework. Clare also attended Dawson Street and felt, like George, that the teachers were not 'on her side'; that she could not talk to the teachers and preferred to talk to her friends. Clare also found the transition from primary to second-level quite challenging and it was at this stage that she began to struggle academically. Furthermore, she felt that her teachers made a deliberate distinction between the 'country' kids and the 'town' kids, with teachers indicating a preference for the 'country' kids who tended to be more academic and from middle-class backgrounds.

Yeah, we were always moaning, all the ones [town students] would stick together and say to the teacher you need to pay more attention to us half the times, because like, we'd come in and she'd be over to the country ones, going to the brainier ones like, and she'd leave us there sitting there doing nothing like.

And was there anyone at all you could have spoken to? Like amongst the teachers?

No, they wouldn't listen, they'd be thinking you were paranoid, and I'm like, no I'm not like. (Clare, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

George spoke a lot about the culture of the school in Dawson Street, how it was a strict school and how the teachers were not particularly supportive of all students. Like Clare, he indicated that he could not speak to the teachers and did not like many of them; thus a negative cycle of 'acting up' and in turn 'being given out to' by teachers characterised his experiences of school.

Just everything, just teachers and everything, they'd just annoy you a lot so they would. If a teacher had it in for you, that's it, she has it in for you the whole time. I don't know really, I just didn't like the people that teach us out there. And then again it was me, I couldn't keep my mouth shut either, that was my problem in school. (George, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Steve too struggled academically, and, as with a number of other young people, mobility between schools had a negative effect on his learning, particularly by the time he got to junior cycle. Aged 18 at the time of the interview, Steve felt that his basic literacy skills and reading skills were poor. When asked about his school experiences, he articulated that he had developed an 'attitude' at school and began 'messing' in school as a result of his academic struggle.

Yeah I used to just get frustrated in class and I don't, I don't really know what I'm doing or anything like ... I had a reader as well for my Junior Cert but I was slipping behind, I'm not that good at reading or that... I was just going into school with an attitude and I started to mess about in the class and all, I was just a messer. (Steve, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

However, he did get on well with the teachers in his school and, unlike George in Dawson Street or Julie in Belmore Street, felt that

the teachers were 'for him' rather than 'against him', reflecting a different type of school response to academic struggle. Brian, who attended the same school, had a less positive view about the school response to his academic struggle. Dixon Street had a high drop-out rate, and while Steve felt that the teachers cared about him and tried to help him with his academic difficulties, Brian perceived that some of the teachers knew that he was falling behind in his work at school, but did little to help him out.

So did you ever feel yourself falling behind in school?

Yeah.

And would the teachers have known you were falling behind?

Yeah they would have, yeah some of the teachers would have.

And would they have done anything or do you think they could have done anything?

Well there were two or three teachers that did help me like; there was a few more that just didn't care. (Brian, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

The interviews also pointed to educational experiences that may have compounded existing academic struggle. These included aspects of school organisation and process, such as subject choice, teaching approaches and ability grouping. Clare indicated that she continued to struggle academically in second-level, which was reinforced by constraints on subject choice. She told us that she was put in a Metalwork class when her preference was for Home Economics. Furthermore, while she was receiving extra tuition in Irish, she felt that the method of withdrawal from class was ineffective as it impinged on other subject classes.

They put me in Metalwork with a load of fellas, there was four girls and load of fellas, and I didn't like it, because it was a boys' thing, and I liked Home Economics, Cooking as well.

...

When I was in school, I didn't like Geography or History, I was very slow at them, I wouldn't have a clue about them at all, I used to go into a different class, just say if I was getting stuck on me Irish, they'd take me for an Irish class when they were doing Geography, but now I don't know anything about History or Geography. (Clare, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Clare also felt that the teaching approach used by the teachers in her school was not particularly effective now that she had experienced a different type of teaching approach at Youthreach.

In school it's hard when a teacher's giving you a book and you're thinking, the size of it, how am I going to learn that in a month like. When you do your Leaving Certificate here [at Youthreach] it's the same thing, but you don't have to come in and sit there reading a book and then writing it down like after studying, you don't have to do that here. They tell you, they write up on the board, whatever, and they explain to you and then you go back and you'll be writing it down in your own book and you know yourself when you're doing it yourself. (Clare, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Like many others who moved to another form of educational provision, a different learning environment seemed to have a positive influence on her learning disposition.

I'd be like [in school], I don't like that class and I'm not going into that class, I used to have rows with the teachers, I don't like that class, I hate him and I hate that one, but like here you can't actually say that, you have to do it, and put it this way, if I got away with murder, I wouldn't know nothing. (Clare, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

For others that we spoke to, the sense of academic struggle did not manifest itself until towards the end of junior cycle or beginning of senior cycle. This was the case for Louise. Louise had moved to Ireland

and entered senior cycle education here. Before she moved, she had poor attendance at her previous school and had moved around a number of schools before coming to Ireland as a result of parental separation. By the time she had moved to her new school here, she felt that she had fallen too far behind and found it difficult to cope with the workload.

It was just too much to handle, I've never been really good at school anyway and it was just, it got on top of me then when I moved, I managed the first three years in my school over in [another country] but then I left and then when I came over here I was so far behind that I just gave up altogether, I didn't want to do it any more. (Louise, Belmore Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Because she was behind in her school work, she felt stressed in class; and like George, this impacted negatively on her behaviour in the classroom.

No, just being behind work and getting stressed in me classes and I used to be like, I just wouldn't listen to what the teacher was telling me, I'd just flip out, I wouldn't be able to sit in a class room and listen to them. (Louise, Belmore Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Oliver who attended Hay Street, a working-class school with a high drop-out rate, also felt a sense of academic struggle. Oliver had moved to Ireland but had experienced all of his second-level education in Hay Street from first year. Oliver left school even though he had enjoyed being in school, had not been in trouble while at school and felt that the teachers were supportive. Despite attending the school from first year onwards, he outlined how he still struggled with his English language skills by the time he got to sixth year.

And did you feel that the teachers and the school were supportive of you?

Yeah, they were very supportive. Yeah, they were like helping, because first time I got to school I had no English. But I was learning so much, doing homework. But by the time I got to sixth

year I still found the language and reading difficult. (Oliver, Hay Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

In stark contrast, Elaine felt very strongly that she hated school, and this process began in Junior Certificate year where her academic struggle was compounded by negative interaction with her teachers. As soon as her relationship with teachers began to decline, the process of disengagement began to accelerate.

I was very good at first year and second year and I hit third year and I just started not getting on with the teachers and all. I kept getting thrown out of classes and suspended all and I just hated it and I hate that school. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

While academic struggle was experienced by many of the young people we spoke to, it was particularly evident among those who had been allocated to their base class on the basis of tracking/streaming.⁵ A key critique of tracking practices is the slow progress and achievement of students in low tracks because of uninteresting lessons and instruction materials, or teachers' low expectations and standards for their students' performance (Hallinan, 2007). In section 5.6, we describe perceptions of the classroom environment among students who attended streamed classes, who report a more disruptive classroom climate. Some of the criticisms of streaming are echoed in the accounts of students who dropped out of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. Thomas was particularly negative about the LCA programme.

Did you know you were going to be doing LCA after your Junior Cert?

No, I only found out when I came back in after the summer holidays. It was the same class that I was in for the Junior Certificate, we were the small class.

⁵ These practices include being differentiated into different classes based on assessed academic ability at junior cycle as well as being differentiated into different programmes in senior cycle.

And had your parents talked to you about you going into LCA?

Yeah, but I didn't know what LCA was, I thought it was going to be good but it's a doss, it's boring, it's a doss, you do nothing, you get no homework, you've no books, you've nothing, so you just come to school to listen. (Thomas, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Both Brian and Clare also expressed negative views of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, with work experience being the only positive aspect of the programme that early leavers commented on.

It was just, it wasn't as good as I thought it was gonna be, like. It was boring, studying all the time and all that.

And did you feel that there was anything interesting or challenging about what you were doing in the Leaving Certificate Applied?

No, oh, I loved the work experience, I done childcare, like minding children and all that, playschool. (Clare, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Criticisms of the lack of academic challenge for LCA students are also reported in a larger scale study of the programme (see Banks *et al.*, 2010). However, young people interviewed for the latter study, most but not all of who completed senior cycle, are positive about many other aspects of the programme, including relations with teachers, small class size and engaging class work.

5.4 Relations with Teachers

Building on the previous section, a dominant theme in the interviews was negative relations with teachers, replicating findings from other studies of early school leaving in Ireland (Smyth, 1999; Malone and McCoy, 2003). This section now considers how the young people spoke about the relationship they had with their teachers, covering issues of how students perceived the dynamic in the classroom, how

they perceived teachers as viewing their academic ability, and their willingness to confide in teachers.

It was common in the interviews for young people to express the view that their teachers did not listen to them or were not interested in them, and many felt that some teachers would 'put me down' or 'have it in for me'. This was common across all schools and certainly contributed to negative feelings about teachers, school and learning.

The teachers say stuff to you like, you know kind of, put you down like because you're doing nothing in their favour like. They kind of put you down like, so then you feel like oh I haven't got the teacher on my side, they don't want to teach me so like, is there any point being here at all like. (Eric, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Teachers? No, not really, didn't like any of them, I used to hate the [certain teacher], she had it in for me big time. I couldn't hack her at all, so I couldn't. (George, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

If you got into trouble say a couple of times, that would stick to you like, you know no second chances like, forget him if he doesn't want to learn, leave him do you know that kind of way. You either wanted to learn or you didn't, you know that kind of way, the way they put it, you get out of it what you put into it like. (John, Hay Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Isobel indicated in her interview that she liked school but had a poor relationship with some of her teachers, and she considered that they disliked her because of her lower academic ability. As a result, she had a poor academic self-image and felt that she could not talk to any of the teachers.

Ah no, it was a good school, it's just your teachers. Like you'd have a laugh and all in the school and like things go on and all in it but it's just all, most of the teachers weren't nice.

...

No, no, there was one or two teachers now who I did like and then the rest were just, they hated me, I hated them, we didn't get along.

Why do you think they hated you?

Because I wasn't good. There were two or three others [students] in a class and they'd [the teachers] just put us away from everybody. That just made things worse. (Isobel, Barrack Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Like many others, she felt herself falling behind, and because she did not like her teachers and felt that they did not like her, she would not co-operate in class as an act of rebellion.

I'd never cooperate with any of the teachers in the class or anything and once they came into the classroom they'd be like 'sit down the back', and I'd sit down the back with nobody, on my own, so, and then that made me worse. So I just started hating them. Then I wanted to leave.

...

You'd have a teacher and say we didn't like her so we just say right we'll mitch and come back after lunch or something, you know. (Isobel, Barrack Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Elaine told us that she had a poor relationship with most of her teachers and she felt that this attitude was common among the students in her Leaving Certificate Applied class. She indicated that it was easier to get on with teachers that she had had all the way through second-level. Furthermore, she indicated that there was only one teacher with whom all or most of the students got on, who would listen to the group of students as a whole.

It is just the teachers. They just drove me crazy. Just shouting at you like and all and shouting at other people and just annoying you, I'd say there is, I'd say that is why people are leaving school and all. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

However, not all of the young people interviewed experienced negative interaction with their teachers. Unlike many of the other school leavers, Ian, who attended Dixon Street, had a good relationship with most of the teachers and described them as being 'nice'. He also indicated that he could talk to them and had talked to them when he needed to do so. Colin who attended Dawes Point also had positive things to say about his teachers. His father had died and he indicated that his teachers were particularly sensitive to what he was going through.

The teachers would often let me go down to the library with a friend when I'd be in floods of tears like you know what I mean, I'd just say sir look I can't or whatever, put up my hand like, I wouldn't be like skiving, if I was upset, generally upset, I'd go down with him like and he'd sit down with me or whatever and we'd talk about things like, because he knew my dad too like.
(Colin, Dawes Point, Senior Cycle Leaver)

5.5 Interaction with Peers

A further theme in the educational experiences of early leavers was interaction with peers. In line with findings from the PPLS quantitative analyses, it was evident from the interviews that many early leavers had experienced difficulties interacting with their fellow classmates, which in turn led to further school disengagement or lack of attachment to school life. This section outlines how interaction with peers can be a problem for some young people from as early on as primary school, how poor interaction with peers tended to be higher in schools that used streaming or tracking practices, and how issues such as bullying can have a profound negative and lasting influence on school attachment. It also considers how some interventions designed by schools to improve or dissipate negative interaction in the classroom are deemed unsuccessful by some young people.

Christine attended Dawson Street and became disengaged in senior cycle. She had a long history of non-attendance; she had missed many days in primary school and had attended school for just 25 days

in the year that she sat her Junior Certificate. Christine expressed a strong dislike of school, describing Dawson Street as being very strict and 'like a prison'. Christine had experienced difficulties in getting on with the teachers and students in her class both at primary and second-level. While she had a best friend at school, it was made clear to her that she was a bad influence on that person, isolating her further.

I just didn't like the people or the teachers. My best friend's mum and dad wouldn't let me hang around with her [my friend] because I was missing days, like, they wanted her to be like, to do well for herself, and they just thought I was a bad influence on her. (Christine, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

While Christine had no clear reason as to why she did not get on with the people in her class, Lisa, who also attended Dawson Street, had described her experience of both primary school and junior cycle as negative, mostly attributing her dislike of school in junior cycle to the people that were in her class and to the bullying that she had experienced.

I didn't like the students that was in it [the school]. There was some of them that just, I didn't really get on with. They were people like from my town, like, I didn't really get on with them

Was there any bullying or anything like that going on?

Yeah there I was bullied in first and second year, there was a lot of bullying, until I got up to fourth year, then everyone kind of settled down, there were a few people in other classes that, maybe they'd be at it, like once, maybe a week or maybe for the whole week and never stop, and I couldn't take that. (Lisa, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

While Dawson Street did not use streaming practices in junior cycle, the school had a differentiated senior cycle. By the time Lisa got to senior cycle, she opted for the Leaving Certificate Applied which she loved and attributed this to improved interaction in the classroom with her classmates.

I love the LCA, I loved it, because like, it's handy with the work and you get to go away to places as well, so, that's what I liked about it, like, and everyone in my class, they're all very good to me like, very nice, the boys and the girls, like I get on with most of them like. I talk to them now even in the town. Any other time like, even when I was in third year, I wouldn't really get on with them, but now we all get on. (Lisa, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

However, the improved interaction with her peers in LCA was not enough to make her stay in school and Lisa seized her opportunity to leave, citing 'I wanted to get out of it for so long, and I thought it was the right time to do it'.

Unlike Christine, while in junior cycle Lisa had a good relationship with her teachers and could speak to them about the difficulties she was having with other students. She indicated that her teachers would help her out by taking her out of some of her classes. However, she felt that because she was taken out of class, it had negative implications for her learning, particularly in some subjects.

Yeah, there was a couple of teachers I could actually like, talk to, like, they'd listen to me whatever I say and that, they were, they'd help me or whatever, that if I wanted to get out of class like, they'd help me to get out of it and bring me to another class that'd be on me own.

...

In school like they [the teachers] took me out of History and Geography in school and that wasn't good for me because now I don't know really what History and Geography is all about, don't even ask me what it is like. And like they kept taking me out of Irish classes as well, so, wasn't much good in the school at all. (Lisa, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Emma had enjoyed primary school but when she moved into second-level, she too disliked some of the people in her class. Emma attended Dixon Street which used streaming practices in junior cycle, and was

allocated to the 'lowest' class. As time went by, because she did not like the people in her class, she began 'mitching' more regularly, and began to struggle academically.

I didn't like it and then there was like people in there that like I didn't like. I didn't like a few people now in my classroom, I just didn't like them. I was in the lowest class.

...

There was this girl I was hanging around with but I was always, like, because she was on the mitch off school, like on the bunk, like I said I'd do it with her and like ever since, ever since I've had poor attendance and I always done it you know what I mean. (Emma Dixon Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

John also attended a school which used streaming practices in junior cycle. He articulated the view that while he had liked primary school, he began to 'doss' in second year of junior cycle. Like others, John did not get on with some of the people in his class and spoke about the disruptive classroom environment he was allocated to, factors which led to his disengagement from school.

I didn't really like it like, I had no time for school, didn't get along sometimes with the people in class like, I didn't like it at all... It was a small enough class, it wasn't massive, maximum of 15 people, there wasn't a lot of us in class, it was a class of messers like. I'd say nearly everyone of us got suspended at some stage. (John, Hay Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Ian had attended Dixon Street which also used streaming practices in junior cycle. His attendance at school had always been bad because he wanted to go to another school but could not. He had a bad experience at school in first year and was 'jumped' by some of the people he went to school with. He did not like school because he felt that everybody knew everybody else's business.

I just didn't like it [the school] like since day one like, I never liked it. I just didn't like it there were too many people that knew you around there and know all your business. (Ian, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

5.6 Classroom Environment

A further theme emerging in the educational experiences of early leavers was the nature of the classroom environment. While this has been touched on in previous sections of this chapter, it will be considered now in more detail. This section considers the extent to which young people are aware of the streaming practices used in schools, and outlines the influence of a disruptive classroom environment on school disengagement.

It was clear that students could distinguish what 'type' of class they were assigned to through streaming practices, as Colin demonstrated with the following quote:

Mine was the medium class, we had the stupid class, the medium class and the swots, that's what we used to call it. (Colin, Dawes Point, Senior Cycle Leaver)

John attended Hay Street and indicated that all of his lower stream class left school early, that he was in a class of 'messers' and that he himself was 'the class clown'.

No-one in my class really had any interest, and the teachers would tell you go or don't go. I don't know just everyone was just a messer, sure even when we're out now, it is still the same, messing, messing, messing. (John, Hay Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Brian attended Dixon Street and had enjoyed the earlier years of junior cycle, but did not like his Junior Certificate year. When prompted about the things he did not like about school, Brian also outlined that there was a lot of messing in his class, both in junior cycle and in LCA, which contributed to him seeing school as a negative experience.

Well the particular school that I went to there was a lot of messing and I just I couldn't stick it, every day people were thrown out of classes, too much messing, I couldn't stick at it, too much messing in my class.

So were you learning anything or was it just messing?

No it was just all messing constantly like. I just got sick of it. It was more like wrecking the teacher's head like, that's every day like, day in day out, every day is like that. (Brian, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Like Brian, Elaine also attended Dixon Street and spoke at length about how her class was particularly disruptive.

My class made a teacher leave, that is how bad it was like, they made her leave, she cried, she came into the classroom and I think it was she had laryngitis and tried to teach us and they just took the piss out of her and I think she ended up leaving over that but it wasn't just our class, it was loads of other classes and she left, I think there was two of them.

...

Sure all the girls in me class used to be shouting at the fellas just to say shut up like I'm trying to learn do you know that way, it didn't happen though. Once they got kicked out of class, everything would be all quiet like and then you would be able to learn a bit for like five minutes and then the bell goes. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Emma similarly attended Dixon Street and felt that there was nothing she could do about the disruptive classroom environment because it was typical of lower stream classes.

Well I was in the lowest class when I went to school, I was in like the last class you know what I mean so.

And do you think that if you hadn't been in the lowest class things would have worked out differently or?

It probably would have like if I was in a higher class, I was in the lowest like you know what I mean, there was nothing I could do. (Emma, Dixon Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Eric also attended a school that used the practice of ability grouping (Argyle Street). He enjoyed junior cycle but began to dislike school when he went into senior cycle. He indicated that his class was particularly disruptive and gave teachers a difficult time in both junior and senior cycle.

We used to destroy them [the teachers]. The lads would just have her head wrecked like. You wouldn't mean to, you look back no and you're just like was I really that bad like. (Eric, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

It was evident from the interviews that many early leavers had been educated in particularly disruptive classroom environments. In some of the schools, there was a culture of early school leaving in the class, if not in the school. This was particularly evident in Hay Street and Dixon Street, two working-class schools that used the practice of streaming from first year onwards. Brian who attended Dixon Street told us that all of his Leaving Certificate Applied class had dropped out of school, all 14 pupils. Brian indicated that this contributed to his decision to leave school.

So what percentage of your year group left do you think?

Well there was 14 in my class and we all left. Yeah, all of us. It was a small class and then there was another class where three or four left.

Did you feel that you didn't have the choice to stay because everyone else was leaving?

Well, yeah, I'd have to go to a new class and meet new people and stuff. (Brian, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

There was also considerable drop-out in the year group that Colin was in, and he attributed this to the fact that many people were expelled from the school.

Would you say many in your class left school?

I'd say no, most of them got thrown out to be honest, not in my class like, in the general year. Some of them got thrown out or they left.

Was it a tough school?

Yeah, kind of like, yeah. Kind of eat or be eaten, that kind of way like. (Colin, Dawes Point, Senior Cycle Leaver)

However, not all early school leavers are found in disruptive classrooms. Julie attended a school that did not use streaming in junior cycle and felt that the majority of her class were serious about their schoolwork. This classroom environment may have compounded her own academic struggle by causing her to feel an 'outlier'.

Ok and do you feel that people in your class in first year, were generally serious about school, would you say the majority of them were serious?

The majority of them, some of them were serious and some of them wouldn't have been. (Julie, Belmore Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

5.7 Conclusions

This chapter has used a life-history approach to explore the school experiences of early school leavers in more depth. This approach allowed us to derive a broad typology of the school experiences of early school leavers. The typology led us to identify that many of the young people we spoke to had negative perceptions of school, with some of

these carrying negative perceptions of school from very early on in their educational careers in primary school. For others, the process of disengagement did not occur until junior or senior cycle.

The chapter then aimed to explain the school experiences of early school leavers in more depth, arranging their educational experiences around the themes of academic struggle, interaction with peers, classroom environment, and relations with teachers. It is clear from the analysis presented here that the feelings of academic struggle that contribute towards dropping out of school manifest themselves early on in the education system, at times as early as primary school. For others, negative experiences of the transition to post-primary education led to a longer term disruption of their engagement in learning. Academic struggle was articulated by the early school leavers in many forms, including a discontinuity between primary and post-primary in standards and environment, feelings of having fallen behind from the beginning of first year onwards, and perceiving subjects to be more difficult. It was clear from the interviews that negative behaviour in class and academic struggle are inter-related. Many of the young people we spoke to developed an 'attitude' or began 'messing' in response to their academic struggle and the school/teacher response to their academic difficulties.

Experiences were found to be coloured by the approach to ability grouping in the school. Young people who had attended Belmore Street and Dawson Street, schools with mixed ability base classes, indicated that their sense of isolation and academic struggle was compounded by their low attainment relative to other high-achieving students. In these schools, the young people we interviewed perceived that the teachers treated them differently, less favourably, relative to other students, to the extent that they felt their teachers would 'give up' on them. In contrast, young people allocated to lower stream classes in streamed schools reported disruptive classroom environments, characterised by lower teacher expectations and negative teacher-student relations.

A further dominant theme in the interviews was the prevalence of negative relations with teachers, replicating findings from existing

studies of early school leaving in the Irish context (see Smyth, 1999; Malone and McCoy, 2003). Many of the young people we spoke to across the schools indicated that their teachers did not listen to them, were not interested in them or would 'put them down', which certainly contributed to negative feelings about teachers, school and learning. Some students felt that they were neglected by their teachers because of their low academic ability which in turn contributed to feelings of rebellion articulated through misbehaviour or poor attendance.

A further theme in the educational experiences of early leavers was interaction with peers. Many early leavers had experienced difficulties in interacting with their fellow classmates which in turn led to further school disengagement or lack of attachment to school life. We found that interaction with peers can first emerge as a problem at primary level, and that poor interaction with peers tended to be more prevalent in schools that used streaming or tracking practices. Issues such as bullying were found to have a profound and lasting negative influence on school attachment.

The nature of the classroom environment was also a dominant theme in the educational experiences of the young people we spoke to. It was clear that students could identify the type of class that they had been assigned to in schools that used streaming, ability grouping or tracking practices, and it was clear that many of the young people we spoke to had experienced their education in particularly disruptive classroom environments. Some schools and classes had a culture of early school leaving, which framed the young person's own decision to leave school. This decision is discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

THE SCHOOL-LEAVING DECISION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter now considers how young people make the decision to leave school, who they consult with, and what factors are taken into account in the decision-making process. In doing so, this and subsequent chapters are informed by the theoretical orientations outlined in Chapter 2 regarding the potential influences of social, cultural and school factors. Section 6.2 begins by devising a typology of the reasons for leaving school, and Section 6.3 considers the process and timing involved in leaving school early. Section 6.4 then considers the communication that young people have with their families and teachers about their school-leaving decision and finally Section 6.5 provides a summary of the analyses presented in this chapter.

6.2 Reasons for Leaving School

Much Irish research to date has focused on intentions to leave school (Smyth, 1999) or the retrospectively reported reasons for leaving school (McCoy *et al.*, 2007; Byrne *et al.*, 2009) using quantitative data; pointing to a single dominant reason for leaving school rather than the complexity of school-leaving. The reasons that young people give for leaving school are of course multifaceted, wide-ranging and interconnected. The life-history approach adopted in this study has the advantage of being able to elicit detailed information on the process of early school leaving, and is therefore an effective methodology for identifying the many inter-related reasons for leaving school. Using

this approach has allowed us to derive the following typology of reasons for leaving school:

- Rejection *by* School: Lack of encouragement from school, expulsion;
- Rejection *of* School: Dislike of school, rules, teachers and other students, feelings of underachievement;
- Labour market opportunity;
- Personal issues;
- Combination of issues.

A number of the young people interviewed articulated strong feelings of being rejected by the school through alienation from school staff and students, expulsion, or the school encouraging them to pursue an alternative education pathway, such as Youthreach or FÁS courses. As a result, a number of the young people we spoke to perceived a distinct lack of encouragement from the school and felt *rejected somewhat by the school*. Feelings of being rejected by the school formed a continuum from feeling ignored or discouraged by teachers up to formal expulsion from the school. These issues of school attachment were very important in the decision to leave school, and were particularly evident in the interviews conducted with Brian, Clare, Isobel, Frank, Rachel and Ian. In addition, five young people had been expelled from school, namely, Julie, Liam, Paul, George and John. The second cluster of students was particularly negative about their school experiences and demonstrated a *rejection of school*, articulating a dislike of school, rules, teachers and other students. This was particularly evident for Christine, Elaine, Emma, Lisa, Steve, Thomas, Richard, Oliver and Thomas. Young people who felt that they were not doing well at school or underachieving also fit into this category. The number of young people who fit into these categories suggests that early school leaving has more to do with the ‘push’ from negative experiences of school, or dissatisfaction with school, than the ‘pull’ of the labour market.

For a further group, however, the decision to leave school was influenced by the favourable labour market conditions for school leavers in Ireland at the time (2005-2007). However, this was not entirely clear-cut as the opportunity to engage in the labour market was often coupled with a rejection of or rejection by school. This was particularly evident for Chris, Liam, Eric and Sean.

School is just one aspect of young people's lives, albeit a crucial one. Finally, eight of the twenty-five young people we spoke to had experienced the bereavement of a parent or a family member, and this experience had a profound influence on their educational attainment, and certainly contributed to the decision to leave school. This was the case for Julie (mother), Colin (father), Helen (step-father), Rachel (both parents), Paul (sister), Richard (brother), Louise (cousin) and Ian (close friend). The following section now describes the experiences of these young people in more detail.

6.2.1 Rejection by School

Ten students reported that they had experienced a lack of encouragement from the school and felt rejected somewhat by the school. These issues of school attachment were very important in their final decision to leave school. Rejection by the school was articulated by the young people in terms of being left to one side or not getting enough support from their teachers, or other more academic students being favoured by the teachers; with the ultimate rejection by the school being demonstrated through expulsion. Furthermore, it was perceived by the young people in this group that the school disciplinary policies were often too strict and contributed towards alienating students. Many of this group responding by seeking out alternative education courses through FÁS or Youthreach.

Brian who attended Dixon Street, a school with a relatively high drop-out rate, had been in trouble quite a lot when he was in school and his main reason for leaving was because he was excluded from many classes because of his misbehaviour. Unlike many others who left school early, he did like school and felt that he would have stayed if he had been allowed into classes.

I wasn't allowed into any of the classes that's why I left it probably.

Ok and why was that?

Just being bold and messing.

Would you have gone along with it?

Yeah if I was allowed in to the classes and that yeah. (Brian, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

It was clear that his intention to leave had formed earlier in junior cycle and had been compounded by academic struggle from an early age. His final decision to leave was based on his perception that he was not learning anything or being challenged in any way because his teachers had given up on him.

So how did the decision to actually leave come about?

It just came into my head I wasn't learning anything in school, do you know what I mean, going to school. (Brian, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Ian also attended Dixon Street and felt that while he had a good relationship with his teachers, he did not receive much help and support at school from his teachers academically and so when an alternative arose (employment) he seized the opportunity. Ian also indicated in his interview that while he had liked school, he disliked some individual teachers in his school.

So why did you leave?

I just didn't like it.

Yeah? What did you not like about it?

I didn't really get that much help like when I was sitting there, like, say for Maths I sat at the end and I was calling for help and

then she'd [the teacher] just go to the next person. (Ian, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Clare attended Dawson Street, a school with a moderate/low drop-out rate, and indicated a strong dislike for her teachers from when she began second-level education. Clare felt there was a disparity from the beginning between how some students were treated by the teachers compared to others.

I didn't like it [school], didn't like the teachers, they were always going with the country ones, they'd never teach the town ones anything like, I just didn't like it, didn't like them, so I just left. (Clare, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Clare had been pursuing the Leaving Certificate Applied programme but left school with just six months left to go before completion of senior cycle. From her version of events, she had missed a lot of school because of illness, but her school were sending work home for her to do. In the end she felt that this was not worthwhile and opted for a local Youthreach programme instead.

I just left because I was sick and, I was really sick like, I got the bug and I was missing a lot of things and I just didn't want to go back because they'd expect me to sit home and do everything like, so I said I'd start here [at Youthreach] and do me Leaving here. (Clare, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Feelings of being rejected by the school were even more apparent among young people in more difficult circumstances. Isobel comes from a deprived inner city family, with everyone in the household unemployed. She did not know the level of education her parents had attained, and none of her older siblings had completed second-level education. Isobel explained that she did not like school, felt that she was discouraged while in school, and that the school were happy to recommend an educational alternative for her.

I never liked school, I never got on with any of the teachers or anything, I was always a messer and always in trouble and being suspended so I just ended up leaving.

Do you think that anyone could have convinced you to stay?

If the teachers had of been a bit nicer. And if you got along and would be like all the good people who sit there and actually listen, you know what I mean. I just got sick of it.

...

They said I could either do my Junior at home or do it in school, I ended up doing it in school and he [the principal] said well if you do your Junior in school you don't have to do your Leaving so he got me into the FÁS.

Okay right, so you couldn't have stayed on?

No, well I'd say I could have like because he was giving me a chance and then I just said no, I want to leave, I want to go to FÁS. (Isobel, Barrack Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Rachel also attended Barrack Street and was also encouraged by the school to opt for a FÁS course over completing the Leaving Certificate.

They'd say [to my guardian] you know she's better off leaving and going to FÁS and all. They used to say, she's better off leaving and doing something else because she's not going to work here. They said that loads of times. (Rachel, Barrack Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Chapter 4 showed that a significant proportion of early leavers had been suspended from school and five of the young people we interviewed were expelled from school. This was the case for George and John as well as Julie, Liam and Paul. George attended the same school as Clare and was expelled from school because he had been suspended so many times. After his final suspension when he returned after the Junior Certificate, the school told him that 'they didn't want him back'.

I was just told not to get suspended again and then in fourth year, a couple of days in, I just got suspended again, that was it, they said they just don't want me back. I got suspended for being into the girls' changing rooms in swimming or something like that. Stupid reason like, I was just messin' and they took it seriously, that was it.

And what did you think of that?

At the start I thought it was good, but then after a while I thought, shit, I would have rather stayed in school like. (George, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

John attended Hay Street and was expelled from school for chronic non-attendance. John felt that the school was too strict in this regard and would not give second chances to anyone.

Ok and was that a shock [when you were expelled] or you were expecting it?

I was expecting it.

So you were in trouble a good bit were you?

Yeah, but there was nothing serious, just messing all day, all the time. Before I got expelled, I went dossing straight for about six months and that's what did it. (John, Hay Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

It was interesting that the young people who were expelled from school had for the most part enjoyed primary school but had become disengaged in junior cycle, senior cycle or found the transition from primary to second-level difficult (John, Paul and Julie). Only George and Liam had expressed a dislike of school since primary level and had either struggled academically or had attendance issues at that stage. We now consider the experiences of those who rejected school.

6.3.2 Rejection of School

Findings from the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study and the previous chapters in this report have indicated that student attitudes towards school tend to decline as young people progress through the junior cycle (Smyth *et al.*, 2007). While the overall trend is one of decline, some schools maintain more positive attitudes to school and to teachers mainly through promoting a positive school climate (Smyth *et al.*, 2006; 2007). Attitudes towards school were particularly negative among a cluster of respondents that we interviewed and these young people demonstrated their rejection of school through a dislike of school itself, a dislike of rules, teachers and other students. This pattern was particularly evident for Christine, Elaine, Emma, Lisa, Steve, Thomas, Richard, Oliver and Thomas.

A rejection of school was articulated by the early school leavers in many forms, including negative interaction with peers, bullying, dislike of teachers, dislike of rules, dislike of school and how teachers dealt with misbehaviour, dissatisfaction with teacher quality, classroom disciplinary environment, dissatisfaction with the curriculum and fear of underachievement. Furthermore, many of those who rejected school had been harbouring negative feelings about school from their primary school days (Christine, Lisa, Steve and Richard) while others had enjoyed primary school but processes of disengagement began in junior or senior cycle. The interviews suggested that schools react differently to young people who reject schooling, again reflecting the school culture as it was perceived by the young people we spoke to.

Christine had never enjoyed school since her primary school days and resisted school from the outset by her own admission; she also had difficulty interacting with her peers. She was in fourth year when she left school and her main reason was because of a dislike of school, rules, teachers and her peers.

I was just sick of it, I just didn't like the people or the teachers, it was like prison or something, just, the rules in it, the teachers in it, the people in it that I didn't get on with. I'd done fourth year, but I

missed a load of days and then was just like, I started getting bored with it. (Christine, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Elaine attended Dixon Street and indicated that her school-leaving decision was driven by a strong dislike of school which began in junior cycle. Her experience of junior cycle had been characterised by suspensions and being frequently 'thrown out of class'. She expressed a dislike of some of her subjects and a very strong dislike of the school.

Why did you leave?

I hated it, I hated Metalwork, I kept getting thrown out of classes and all and I just hated it and I hate that school so I wouldn't go back to it, I wouldn't advise anyone to go to it. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

When prompted about what she specifically did not like about school, she indicated that she did not rate her teachers as being good teachers and felt that the classroom disciplinary environment was particularly bad.

Specifically what did you not like about it?

Everything, they just don't teach properly like, they're shouting at other students, you don't get a chance to learn or anything and that, so I just didn't like it. The teachers would be shouting at other students and you're wasting, like losing time to learn like do you know that way.

And would you have stayed in school if things had been better do you think?

Yeah I'd say I would, if I got on with the school like, got on with the teachers, that was it, the teachers were just shite, that's the way I see it like, they don't help you or anything. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Emma also attended Dixon Street and left school because she felt that she got left behind in class because of her poor attendance; she also indicated that she did not like the other students in her class. For Emma the consequences of leaving school were particularly bad as she increasingly got into trouble with the authorities and was facing court proceedings when we spoke to her.

Lisa left school in fourth year and her main reason for not liking school was not a dislike of the teachers, but because she did not get on well with her peer group. She indicated that she had been bullied in junior cycle.

I just didn't want to go back after the summer holidays, I didn't like the students that was in it, there was some of them that just, I didn't really get on with, that was it basically. (Lisa, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Rejection of schooling is not just a female phenomenon. Thomas also rejected school and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme in particular. Thomas indicated that he had intended to complete the Leaving Certificate but when he returned to school after the Junior Certificate, he was allocated to the LCA class. He felt that he was not making academic progress in the LCA programme, finding school-work uninteresting and lacking in stimulation.

And can you tell me why you didn't like school?

It wasn't for me, I just hated it, I hated it. We were in LCA and it was a waste of time. We'd no school bag, no school books, nothing, you know. What was the point? I thought I was wasting my time in LCA and a lot of people in my class did as well. (Thomas, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Taking part in the Leaving Certificate Applied programme had a particularly negative impact on Thomas as he felt isolated from the rest of his year group. In addition to feeling that he was not learning anything, Thomas also felt that the LCA class was too small.

Attendance wasn't the main thing as well, just waste of time, hated it, LCA is fucking stupid. If I was in normal classes I suppose [I might have stayed] I mean there was only, what, eleven in our class. I hated it. We were the lowest class, especially for assembly, you'd queue up, and there'd be thirty in each class, there'd be just a few of us, I hated that, didn't like that.

...

We done nothing, like, you get sheets, just a sheet like that and you know. Yes, we'd no books or anything. Even though I didn't like carrying books, but I'd like to have books. We got no homework, we got nothing. I just thought it was going nowhere, same thing every day like. I suppose LCA helps some people but, I don't know, I'd prefer to be in a normal class. (Thomas, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Oliver also opted out of a school with a relatively high drop-out rate. While he enjoyed school and had positive things to say about the teachers and the support he received, he left school because he felt that he would not do well in the Leaving Certificate and preferred to do a course in something he was interested in.

I wasn't too sure if I'd do well in the Leaving Certificate ... you know, I said I'd try something like computers. (Oliver, Hay Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

This was also the case for Eric who expressed a fear of underachievement in the Leaving Certificate. For him, leaving school early and obtaining employment or an apprenticeship would be less humiliating than performing badly in the Leaving Certificate examination.

I don't know, I didn't want to go through the humiliation of getting a bad Leaving Cert, but I suppose a bad Leaving Cert is better than no Leaving Cert like when I look back at it, but I suppose that was my decision to make, mistake to learn like and I'll know next time if that opportunity comes around, like to stick it out. (Eric, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

6.2.3 Labour Market Opportunity

School Leavers' Survey data indicate that the lure of the labour market has increased among males as a reason for leaving school to the point where it has surpassed school factors (Byrne *et al.*, 2009).⁶ The lure of the labour market was particularly evident among the young males that we spoke to. However, it appeared to be the dominant reason for leaving school for just three of the males interviewed. In fact, the favourable economic climate which provided the opportunity to engage with the labour market was often coupled with a rejection of, or rejection by, school.

Chris indicated that he had struggled with schoolwork and disliked school in junior cycle, and finally left school having completed his Junior Certificate. Chris did not enjoy school and had been suspended a number of times but did not intend to leave school in junior cycle. He was working in a part-time job during the summer after his Junior Certificate and the job proved to be an incentive to leave school.

I was just working through the summer and I just liked the money and I stuck at it, stuck at the job I was at. Well I didn't plan to leave school like till I got it [the job], and when I got the job I decided to stick at it. (Chris, Hay Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Despite doing relatively well in his Junior Certificate examination, Chris had a low academic self-image, indicating that he felt that he 'wasn't much good at school', and that he was better at carpentry 'or that kinda thing'. The school-leaving decision for Chris was, however, also influenced by the fact that all of his class left school after the Junior Certificate. This, coupled with his low academic self-image and labour market opportunity, may have compounded his decision to leave school.

⁶ This pattern is particularly evident among males who have completed the Junior Certificate in the School Leavers' Survey data.

Yeah, I couldn't really stick at it; I didn't really like the school, even though my class was kind of nice, nice fellas like, everyone in my class left anyway. They all left.

So was it that, would that have influenced your decision to leave?

Probably yeah. Yeah looking back at it now like I suppose I should have stayed like but that's that, that's been done like.

(Chris, Hay Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Sean also attended Hay Street, which had a working-class intake; he had disliked primary school and had experienced a difficult transition to second-level. As a result, he never liked school and always wanted to go into employment. He left school in his Junior Certificate year after obtaining a job with a relative and so has not achieved any second-level qualifications.

I just left it because I just didn't like it and not just that school, just any school like because I just wouldn't like it. I like to be out do you know, I like to be out on the building sites working and stuff like that, do you know being able to have a laugh and all like, no teachers roaring down your neck like. That's really it, it was the fact of going out and earning money was better than sitting inside in class, that's why. (Sean, Hay Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Liam was from a Travelling family and from an early age had been involved in the informal labour market. Liam was 14 when he left school, and indicated that since primary school he did not like school and would prefer to be working. When he was expelled from school, the opportunity to enter the labour market was perceived as a good alternative for him.

The whole way through I never liked school. All I wanted was work, work, work. I didn't like you know; I didn't want to go into school. I used to work with anything, since I was about six years of age; I was pushing a lawnmower cutting grass. (Liam, Park Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

What is unclear (and cannot be answered by this study) is whether Chris and Sean would have left school if labour market opportunities had not been present and available.

6.2.4 Personal Issues: Coping with Bereavement

The interviews conducted shed new light on the impact of personal issues and personal circumstances on educational attainment, issues which are not often considered in existing research on school retention. Eight of the early leavers we spoke to had experienced the bereavement of a parent or a family member and this seemed to have a profound influence on their subsequent educational experience. This was the case for Julie (mother), Colin (father), Helen (step-father), Rachel (both parents), Paul (sister), Richard (brother), Louise (cousin) and Ian (close friend).

For Colin, the main reason for leaving school was because his father died after a prolonged illness.⁷

So why did you leave?

It was kind of more so, my Dad just died.

I couldn't, I wasn't really coping and stuff like that, I wasn't bad at school or anything like that, it was just kind of circumstances and money wise and stuff like that so I said I'd leave, so that was one of the major factors, my head was spinning around and I just decided to leave. (Colin, Dawes Point, Senior Cycle Leaver)

There was the general feeling from the interviews with these young people that any problems they encountered while in school were exacerbated by the bereavement process they were going through. For many it was a case of the 'last straw' or 'enough is enough'. This was the case for both Colin and Louise. Louise had lost her cousin to whom she was close and with whom she had lived. For her, this was a

⁷ The death of his father also deterred his brother from completing senior cycle and going on to higher education despite 'being the brains of the family'. He was in sixth year at the time.

key point when her levels of satisfaction and engagement in school began to decline.

When did you find that your work was going downhill?

I'd say it was just after my cousin died. My cousin died and it hit me really bad so I just couldn't hack it, I was losing the head a lot at teachers like, telling them to basically get away from me.

And did you get any counselling back then or did anyone at school notice what you were going through?

They tried to get me into counselling and everything, I went to see one counsellor, I liked one counsellor that I had, I went to him for about two, three weeks and then I just stopped going to the counsellor and stopped going to school, just started mitching and everything like, you know just wouldn't go in, you know even if my dad thought I was going in, I'd say I was going in and then go somewhere else. (Louise, Belmore Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

For others, such as Rachel and Julie, the loss of a parent or loved one occurred before or during the transition to second-level and had consequences for their second-level education, particularly in relation to the level of support they received at home. Richard told us that his older brother died suddenly when he was coming to the end of primary school and it was around this time that his behaviour became disruptive. Unlike Louise, he never received any counselling. His mother was also ill, and he was not sure if anyone from the school knew about his home circumstances. These issues reflect the complexity of the lives of some of the young people we spoke to; some had experienced the death of loved ones through suicide and had experienced other harrowing personal circumstances (such as parental separation and parental illness) which they were dealing with on top of the multiplicity of issues that young people face.

6.2.5 Combination of Factors

The complexity of the school leavers' lives is a dominant theme emerging from the interviews. While the above typology attempts to categorise the reasons for leaving school, it was often the case that a number of factors were operating at the same time. Eric is a good example of the complexity of the school-leaving decision. Rather than being driven by one of the reasons outlined above, he felt there were a number of factors that contributed to his decision. Eric came from a family where his older sister had not completed her second-level education. He expressed an earlier intention to leave school when he told us that he did not take Transition Year because he felt that it was unlikely he would finish school anyway.

I didn't think I was going to last in school anyway... from first year to third year I was in a bit of trouble all the time you know, trouble was my middle name like. Then in fifth year I kind of copped on, the trouble stopped you know, I just started getting bored of school, so I didn't try, I slipped a bit. (Eric, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Eric had worked during his summer holidays with a relative in the construction business and his parents had told him that a job with his relative was always going to be an opportunity for him if 'anything ever happens', thus reinforcing the option to leave school early. Around the time Eric left school, his sister became very ill which appeared to precipitate his decision.

One day I just said enough's enough like. I got offered an apprenticeship off my [relative], an electrician, so I said I'd take that, before the offer was taken back, because I wouldn't get another offer if I didn't take it then.

...

My sister got sick then like, you know I just couldn't take it, left school, said I want to go work and went working. She'd massive

surgery and everything like, so. Major stuff like, it affects different people in different ways like.

So why did you leave school?

I just generally didn't like it, didn't get on. I was just; I was more or less just honestly fed up one thing after another on my brain.
(Eric, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

6.3 The Process and Timing of Leaving School

Chapter 2 and the analyses presented so far indicate that processes of leaving school often involve a gradual withdrawal from school, a 'fading-out' rather than a 'split decision' to leave. However, to date, there is a dearth of empirical research in the Irish context on the actual process of leaving school. In order to consider the school leaving decision in more depth, this section now reports on how young people constructed their experiences of leaving school in terms of the actual timing and process of leaving school, including their perceptions of how the school responded to their decision.

6.3.1 Timing

Identifying an exact time-point at which young people leave school is frequently difficult as the process of leaving school more often than not involves a gradual disengagement and withdrawal from school. Table 6.1 provides an outline of the timing and stage at which the young people we interviewed left school, based on what the young people told us. What is particularly evident is that early school leaving occurs at all stages of second-level education – from first to sixth year. It is also important to note that many of these young people left school before reaching the age of 16, despite current school attendance laws.

Young people from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or Traveller backgrounds tended to be among those who left early in junior cycle; and their reasons for leaving tended to centre on not getting enough encouragement from teachers, experiencing con-

flict with teachers, teachers not understanding their culture or being expelled. For many of these young people, it was clear that they had not reached their potential even at primary school and their under-achievement continued into post-primary education.

Table 6.1: Timing of School Leaving

Name	School	Age Left School	Age at Time of Interview	Year Left School	Qualification	Stage Left
Brian	Dixon St	16	18	2006	Junior Certificate	2 weeks into 5 th year
Chris	Hay St	16	19	2005	Junior Certificate	After completing JC
Christine	Dawson St	16	18	2006	Junior Certificate	Early in 4 th year
Clare	Dawson St	15	17	2006	Junior Certificate	After completing TY
Colin	Dawes Point	16	18	2005	Junior Certificate	In Jan of 5 th year
Elaine	Dixon St	15	17	2006	Junior Certificate	In 5 th year (start)
Emma	Dixon St	14	18	2005	No Qualifications	In 3 rd year
Eric	Argyle St	17	18	2007	Junior Certificate	At start of 6 th year
Frank	Park St	14	19	2004	No Qualifications	In 2 nd year
George	Dawson St	16	18	2006	Junior Certificate	Early in 4 th year
Helen	Barrack St	18	19	2007	Junior Certificate	During 6 th year
Ian	Dixon St	17	19	2006	Junior Certificate	At start of 5 th year

Isobel	Barrack St	16	18	2006	Junior Certificate	After completing JC
John	Hay St	15	18	2006	No Qualifications	In 2 nd year
Julie	Belmore St	12/13 and 16	19	1998/2005	No Qualifications	In 5 th year
Liam	Park St	14	17	2005	No Qualifications	In 1 st year
Lisa	Dawson St	16	17	2007	Junior Certificate	At end of 4 th year
Louise	Belmore St	17	18	2006	No Qualifications	In 5 th year
Oliver	Hay St	18	17	2007	Junior Certificate	During 6 th year
Paul	Dixon St	13	18	2003	No Qualifications	In 1 st year
Rachel	Barrack St	17	19	2006	Junior Certificate	After 5 th year
Richard	Dixon St	17	18	2007	Junior Certificate	At start of 6 th year
Sean	Hay St	16	19	2006	No Qualifications	In 3 rd year
Steve	Dixon St	16	18	2006	Junior Certificate	Early in 4 th year
Thomas	Argyle St	16	18	2006	Junior Certificate	In Jan of 5 th year

Those who left later in the junior cycle, i.e. those who left school just before completing the Junior Certificate examination, were more likely to have expressed a dislike of second-level education, were likely to have been suspended a number of times prior to the school-leaving decision, and spoke of conflict with their teachers and at times with other students. Some also left school at this stage to enter the la-

bour market. Those who left school later in senior cycle were more likely to have rejected school and were eager to remove themselves from the school environment.

6.3.2 Process of Leaving School

For the majority of the young people we spoke to, the actual act of leaving school was a gradual process and was predated by disengagement, suspension, truancy and attendance issues. Louise explained that her attendance at school was particularly poor before leaving school. After her cousin died, she stopped going to school and started 'mitching' unknown to her father.

I just stopped going to the counsellor and stopped going to school, I just started mitching and everything like, you know, I just wouldn't go in, you know even if me Dad thought I was going in, I'd say I was going in and then go somewhere else like so.
(Louise, Belmore Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Like many of the early leavers, she generally played truant with other students but would at times also spend time on her own.

And were you doing it [truanting] with friends or were you doing it on your own?

I was doing it sometimes with me mates and then other times on me own like.

That must have been fairly lonely at times?

I started singing on the top of the train tracks, I will survive, I remember doing that. (Louise, Belmore Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

And were you doing it with friends or were you doing it on your own?

I just hung around with the boys. (Richard, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

I was just mitching for three weeks or something and that I'd get caught, but there was like other girls with me out of my class doing it. You'd end up caught and suspended like. (Isobel, Barrack Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

For many of the early school leavers, the exact stage of leaving school was unclear because of their non-attendance. As with many of the young people we spoke to, leaving school was a gradual process for Christine. While Christine had disliked school all the way through and had become disengaged from school in junior cycle, she had only started seriously considering leaving school when she was in senior cycle. It was at that point that her attendance began to decline further. As with many early school leavers, she indicated a delay between the actual stage of leaving school and the 'official' stage of leaving school. While she left school in September, it was February when she officially left school.

I did about two days in September and I was still enrolled in the year, but then I think it was February that year that I signed myself out of the school. (Christine, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver).

This was also the case for Steve who found it difficult to pinpoint when he actually left school.

I left after my Junior [Certificate]. I was just in and out of fifth year, I'm not sure exactly when I left, but it would have been before Christmas. I was just in and out like now and again. I knew that I wasn't gonna go back after my Junior, I went in for about three weeks, four weeks, about a month or two after my Junior, then I just left then. (Steve, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Thomas attended Argyle Street and, like many others, had been suspended regularly for misbehaviour in class. He too indicated a delay between the actual stage and official stage of leaving school.

I left in January but it was a good bit before that, but I officially left after January. (Thomas, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Schools varied considerably in terms of how they deal with students who leave school. In some schools, young people were asked to fill out a form before leaving while this was not the case in others. Many of the young people we spoke to had either not officially notified the school that they had left, or had no requirement to complete paperwork. Some had just literally walked out of school and never returned, citing their non-attendance being interpreted by the school as evidence that they had left school.

In terms of actually making the decision to officially leave school, students differed in the amount of time they took to make this decision. When asked about the ‘crunch’ decision to leave school, Thomas and Eric indicated that it came down to reflecting on it for a couple of weeks at most.

So, how did you come to make the decision to leave?

I don't know.

Did you just wake up one morning and think ‘that’s it, I’m leaving’?

No, I suppose it took a week or so to think about it. I didn't just wake up and say. (Thomas, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

I was just thinking, just get out of here, for about, for a good three weeks, four weeks. You know, it sounds like a short, split decision like, but that three weeks was a long thinking three weeks, a lot of stuff happened over that time, like with my sister. (Eric, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

For others, the final decision to leave school was more instantaneous or ‘knee-jerk’. This was the case for Colin who left school after an argument with a teacher which resulted in suspension.

And how did the decision come about, was it just an over-night decision or had you been thinking about it?

No I was kind of; I was in school, actually. I had a big bike chain in me bag and I took out the chain to get my book and the teacher just looked at me like and he just told me to get out of the class. And I said, sir I'm just getting my books, he said get out of the class now, so I said alright then. I was kind of cursing under me breath like, who the hell are you, why like, so I got out of class and then he stormed down to the principal and he said I was threatening him with the chain and then I got suspended for that and then I just decided not to go back and I just said what's the point like. (Colin, Dawes Point, Senior Cycle Leaver)

I just, one day I just never came back, I went and never came back. (Ian, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Others had the impression that the school was waiting for the opportunity to push them out of the school through expulsion. This was the case for George who was expelled two weeks after returning to school after the Junior Certificate examination.

Lisa attended Dawson Street and left school at the end of fourth year. Like the others, her attendance was poor before leaving school. When asked about how the final decision to leave school was made, she indicated her intention to leave school became 'real' when her parents helped her find an alternative.

And did you intend on leaving school around that time?

I did in a way, and in a way I didn't like, it was like, it was a spur of the moment thing like, and I was like, I said to my parents that I didn't want to go back to school, and they were like, what are you going to do, and I was like, I'll try and get into Youthreach and then they helped me get into Youthreach. But they didn't like it that I left school like, that I wasn't doing my Leaving Cert. (Lisa, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

While Section 6.4 considers in more depth who early leavers discussed their decision to leave school with, the next section now con-

siders how schools vary in terms of follow-up processes for early school leavers.

6.3.3 School Follow-Up

The previous section has outlined that young people differ in terms of how they approach the school-leaving decision and we now find that schools differ in the degree to which they track and encourage young people to return to school. It was clear from the interviews that school follow-up for students who left school differed significantly, both within and across schools. In terms of within-school variation, this was particularly evident in Argyle Street, Dixon Street and Barrack Street.

Thomas attended Argyle Street and had left school in fifth year, with a history of truancy since third year (if he did not like a certain class, he would not attend it). Thomas felt that nobody had tried to stop him from leaving school and he was not friendly with any of the teachers because 'there was like new teachers every year'. As a result, he had not discussed his decision with any school staff. His attendance had been poor, and he and his mother received letters from school about his non-attendance, but because he was over sixteen he felt that it did not matter. On the other hand, Eric attended the same school and had a close relationship with his guidance counsellor who tried to stop him from leaving school. Eric felt that because he played sports for the school, he had a good relationship with many of the teachers which kept them 'on his side'.

And did any of them try to stop you, or did they have a chat with you or ...?

No, well the guidance counsellor was doing that for me, she was having a chat like, and that was about it like, and I don't think any of the other teachers knew the situation like. I didn't let them know the situation like, I done it behind closed doors you know.
(Eric, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Rachel attended Barrack Street and left school when she was in fifth year. She had begun truanting in that year and the school had initially contacted her after she left to persuade her to come back and do the Leaving Certificate Applied. Later, she felt that the school had encouraged her to leave school and opt for a FÁS course. When asked about the contact the school had made with her, she indicated that people were treated differently by the school.

Like my friend left as well, she left before me and they were always ringing her house and asking her to come back. And they only rang my house once to see, because they wanted me to go. But they rang her a good few times. (Rachel, Barrack Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Elaine attended Dixon Street and also felt that that the school did not try to prevent her from leaving school. Because of Elaine's chronic non-attendance, she had received support from a school intervention called Late Start, but there was no school intervention to stop her from actually leaving school. She told us about how her friend who attended a different school had been encouraged to stay at school when she was giving her official letter of leaving to the school.

They even had to get the, I think it was the Late Start woman to come down to me, to try and get me up for school because I wouldn't go, but I ended up not going.

And did any of your teachers try to stop you from leaving school or you know did they have a chat with you or anything like that?

No, and my friend only left school there a few weeks ago and I went up with her, while she was getting the letter, note, to say she left school for good and they were saying, they were trying to stop her and all, they didn't try and do that for me and I thought it was weird like.

And why do you think they did it for her and not for you?

I don't know, but that was a different school, it was probably that, it just shows you that school is a dump, what I went to. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

On the other hand, Steve also attended Dixon Street and had a good relationship with his teachers and left school because he wanted to get a job and he had been slipping at school. He indicated that the teachers tried to get him to stay in school.

Yeah they [the school] were trying their best for me to stay, like my tutor and that came down to my house a few times and saying 'would you not come back and all we'll do a special class and all' for helping me read properly and that, and all, but I just got too frustrated or something, that's it. (Steve, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Others had little or no contact from the school after leaving. Lisa left Dawson Street school when she was 16; she was going into fifth year when she dropped out. She had disliked school and had intended to leave, but when she did not return after the summer holidays it felt like an instant decision. When asked about whether she had been contacted by the school about her decision to leave, she indicated that the school did not do anything to stop her.

No, the teachers never said nothing to me when I was leaving school, they all said we're going to miss you like, and there was me thinking, oh, yeah you say that now, but you'll be glad of me going, and we were messing and going like, saying about it, they were just, like some of the teachers were disappointed in me going, but they never said oh, stay on, they never said nothing like that. They just let me go like. (Lisa, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Interventions before leaving school were more frequently talked about than interventions after leaving school. A number of students spoke about contact with a Home School Liaison Coordinator (HSLC) who

would visit their home in order to encourage them to stay in school. This was evident for some students in Dixon Street and in Dawes Point.

Well she [the HSLC] came out to my house like she was saying 'oh would you go back to school and all' and I was like 'yeah, yeah I'll go back to school'. I just, you know, I just kept doing the bunk like I just didn't like the people that was in it, you know what I mean. But then once like you do like the bunk off school you end up doing it again and again because you're getting away with it, one day like they don't ring your Ma you know what I mean then you do it again and again and that's how I started doing it like. (Emma, Dixon Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

And did you talk to the teachers about your decision or ...?

No, well, they were like trying to get me back and all like that but I was like, no I'm not going back like you know what I mean. And the liaison officer came up to the house. (Colin, Dawes Point, Senior Cycle Leaver)

6.3.4 Giving School a Second Chance

What was particularly evident from the interviews was the finality of the decision to leave school. We found that almost all of the early school leavers we interviewed would not have considered moving to another school. Many of the young people we spoke to did not want to give school a second chance and these were typical responses:

And did you ever think of moving schools? You know, when you weren't really getting on?

No, I actually never thought of moving school now. It was just in my head about leaving. That's all I wanted to do was just leave. (Isobel, Barrack Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

And was there any talk of you going to another school?

No, they said I wouldn't get into another school, so they did. Then I just thought I couldn't be assed going to another school. I didn't really like it anyway, it just wasn't for me. (George, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

And was there any time, like, within a month or two of leaving, that you thought you might go back?

Yeah. But then I think about what it was like and I would just, turn me right off. (Thomas, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

The first thought that came into my mind was will I move school like. And then I was like no, it's way too much hassle, I'd just prefer to get a job. The teachers certainly don't make it easier like. And I suppose they don't owe us any favours either for what I've done to them like. (Eric, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Just one of the young people we interviewed was about to go back to school, to another school.

And how come you made the decision to go back?

Because I was just starting to waste, waste me life, just sitting around all day, so I went back to school. (Richard, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

6.4 Communication with Family about Leaving School

The Post-Primary Longitudinal Study has indicated the importance of informal advice, especially from parents, in decision making within second-level education (Smyth *et al.*, 2007; Byrne and Smyth, forthcoming). McCoy *et al.* (2006), using School Leavers' Survey data, similarly report that young people who leave school prior to Junior Certificate level are particularly unlikely to receive advice from school personnel, and much more likely to receive (and rely on) advice from informal sources, such as their parents, other family members or their friends. The data indicate that the frequency of reporting receipt of

formal guidance from a guidance counsellor or teacher rises steadily according to the level of educational attainment.⁸ Furthermore, regardless of educational attainment, young males are more reliant on the advice of their parents while females are more likely to consider within-school advice, particularly from career guidance teachers. It was clear from the interviews with the early school leavers that communication with parents was an important aspect of the school-leaving decision. Practically all of the school leavers we spoke to had discussed the decision with their parents to some degree.

Rational action perspectives assume that when parents and young people are making key educational decisions, they arrive at the same conclusions as to the best course of action to take (see Chapter 2). For some of our respondents this was the case. However for others, there was no apparent consensus between young people and their parents. In line with rational action approaches, consensus was evident between parents and young people in the decision to leave school when a 'satisfying' alternative was available. A key example of this type of decision making was evident with Eric (and Sean) and his parents. Eric left school to begin an apprenticeship with a relative. When asked about how he communicated with his parents about leaving school, it was clear that his parents would have preferred to have him opt for what they deemed to be the optimal situation (complete the Leaving Certificate) but were happy enough to opt for a 'satisfactory' alternative (pursue an apprenticeship).

The parents were fully, they were grand with it like.

Oh were they, were they trying to get you to stay?

My dad would've wanted me to do the Leaving Cert, because my sister didn't do her Leaving Cert and I didn't do my Leaving Cert so he wanted a Leaving Cert in the family like you know.

⁸ They find that 40 per cent of Junior Certificate school leavers report receiving advice from their Guidance Counsellor, rising to 50 per cent among those leaving during senior cycle and 82 per cent among Leaving Certificate holders.

...

And my dad said to me look, there's an opportunity here for you [apprenticeship with relative] if anything ever happens, there's an opportunity there for you so, fair enough. (Eric, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Chris was the youngest in his family and has four older siblings, all of whom did the Leaving Certificate. He outlined how he had spoken to his parents about his decision to leave school and that it was very much his own decision, with his parents trusting him to make the right choice. His parents did, however, seem happier with the decision because he had secured a job before leaving school.

And who did you talk to when you were leaving school?

What do you mean my parents like? They said it was up to myself, if I wanted to leave school it was up to myself, once I had a job, once I had my Junior Cert, they told me to stay if I want like ... It didn't really bother them I think, at the time, they said it was up to my own decision like. (Chris, Hay Street, Junior Cycle Leaver)

Contrary to rational action perspectives, however, it was clear that while many young people spoke with their parents about leaving school, the communication led nowhere near consensus. Like many of the early school leavers, Brian spoke to his parents about his decision to leave school, but it was more a case of *telling his parents* than actually discussing the matter with them.

And did you tell your parent you were gonna leave?

Yeah.

And what did they say?

They didn't say anything, it's up to myself. (Brian, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

This was also the case with Elaine, who *told* her mother that she was leaving school.

Ok and when you were making the decision to leave school, who did you talk to?

Me ma, I told her I wasn't going back and that was it, she wasn't going to make me, I hated it, I wouldn't go back. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

Christine's decision was also against her parents' wishes for her. She argued that her parents could not 'make her' stay in school and that there was nothing anyone could do because she had reached the legal age for leaving school. Christine was the youngest in her family. Not all of her siblings had completed second-level education so there was a precedent in her family; however, going to college also featured among her siblings' post-school pathways. When asked what her siblings thought about her school-leaving decision, she stated that her siblings supported her decision to do what she wanted.

What did your parents say when you were going to leave?

They didn't want me to at all. Like, they couldn't make me go in so they'd no other choice. Because like after I turned sixteen they can't do anything, like, the school couldn't do anything.

...

All them [my siblings] are off in college, or have jobs, they're all way older than me so they were 'just let her do what she wants like'. (Christine, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

It was clear from the interviews that many young people made the decision to leave school by themselves, contrary to the wishes and guidance of parents who generally wanted them to stay on in school. Their experiences can be further captured from the following examples:

Well my parents had a bit of a fight with me, yeah, trying to say I want you to stay, do your Leaving, I was rowing with them a long time, like a couple of months and they kind of got sick of me, so they had to send me here [Youthreach]. (Clare, Dawson Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

She [my mum] said it was up to me, she said it was fine. That's what you want to do, fine. She can't stop me like, she tried to alright but no, I wouldn't listen ... I told him [my Dad] I done it [the Leaving Certificate] just to keep him happy, my Mum knows, everybody knows, except my Dad. I don't want to tell him. (Thomas, Argyle Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

[My parents said] not much just get out and get a job. Oh they tried to get me to stay, like my Ma don't live with my Dad like because he's somewhere else like but I'm just living with my Ma and she just, no she was going mad like in the mornings 'get up and get a job or go to school or something'. So she was trying her best to like to keep me in school but I just wouldn't I just end up going, not going to school and not even going out like. (Steve, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver)

In addition to young people having a difficult time because of personal problems, parents dealing with personal problems such as death and illness may not be in a position to fully explore the school-leaving decision with their children. For example, Colin gave the impression that his mother was still grieving for his father around the time he left school, and Eric suggested that his parents were worrying about his sister and her ill-health when he decided to leave school. Others indicated that their parents were in poor health.

And what about your Mum, what did she think of your decision?

Oh she didn't, no, she wasn't too happy about it like, she was saying if your Dad was here now, you'd be in that school he'd drive you in, he'd do it himself, because he would, I know he would be like that. Yeah, he used to drive me to school everyday like so whatever, so he would, yeah he would make sure I would

be in school so and I was kind of weighing that up, will I or won't I but then I just decided no I won't.

And did she want you to go to another school?

Yeah she was say go, here or there, I just said no I'm not going back to school, that was the round about thing, I just said I'm going to go out and get myself a job, so she wasn't too happy about that but I did it. (Colin, Dawes Point, Senior Cycle Leaver)

6.5 Conclusions

This chapter draws on qualitative interviews with early school leavers to consider the school-leaving decision and, in doing so, derives a typology of the reasons for leaving school. This chapter has aimed to go beyond existing quantitative studies of early school leaving using a life-history approach to elicit detailed information on the process of school leaving, identifying the many inter-related reasons for leaving school.

It was clear from the interviews that the school-leaving decision was driven by negative experiences of school, articulated either through a rejection of school or being rejected by the school. For those who rejected school, it was clear that the disciplinary climate of the school and the quality of relations with teachers had contributed to a strong rationale for leaving. Those who felt rejected by the school generally had a history of misbehaviour and related punishment within school. It was clear that negative behaviour was often a response to poor student-teacher interaction or low teacher expectations for the student. For others, a rejection of schooling had begun much earlier in the educational trajectory, that is, back in primary school. Negative relations with peers also contributed to alienation from school. Our findings suggest that early school leaving has more to do with the push from negative experiences of, or dissatisfaction with, school than the pull of the labour market.

It was evident that, for many, the availability of labour market opportunities, particularly for males who had completed the Junior Cer-

tificate, fed directly into the decision to leave school. However, what is important to note is that this alternative to school was often coupled with a rejection of, or rejection by, school and/or a low academic self-image. Finding employment precipitated the decision to leave school, but these young people were already disengaging from the school context. What was particularly striking from our study was the prevalence of bereavement issues in the families of the young people we spoke to and the impact this had on their educational attainment. Eight of the twenty-five young people we spoke to had experienced the bereavement of a parent or a family member, and this experience certainly contributed to their decision to leave school. These issues, coupled with a culture of early school leaving in some schools, made the actual action of leaving school easier for some.

Young people are found to drop out of school at different stages, from first year to just before the completion of senior cycle. Trends over time suggest that later cohorts appear to have postponed leaving school from directly after the Junior Certificate exam until some time after entering fifth year, and this was clearly reflected in our sample. On the basis of our study findings, young people from particularly disadvantaged or Traveller backgrounds are more likely to leave school without gaining any qualifications and their reasons for leaving tended to centre around either low teacher expectations, disciplinary issues or poor student-teacher interaction. For many of this group, it was clear that they had not reached their achievement potential at primary level. Among senior cycle leavers, feelings of rejection of school were dominant, with young people gradually disengaging from the school context.

The analyses presented in this chapter clearly point to the fact that processes of disengagement involve a gradual withdrawal from school, a 'fading-out' rather than a 'split decision' to leave. Thus, the actual act of leaving school was predated by poor attendance, truancy and suspension. This results in a blurring of the distinction between the point in time at which young people leave school and the 'official' leaving school stage. For many, the exact stage of leaving was unclear because of non-attendance. Some saw leaving school as an official

matter, returning to the school to complete paperwork, while others just left and never returned, citing their non-attendance to be interpreted as evidence that they had left school. While the process of leaving school is gradual, there does come a time when a decision is made not to return and young people could be differentiated according to the time they took. Some considered their decision over a few weeks; others had a 'knee-jerk' reaction, often spurred by a negative incident in school, while others waited for parental approval. However, it was clear that the decision to leave was not taken lightly by young people.

It is apparent that school follow-up to attract young people back to school differed both across and within schools, depending on the young person in question, thus at times reinforcing young people's feelings that school staff had low expectations of them. Almost all of the young people we interviewed would not have considered moving to another school to continue their education, thus reflecting the lack of second-chance pathways in the Irish educational system.

Finally, much of the theoretical literature on school retention, particularly rational choice approaches, stresses the way in which parents and students weigh up the costs and benefits associated with staying in school. In the Irish case, it has been well established that parents and family members contribute greatly to decision-making at second-level, particularly in terms of subject choice and options upon leaving school. This study reinforces such findings, as practically all of our respondents had spoken to their parents about their decision to leave school. However, communication with parents about decision making did not always mean consensus in terms of the decision being made. It was clear from the interviews that many of the young people we spoke to told their parents they were leaving school or argued strongly their case for leaving school early. Chapter 7 now considers the post-school plans and pathways of the young people we interviewed.

Chapter 7

POST-SCHOOL PLANS AND PATHWAYS OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, attention turns to the post-school education, training and labour market activities of young people. Existing Irish research consistently finds that early school leavers are the most disadvantaged group in the labour market, experiencing low employment rates and wages, employment instability and longer spells of joblessness as well as lower job quality and entry into low skill occupations (Breen, 1984; Breen, 1986; Hannan *et al.*, 1995; McCoy and Smyth, 2004; McCoy, 2000; Byrne, 2008; Byrne *et al.*, 2009). Those who leave school without a Leaving Certificate, particularly those who leave without any qualifications, tend to have poor labour market outcomes and limited re-engagement with post-school education and training.

This chapter now provides a broad overview of experiences of the young people interviewed after they left school. At the time of the interviews, the young people we interviewed had been out of school for varying amount of times, ranging from one year to four years, covering the time period 2005 to 2008. They were in very different employment statuses, including full-time employment, unemployment, education/training and inactivity (see Table 7.1 at end of chapter). In this chapter, quotes are labelled according to the status of the young person at the time of the interview. Because of the close relationship between qualifications and labour market outcomes in the Irish con-

text, quotes are labelled according to the qualification level of the young person.⁹

The chapter is outlined as follows. Section 7.2 considers the post-school plans of the young people we spoke to. Section 7.3 then identifies four main trajectories of school leavers characterising the pathways undertaken between leaving school and the time of the interview. Section 7.4 considers the theme of regret which arose as a dominant theme in the interviews and section 7.5 then provides an overview of the recommendations and advice that school leavers offer in light of their experiences. Finally, Section 7.6 provides a summary of the chapter.

7.2 Post-School Plans

The young people we interviewed had different ideas about what would happen after leaving school. One of the questions we asked was ‘What did you think was going to happen after you left school?’. While many of the young people we spoke to were ‘planners’ in the sense that they had planned to look for employment or to pursue an alternative education pathway, a second group was less specific about what their next step would be. For a third group, the decision to leave school was foremost in their mind and so they were focused on leaving school rather than on what they would do after leaving school.

7.2.1 Get Out of School!

Thomas and Emma were entirely focused on leaving school and had not been thinking in depth about what they would do after leaving school. Thomas decided to leave school over a period of a couple of weeks; while he had intended to complete second-level education, he was placed in the LCA track in senior cycle which he really disliked and which drove his decision to leave. At the time of leaving, he told

⁹ In practice, this gives a similar picture to labelling young people by the stage of leaving school, as was done in Chapters 5 and 6. However, one young person (Chris) left school before entering senior cycle but had attained a Junior Certificate qualification. Conversely, Louise was a senior cycle leaver but, because of geographical mobility, had not attained a Junior Certificate qualification.

us that he did not have a plan; he just wanted to leave school and, like many others, was focused on the school-leaving decision rather than the consequences or plans afterwards.

I had no plan. I just wanted to get out of school. I never thought ahead, I never thought to the future, I'm very laid back. I had no idea. (Thomas, Argyle Street, Junior Certificate, Employed Full-Time)

This was also the case for Emma who attended Dixon Street. Emma told us that she had no plan for when she left school, and just thought that hanging around shopping centres would be better than attending school.

Did you have a plan in your head when you were leaving school?

No I just wanted to leave like, you know. When I was doing the mitch off school, like, I think I thought it was fun going down to [the shopping centre] then and running around and getting chased [by the security guards] thinking 'oh this is better than school because I'm having a buzz here instead of being in school and doing work' like you know. (Emma, Dixon Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

7.2.2 Apprenticeship

Many of the young males we spoke to had been considering the apprenticeship route. Richard attended Dixon Street and initially indicated that he had no plan for when he left school, claiming that he just wanted to get out of school. However, as the conversation developed, it was clear that he had a broad idea about what he might do, as was the case with many of the young people we spoke to. After further probing, it was clear that he had been thinking about the apprenticeship route, but it was clear that he was not equipped with the information he needed to achieve his plan.

When I thought about leaving school, I didn't think about what I'd do. No, I thought I would have been able to get an

apprenticeship, like without me Junior Cert, but I wasn't.
(Richard¹⁰, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

As a result, Richard spent all his time in unemployment since leaving school, just 'hanging out' with his friends who had also left school. Given the favourable economic conditions of the time, the apprenticeship route often featured in the plans of the males that we spoke to. As well as Richard, five young men (Eric, Chris, Brian, Steve and Sean) had all considered the apprenticeship route as an alternative to school. Eric had intended to leave school and become an electrician. Because he had a plan, he had lined up a job leading to an apprenticeship with the help of his father before leaving school.

So right, when you were making that decision to leave, what did you think was going to happen, or what was the plan in your head or did you have a plan?

I had a plan to become an electrician, I was saying I know it was going to be different but I didn't know how different it was going to be so, it was very much in the background like. I didn't know what it was going to be like, my Dad helped me, and I just knew it was for me, I know it is for me like, I get on with all the lads.
(Eric, Argyle Street, Junior Certificate, Apprenticeship)

While Chris and Eric left school to enter apprenticeships almost immediately after leaving school, Brian, Steve and Sean were less successful in securing an apprenticeship, mostly because they could not obtain any stable employment in the construction industry.

I always thought I would have been working, I thought I would have got a job. I saw a lot of my friends getting apprenticeships and I just said that I'd try it and left around a few CVs, so I did my best to get work but nothing has come up yet. (Steve, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

¹⁰ Richard had taken only some of his Junior Certificate exams so his grades were not seen as qualifying him for apprenticeship.

While Sean did not succeed in securing an apprenticeship, he spent most of his time since leaving school working on construction sites, in line with his expectations.

And when you were leaving school what did you think was going to happen?

I didn't know really I just, I knew I wouldn't end up going back to school one way or another like but I thought I'd end up working on the building site like, as I did too.

So things worked out pretty much the way you thought they would?

Yeah, the way I thought yeah. I was realistic like. I wasn't looking for no fairy tale or anything like, it was just what I wanted like, have a job and being able to do what I'm doing like and someday then be able to go out on my own doing it. (Sean, Hay Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

7.2.3 Finding Employment

Many young people planned to find employment after leaving school but were much more vague about the type of employment that they planned to get, suggesting that many of the school leavers lacked the appropriate information about their post-school opportunities, or may have not considered their next move fully. This was the case for ten of the group (John, Liam, George, Ian, Lisa, Paul, Elaine, Colin, Rachel and Christine), each of whom mentioned that they had been thinking about finding employment around the time they left school. While these young people expressed a preference for finding employment, they seemed to have no idea about the disadvantage they would be facing in order to access paid work. It was clear that many school leavers had a vague idea of what they wanted to do but were misinformed about what opportunities they would have once leaving school. Upon leaving school, most came to realise how not having the Leaving Certificate was a barrier to employment.

I thought I was going to go out and get a job and like live the rest of me life being happy, then like you go to a job interview and then they [potential employers] say like have you got your Leaving Cert or your Junior Cert and you say no, and then that's it. (Paul, Dixon Street, No Qualifications, Inactive on Disability Allowance)

I wasn't thinking, not really like, I thought I could just walk in and get a job but actually most workers have a Leaving Cert. ... You've more of a chance with your Leaving Cert because they'd take you on straight away, but like when you just have your Junior Cert they look and say 'no he's better off getting his Leaving Cert sorted'. (Ian, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

Others attributed their difficulties to the broader economic context, particularly the decline in employment vacancies, rather than to their lack of qualifications.

Any why is it hard to get a job? What are the employers saying to you, why are they not giving you the job?

They have no places and they're all taken.

Does not having a Leaving Certificate come into it, is anyone saying that to you?

No, it's more that, there's no jobs. (Brian, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

Irrespective, not all the young people who had planned to find employment actually obtained a position in the labour market, again indicating that they were not equipped with the correct information or had not fully thought their next move through. The following were typical comments.

I thought that I'd get a job and that I'd get on with my life, it didn't happen.

And what kind of a job did you think you were going to get when you left school or did you have anything in your head?

I didn't have anything in me head, I was just hoping I'd get a job to move on with me life like, save me sitting at home all day, that's it. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

I didn't have no plan at all at the time, no, I was just sick and wanted to get money like. Yeah, I wanted to get a good job and that. That was it really like. Now I'm in Youthreach. (Lisa, Dawson Street, Junior Certificate, Youthreach)

I just wanted to leave and get a job, I just really thought I would have got a job like but the past two years now I still haven't got a job. I'm down to FÁS trying for the last two years to get a FÁS course. (Steve, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

The types of jobs that young people were looking for generally tended to be low-skilled positions, often in gender-specific areas. Many young people indicated that they did not care what type of job they got, just as long as they obtained employment in some way, indicating desperation and a lack of a clear idea of their longer term direction.

7.2.4 Alternative Education Pathways

Some young people had considered an alternative education pathway when planning to leave school. While Eric and Chris pursued apprenticeships upon leaving school, Oliver left school to pursue a short FÁS course, Isobel was encouraged to pursue a FÁS course by her school and Clare went straight into Youthreach. There was the impression that leaving school to enter an apprenticeship route was a choice driven by the occupational interest of the young person, but joining Youthreach was an alternative to school, or a 'last chance'.

Well I didn't actually have a plan, like, all my friends left school and I'd no friends there that I knew, and all the innocent ones I don't really, they kind of have their own business, so I said I'd start here [at Youthreach], I'd learn more here, I like it here like,

so I'd get into the Leaving. (Clare, Dawson Street, Junior Certificate, Youthreach)

A number of the other early leavers we spoke with had wanted to pursue a course after leaving school, but indicated that there are barriers to further education for early leavers, both in the short-term and in the long-term.

I thought I was going to do a course to learn social studies to work with children but it never happened, but I can still, like I'm on the dole now, so I can go to FÁS and send a note to FÁS and get them to get me a class doing that which is better for me, because I love children and I like working with them so.

So you had a plan when you were leaving.

Yeah I had a plan [to get a job]. Yeah I thought I was going to be better off but it didn't turn out that way. (Louise, Belmore Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

John indicated that he did not have the required level of education to access the FÁS course was interested in.

I've been up to FÁS and they're on about you have to have your Junior Cert, you have to get some bit of paper like to back you up, you have to have at least your Junior Cert so like, if I want to do cars [to be a mechanic], I'd never have the papers to do it. Like if you were the best in the world, you still don't have the paper like so I'd say eventually I'll go back and do some course so I'll be able to get on it. It is a four year course, the mechanics like, so hopefully. (John, Hay Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

For others it was clear that the supply of courses on offer did not always meet the interests of early school leavers.

The FÁS want me to do a computer course and all but I don't know it's a sport course that I want so I guess I'll wait and see what happens. I just, I really like sports that's about it. (Steve, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

7.3 Trajectories of Early School Leavers

Table 7.1 provides an outline of the trajectories or post-school pathways followed by each of the young people we interviewed since the time of leaving school. Four typical trajectories can be identified among the young people interviewed:

- Continuous employment or initial unemployment leading to full-time employment;
- Fragmented trajectories, which incorporate periods of employment inter-dispersed with periods of unemployment or periods of unemployment inter-dispersed with periods of incomplete further education/training;
- Persistent unemployment/inactivity;
- Further education/training following from initial period of employment or unemployment.

We now consider these trajectories in more depth.

7.3.1 Continuous Employment

While some of the respondents had obtained employment at some stage since leaving school, just three had obtained any form of steady employment. This was the case for Liam, Colin and Thomas. Each of these had either rejected school or had been expelled from school. Thomas left school because he was on the LCA track which he hugely disliked. He had experienced a period of unemployment/inactivity before obtaining employment in the services industry. When we spoke to Thomas, he indicated how he had been in continuous employment with the same employer for a year and was in a job he planned to keep. Before he obtained the job through personal contacts, he was unemployed and ‘up to nothing’.

And have you been working since you left school?

No, I wasn't working for a while after I left. Even for about a few months after I left I wasn't working.

What were you up to then?

Nothing, I don't know. Just hanging around. Yeah, I hated it, boring. I, then I was lucky to get a job because my Mom knew him, so, that's how I started then. (Thomas, Argyle Street, Junior Certificate, Full-Time Employment)

Thomas, who was in full-time employment in the services sector at the time of the interview, indicated that he would need to return to school or get more qualifications in order to 'get anywhere' in his career. He recognised that not having the Leaving Certificate was a barrier to the choices available to him.

I know you're happy enough working now, but if you wanted to change down the line, do you think you'd, do you think you have any choices?

I've no choices really, without the Leaving Cert, everything requires a Leaving Cert.

Have you looked into courses?

I've just looked on the internet, things like FÁS courses and things like that, college even, or Leaving Cert.

So yeah, I suppose then you're...

Pretty stuck in it.

Do you feel stuck? Or are you happy enough?

Well, I'm stuck but I like it, yeah. (Thomas, Argyle Street, Junior Certificate, Full-Time Employment)

Issues relating to conditions of employment arose with many of the males who had experienced employment. Colin had been in continuous employment in a number of different jobs since leaving school. He felt that employers could 'take advantage' of early school leavers in employment, particularly in relation to wages and hours worked. He spoke about the difficulties involved in entering the labour market at an early age.

I did find things are much harder coming out of school at my age, in terms of finding work, being that age and going around, it was hard, it was hard enough.

Did you feel that people were taking advantage of you because you were younger?

Yeah, on yeah, Jesus, I had money in the hand [working in the bar] or whatever all informal, so yeah, they did work you as hard as they can like, do you know what I mean, it was like slave labour the place I worked in like, that is why I left there, but I'm happy where I am now, it is really good money and the hours are not too bad. (Colin, Dawes Point, Senior Cycle Leaver, Full-Time Employment)

John had experience of working in the construction sector and felt that he was at a disadvantage because it was qualifications rather than experience that determined pay and wages.

There's a big difference in money, some people, like you do the work and they'll pay you and that's it like but some people like to take the piss.

And do you think that you get paid less?

Oh yeah.

Than people with even the Junior Cert?

Definitely, definitely, even if you were a hundred times better it is the paper like that pays. (John, Hay Street, Junior Cycle Leaver, Unemployed)

Furthermore, there was little evidence of on-the-job training being provided to the young people in full-time employment. Only Colin spoke of how his employer sent him on a training course which led to a qualification.

7.3.2 Fragmented Trajectories

From Table 7.1 (at end of the chapter), it is clear that the majority of the young people we spoke to had experienced fragmented trajectories since leaving school. This was the case for John, Sean, Isobel, Steve, Brian, Ian, Louise and Oliver. These fragmented trajectories incorporated periods of employment inter-dispersed with periods of unemployment, incomplete or short periods of further education/training; and more often than not led to unemployment. Oliver had participated in a short FÁS course immediately upon leaving school but this had been followed by persistent unemployment. When we spoke to Oliver he was unemployed, receiving social welfare payments, and was trying to get on another FÁS course and/or find work.

Since I finished the FÁS course I've been looking for work. I've tried to apply for a new course, but there's too many people waiting for courses. I've been unemployed since. I am looking for work but I have nothing.

Would you like to be working or is not working a choice?

No, I want to be working.

Why do you think you can't get a job?

I don't know.

Do people tell you why?

No, they just say, they make the interview for you and they talk to you, you give them all your details, your CV, everything and they just send you back home, they are going to call you and no answer. (Oliver, Hay Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

Like others, Oliver felt that he would probably get a better job if he had the Leaving Certificate. However, he felt that his peers who did the Leaving Certificate did not always get a better job or have more choices open to them than him.

If you could do it all over again would you still make the same decision?

I don't know. Maybe yeah I suppose, doing the Leaving Cert it is good because you get a better job.

Do you see other people who did their Leaving Certificate and are in a better situation now?

My sister she was with me in the class and she did the Leaving Cert, well they wanted to take her back in school for a course, but they didn't take her for the course, the IT, the PLC. Yeah, so now she's just at home. She wanted to do it, but they told her there's no space anymore. (Oliver, Hay Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

Isobel had also experienced a fragmented trajectory but, unlike Oliver, had not completed the course she participated in after leaving school. Isobel left school after the Junior Certificate and entered a FÁS course because her school encouraged her to do so and her friends had also joined the course. In the second year of the course, she was asked to leave and had been mostly unemployed since, with short periods of employment as a waitress. At the time of the interview, she was unemployed and looking for employment. Like Oliver, she felt that if she had the Leaving Certificate it might be easier to get a job, but ar-

articulated the view that her life would not necessarily be better if she had the Leaving Certificate.

Do you think you would have been living a different life or doing something else if you had your Leaving Cert now?

No, not really. Well, yeah I think that having the Leaving Cert would help me more. I know I'm not getting jobs and all like but I don't think it would make my life any better if I had a Leaving Cert. (Isobel, Barrack Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

Sean, Steve, Brian, Ian and Louise had also experienced fragmented trajectories since leaving school, spending periods of time either in employment or unemployment. Each of these young people was unemployed at the time of the interview. Sean had experienced a number of jobs labouring on construction sites, and obtained this employment through a relative. While he had a 'good set-up' during the boom, when we spoke to him the construction industry had begun to slow down and so the past year had meant that work was harder to secure.

And how are you finding things now work wise?

Grand, but it's slowing down in the building like. Yeah you would notice it alright, like when I first started, as I said like there wasn't really much breaks, like I was working the whole time like but now even last year there like, I was out of work a good couple of weeks out of the whole year, so it is all slowing down. But everything is slowing down now, like nobody is building or digging foundations. (Sean, Hay Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

Sean also articulated the view that he was better off leaving school early to join a construction site when others who went on to complete their Leaving Certificate ended up in the same position.

It was the fact of what was the point in going into school like, do you know, just staying there 'til sixth year doing your Leaving Cert and then just end up on a building site anyway, whereas if

you left young and early and got into the building site you'd have a qualification like. School wasn't going to bring you nowhere like. I just knew I'd do better do you know on the building sites and stuff, like I knew that is what I wanted to be like.

And had you seen other people stay on and maybe still end up on building sites?

Yeah I've seen a lot of people like, my cousin there done it, he went to sixth year, got great things on his Leaving Cert and then he just ended up laying blocks himself, he's a block layer himself now, still at it like. (Sean, Hay Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

He spoke about the money he was making during the boom and how this placed him in a better position than many of his peers who stayed in school.

During the summer before I left, I used to often go out, or during the Easter holidays or something go out with him [my relative on the sites] for a couple of days like and I liked it like and then as I said I got a job, joined him and left school. And then I was working with him and I was getting 300 euros a week. So I was saving and then by the time I was, before I was 18 I had a car like because of the saving. I got a loan out of the credit union and now I have it all paid back and all. Whereas if I stayed in school, I'd probably be only saving now for a car, do you know? (Sean, Hay Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

While Steve was unable to secure an apprenticeship, he had been able to obtain some employment through a personal contact on a building site. This was also the case for Brian.

Like Isobel, Ian and Louise had relied on the service sector (mainly department stores, hotels, bars, and waitressing) for employment and these jobs had also largely been obtained through the use of personal contacts. Louise had been working at odd jobs in the service sector obtained through personal contacts, but felt that she was holding out for a FÁS course.

I've been working like little jobs here and there, you know like two or three weeks in such a place and then two or three weeks on the other place, cleaning, waitressing, all that kind of stuff, that's all I've been doing.

And how are you getting those jobs?

Friends of mine get me work, to work with them, they'll say if they have a friend and the friend doesn't come in, they'll get me to do it with them instead of you know being on the short end of the stick like.

Is it enough to get by? Is it what you want to do?

No, it doesn't, but you know the odd job here and there is alright because it is a bit of money in me back pocket to buy stuff, but I'm not really looking for jobs, because I want to do the FÁS course, to work with children. (Louise, Belmore Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

The boom-time of the Celtic Tiger had provided some of these young people with the opportunity to gain sporadic periods of employment despite their low levels of education. For many now, the reality was being reliant on social welfare. Isobel spoke about life as a welfare recipient and the challenges involved. Both Isobel and Steve spoke about how empty their lives are without any employment.

You have just been living off the dole or ...?

Yeah.

And how's that going?

It's not going well. I'm just trying to get a job.

And what do you do most days, like how are your days spent?

Just hang around with friends and then go out with me fella and all that. It's kind of boring. You get sick of it.

Do you think you'll do that for a long time?

No, I just want to get a job so me days are gone. (Isobel, Barrack Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

I mean is it hard, is life hard when you leave school?

Yeah it is yeah. Yeah it is different I used to stay in bed all day, I got lazy. I don't know, it's just rough getting up in the morning and not working or anything, no job, no money. It's depressing, it just all comes back to you, them [potential employers] saying 'no' so.

And what do you do most days?

Well not much I usually get up some mornings, say Monday, Tuesday, go down to FÁS, see is there's any job, fax away a few CVs, and see if can get a few jobs or play football, that's what I love, not much, or I drive around with my mates. (Steve, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

Among the young people we spoke to in this group, Sean was the most optimistic about his further employment chances, despite a considerable drop in his weekly income as a result of moving from employment into unemployment.

Ok and are you on the dole now because you haven't worked in about three weeks or a month?

Yeah.

And how are you finding that?

It is alright like but I live at home like with my father like so, I only get a 150 euro off them every week, do you know, more people get 187 or something.

And what are you doing with yourself now like, I mean how do you kind of spend your days?

Looking for jobs. I'm looking around and if I hear of something I'd go and look into it, you know. I've been down FÁS as well and looking in the papers.

What would you be looking for now?

Driving I'd say. I'd like to drive a taxi or something like that, well not a taxi, lorries or something. Yeah I'd like to do that. (Sean, Hay Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

7.3.3 Persistent Unemployment/Inactivity

Persistent inactivity or continuous unemployment since leaving school was a reality for seven of the young people we interviewed (Julie, Elaine, Paul, Frank, Richard, Rachel, and Emma). Julie had been largely inactive since leaving school and had unsuccessfully attempted to re-engage in further education through Youthreach and the Community Training Workshop. Before obtaining disability payments, Julie had tried to obtain employment and, after her mother died, she left the Community Training Workshop course she had been attending. Emma had also unsuccessfully attempted to re-engage with education through Youthreach two years after leaving school, but spent most of her time unemployed or inactive. Elaine had been continuously unemployed since leaving school, as were Paul, Richard and Rachel. Frank had been continuously unemployed since leaving school and had spent 18 months in a detention centre. This group of young people represent the most disadvantaged of early leavers.

It was clear that many of these young people had actively sought employment after leaving school.

I tried to get a proper job in a sandwich bar but they didn't take me on, well I went around looking in other places but I suppose not having a Junior Cert or a Leaving Cert they wouldn't take you on. (Julie, Belmore Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed/Inactive)

Just as school experiences can have a negative influence on educational attainment, time spent in unemployment can have a negative impact on how young people see their future. Many of the young people in continuous unemployment indicated that they did not care what type of job they got just as long as they obtained employment in some way, indicating desperation and a lack of a clear idea as to where they were going.

And what kind of jobs were you looking for?

I was all over the [shopping centre] like, anything, I didn't mind once I had a job, but the only thing, the problem was, I hadn't got me Leaving Cert and that was what I was going mad over.
(Elaine, Dixon Street, Senior Cycle Leaver, Unemployed)

It was clear that this group had few choices available to them. Elaine was planning to begin a computer course with FÁS but her real interest was in cars and becoming a mechanic. In addition, it was clear at times that their expectations for the future were not entirely realistic given the low level of education currently achieved.

I would like to get a proper job like I want to work in a hairdressers or a shop or something like.

...

So do you ever regret leaving school?

Sometimes yeah, sometimes I do.

Do you think your life would be different now?

Yeah it would be, I think it would be different if I stayed in school. I would have went to college or something.

And would you still like to go to college?

Yeah.

What would you like to do?

A business course or something. (Julie, Belmore Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed/Inactive)

While early school leavers are much more likely to experience long-term unemployment, the interviews revealed that many of the young people were unaware of their social welfare entitlements and the younger members of the group were not entitled to claim unemployment assistance because they were under-age. As a result, many young people were deemed to be inactive and this blurred the boundary between unemployment and inactivity. Research has indicated that inactivity levels are higher among females in recent years (Byrne *et al.*, 2009), and, from the interviews with females, we found that the high levels of inactivity were often attributed to a lack of knowledge of what welfare benefits they were entitled to rather than early motherhood which is traditionally cited in existing research on school dropout.

No, I haven't been on the dole, I only found out that I could have got the dole when I was 16 and I didn't know that and I was like what and I just didn't know so no I've been living off me Ma basically. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed/Inactive)

I only turned eighteen in January and I only got my dole really twice you know. This will be probably my third week. I don't think I'm getting paid this week though because I have no proof that I was looking for work but I'm gonna have to get that like you know what I mean. (Emma, Dixon St, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

It was clear from the interviews that many young people were inactive upon leaving school. This group also spoke about how challenging life on the dole or having nothing to do on a daily basis can be, a finding that is consistent with previous research which indicated higher levels of psychological distress among the non-employed (Hannan *et al.*, 1997).

Since I left school I've been kind of the first, I think it was the first year, I ended up staying in bed all the time, because I had nothing to get up for, nothing to do, that was when I was 15, and then when I hit 16 I tried to look for a job but it wasn't happening and then thank God that on the twenty-third of this month I'm starting a course with FÁS. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed/ Inactive)

What have you been doing since you left school?

I'm on the labour since like April and they haven't even, not this April but April before that, it's a year ago and they haven't even sent me on one course yet. Like I'd like them to send me on courses like, asking me to do stuff. But they just haven't even sent me anything (Rachel, Barrack Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

What I'm doing? I'm just walking around, basically on social welfare [Disability Allowance], that is there for the rest of me life, I can't get work, I can't do anything, sure even me Mother says what do you call it, like are you not going to go out and look for a job, you know you'll have to go out and get your own place. So I have to go and see an officer in the social welfare to see can I get my own place and basically I'm going to be living on my own. I'm going to be lonely for the rest of my life, I'm not going to have no skills, nothing at all so. (Paul, Dixon Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed/ Inactive)

7.3.4 Post-School Education and Training

A final group had been engaged in education and training since leaving school. This was the case for Chris and Eric (apprenticeships), George, Christine, Lisa and Clare (Youthreach). Among those who pursued a Youthreach course, it was clear that they preferred the learning environment in Youthreach compared to school.

When I first came here, people were saying it's a doss, it's a doss, but it's not all of a doss at all, it's just you're getting into your Maths, you're getting into your English and Computer skills and other stuff in here. (Lisa, Dawson Street, Junior Certificate, Youthreach)

It's grand. I rather Youthreach than school, it's smaller and less in the classes and stuff, easier to learn. (George, Dawson Street, Junior Certificate, Youthreach)

Many of the young people we spoke to had a poor attendance record while in school (see Chapters 4 and 5), and they considered that their attendance record had improved somewhat since joining Youthreach. This was the case for Christine and Lisa who described that they had a better relationship with teachers in Youthreach.

Like, last year my attendance was kind of bad like, but it wasn't bad, bad, but I'm starting to have better attendance now, I'm starting to come in now more days than everyone else. At first I never liked the Youthreach and then I started really liking it. You can get on with the teachers now in here like. In school like, you could get on with the teachers, but you can't like say, oh miss, can I do this, do that, you can't like kind of say that to them in school, but in here like you're just like, can I do this, do that, oh yeah sure, no probs like. So yeah, I like Youthreach, yeah. (Lisa, Dawson Street, Junior Certificate, Youthreach)

George also described Youthreach as being not as strict as school.

And do you think that you have settled down a bit now that you're in Youthreach?

Yeah, a little bit, yeah.

Are you as chatty in class as you used to be?

No, because in Youthreach like you can have a wee chat and they don't mind, you know what I mean? But you just get the work done, it's not too bad like. And you're in a small class, like, when

you're in school you're in with like thirty, thirty-two students like and everyone's at it [messing], so they are. (George, Dawson Street, Junior Certificate, Youthreach)

However, there were less clearly defined trajectories out of Youthreach. For example, Clare was attending Youthreach and spoke about pursuing a course in childcare upon completion. However, later in the conversation she then spoke about pursuing a further course in hairdressing. This was also the case for George who indicated that Youthreach was a second choice to labour market entry. While he would have liked to get an apprenticeship, he felt that it was too late.

What were you planning to do after leaving school?

I don't know, anything at all really. Job straight away anyway.

So what would you like to do after Youthreach do you know?

Maybe begin an apprenticeship or something. I don't know, anything at all really. Maybe get a job straight away.

Are you pretty keen to start making money or?

Yeah, big time.

So if you got a job would you quit Youthreach?

I'd quit Youthreach in the morning if I got a job. But there's no jobs around here. No, this town is the worst for jobs. You'd need to travel if you need a job, but I've no car or nothing like. Whoever comes to Youthreach and stuff like that, like, we're the ones who are unemployed really. (George, Dawson Street, Junior Certificate, Youthreach)

Chris had obtained a job before leaving school which then led on to an apprenticeship. When we spoke to him, he was two-and-a-half years into a four year apprenticeship. Like others on the apprenticeship route, he found the work difficult, particularly the Maths.

Do you think it is a tough road leaving school, is it harder than you thought it was going to be?

Yeah, yeah, especially doing stuff inside in college, like it is kind of hard, it would be handy if I had a Leaving Cert like, because I'm doing Maths there in the college now and if I did the Leaving Cert it might be a bit easier like. (Chris, Hay Street, Junior Certificate, Apprenticeship)

Maths. Maths and Science are hard, yeah. I'm getting grinds like, so, I get three grinds a week, well I did anyway for the last three weeks because it was coming up to the big exams like. Hopefully I got it [the exam] so I can get to the next stage, because if I don't pass this I'll have no qualifications, I won't have a Leaving Cert like, and people just don't want to deal with you like [without a Leaving Cert]. But, I'll hope for the best, that I won't be at a point where I will be regretting it. (Eric, Argyle Street, Junior Certificate, Apprenticeship)

Like others involved in apprenticeships and construction, Chris and Eric spoke about the economic conditions slowing down and the possibility of moving abroad.

I'm going to stick at this now until I get qualified and hopefully if I travel some place, travel around.

Why are you opting to go travelling?

Well things are getting quiet here, work on the building site, I was planning on going travelling anyway, that's the reason why I want to do an apprenticeship like, to get qualifications. Yeah I wouldn't mind going to England for the Olympics like. (Chris, Hay Street, Junior Certificate, Apprenticeship)

Australia, I'd love to go. But, I'm only on my first year, I can't go anywhere until after four years like, so, when my apprenticeship is done, so I suppose, I'd definitely go abroad. (Eric, Argyle Street, Junior Certificate, Apprenticeship)

7.4 The Theme of Regret

Regret was a dominant theme towards the end of the interviews. Many of the young people we spoke to expressed regret at leaving school early, irrespective of what activity they were engaged in after school. Brian and Ian expressed regret at leaving school early. Both indicated that they should have stayed in school to complete the Leaving Certificate because of the limited range of choices available after leaving school due to a lack of suitable qualifications.

And do you regret leaving school at all?

Yeah.

Why do you regret it?

I have nothing else to do, I haven't got a job or nothing. I should have stayed in school and done my Leaving.

Do you think that would have made a difference?

Yeah. I just would have being able to go to college with the Leaving Cert. (Brian, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

Do you think life is easy after you leave school?

No not at all, a struggle.

And what do you mean when you say 'struggle'?

Like getting a job like they turn around and say 'no you need your Leaving Cert for this', you just get, you get the stupid jobs. (Ian, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

Brian's advice to others was to stay in school or obtain employment before leaving school.

Stay in school or manage to get a job before leaving. (Brian, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

Like many of the other early leavers we spoke to, George regretted leaving school, regretting not having the qualification in particular.

So do you regret not doing your Leaving Cert?

Yeah, big time. Like, if you have your Leaving like, you can go on and do anything, do a lot like, with your Leaving. Not doing your Leaving fucks up your life a bit too much like. Junior Cert will get you in nowhere, you have to have the Leaving for everything. (George, Dawson Street, Junior Certificate, Youthreach)

For some of the girls, regrets centred not only on the lack of qualifications but their exclusion from some of the 'rites of passage' (such as debs dances) which mark the transition to adulthood.

Do you regret leaving school?

Yeah definitely I really do, I really, really do. I could have had a really good education like you know then I could have done my Junior and got a job. I could have even have my Leaving Cert done now you know what I mean. I could have been going on my debs or something you know. (Emma, Dixon Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

Yeah. I regret it, I do regret it, because like me sister and that done their Leaving and done their debs and I'm thinking why did I leave school, I could have learned more. (Clare, Dawson Street, Junior Certificate, Youthreach)

Many of the early leavers we spoke to had regrets but argued that they would make the same decision again. This was the case for Isobel, who expressed regret at the lack of qualifications needed to get a job and the signal it gives to employers. However, she felt that, because of her disadvantaged circumstances, even if she had a Leaving Certificate, it would not make a difference.

Do you regret leaving school?

Yeah. Now I do.

Why do you regret it?

I don't know now, it's just because I haven't got my Leaving Cert or anything. I didn't even do that in FÁS. So I do kind of regret it. Sometimes I wish I was still in school but my years are gone now, sixth year and all is gone so I would have been finished school anyway. I know I'm not getting jobs and all like but I don't think it would make my life any better if I had a Leaving Cert.

So why do you regret it?

Just to have it there when you are getting jobs and all. And just to show that you done your Leaving Cert. (Isobel, Barrack Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

John argued that while he regretted not having the qualifications, he did not regret leaving school because he had not wanted to be there.

So, do you regret leaving school?

I don't really regret it like, I would like to have the paper work but I didn't want to do it. I don't regret not being there but I, I regret not having the qualification like. You see it is a lot easier to get a job if you have a Leaving Cert. It means a lot like, if you have it, you're nearly guaranteed to get a job like, even to get a job in Dunnes, you have to have some qualification so. (John, Hay Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

This was also the case for Lisa who had been bullied at school and for Louise who reported high levels of psychological distress.

So do you regret leaving the school?

I do now, but in a way I do, and in a way I don't.

So, in a way you do, because ...?

Because I want to do my Leaving Cert, my proper Leaving Cert and now I can't do it.

And in a way you don't, because ...?

Because like, least I know I'm not getting bullied anywhere else. (Lisa, Dawson Street, Junior Certificate, Youthreach)

I wish I'd stayed in, but I'm happy I've left as well but I wish I hadn't, like you know I had stayed in to do my tests and everything because it is very hard to get a job without having the qualifications like but I am happy that I left as well because I don't have the stress anymore, I've calmed down a lot since I left school which is better for me like.

...

It was bad, I'd say it was a bit bad but I'm happy like, I'm a lot more, less stressed and everything and more laid back than I was when I was at school and I didn't want to be there anyway, so I think it is better off that I did leave because even though I don't have the qualifications that I want, I still, you know I didn't want to be in school so. (Louise, Belmore Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

For Colin, it was a case of just getting on with it now that the decision was made.

Yeah like I just, I'm happy where I am like, you know I'm not complaining or anything, I'm just getting along like, doing what I have to do. (Colin, Dawes Point, Junior Certificate, Employed Full-Time)

It was interesting to note that many of the early leavers expressed a desire to go to college or to further their education. As a result, some of the young people we interviewed expressed the view that they would have to

go back to school in order to gain entry to college. This was the case for Clare, who could see a distinction between the value of a Leaving Certificate obtained through Youthreach and a Leaving Certificate obtained in school.

You get more places [with a Leaving Cert], people ask like, did you do your Leaving, you're like no, and they're probably thinking, oh a girl like you should settle down and do her Leaving. (Clare, Dawson Street, Junior Certificate, Youthreach)

It was also clear that many of the early school leavers we spoke to placed a value on education, indicating that leaving school early is 'a stupid thing to do' and that if they had younger brothers or sisters, they would encourage them to complete their second-level education. We asked young people whether hypothetically they would like their own children to leave school early. All of the early leavers we spoke to agreed that education was important and that they would encourage their children to complete second-level education, even when they were aware that they were contradicting themselves.

I'd try yeah, I'd try yeah, I would like them to have something maybe I didn't have, I'm not saying that I'm not happy, I'm happy the way I am now but I just, maybe I'd just like to see them have something I didn't have like, I'd be happy like if they had something, you know what I mean I'd be happy like if they had it, yeah. (Colin, Dawes Point, Junior Certificate, Employed Full-Time)

However, not all of the young people we spoke to placed a value on education. It was often articulated to us in the interviews that clear evidence of the value of education was not apparent in their social network.

So do you feel now you have enough choices or do you think you have fewer choices?

I think I have less choices than what I would if I was in school but I wouldn't know until, you know I'd see someone who would come out of school with a proper education and got into a big

lawyer firm or something, because I don't know that. I've never seen like anybody you know get far with their qualifications because I don't know. I'd say I'd have a few more choices if I'd stayed in school but I'm still happy that I left. (Louise, Belmore Street, No Quali-fications, Unemployed)

Such views were in direct contrast to those who could see the value of education in their everyday lives. Elaine could see how education paid off for some of her friends. When talking about her friends, she indicated that she admired them for sticking with school and for making it to college.

Yeah, one of them, I'm very proud of a young fella on me road, he left, or he did his Leaving and now he is in college and he has a job and all like, so it is pure good for him like, I'm delighted for him and he hated school as well. But he stuck to it, I wish I did, just go to college and all.

Would you like to go to college?

I'd say I would yeah to train for a mechanic, I love cars. Love cars, I'm a pure tom boy, I would have love'n to do that. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

7.5 Recommendations and Advice

Most of our respondents indicated that their experiences meant that it would have been better to stay on in school. Typical comments were:

Yeah I'd tell them to stay in school and stick it out, it's only three years like, you're better off having a Leaving Cert and a Junior Cert as well so. (Chris, Hay Street, Junior Certificate, Apprenticeship)

What would you advise young people who want to leave school?

Not to leave, I'd tell them not to leave it's not worth it like, that's if they asked me not many people do, but like if they did ask me

I'd say 'don't leave it's not worth it because like you regret it years to come' which I did like.

It [leaving school] probably seems easy for a while?

Yeah, like, but not now, like you know what I mean, it did there and then when I left but like not now. (Emma, Dixon Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

When prompted about what advice she would give to other students who had a similar experience of second-level education, Elaine gave the following response:

I'd say talk to your Ma, tell her to go up to the school or something, to do it like, to explain or whatever, or even change schools like, because it's, you don't know, if they think leaving school is easy, it is not, because it is hard to get a job without your Leaving Cert and all, so I wouldn't advise any of my friends to leave school.

And had anyone given you that advice?

No, me Ma tried, but it didn't work on me, I'm one of them what left school, look at me now, I'm after waiting two years for a FÁS course, it is not easy at all. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

Even though Colin was happy in his employment, and was happy enough with his life since leaving school, he still felt that young people should try and make every effort to complete second-level education.

So what advice would you give to anyone that was leaving school?

Advice for leaving school? It is your decision, it is your life, I'd say try to stick it out, even if you don't like it. (Colin, Dawes Point, Junior Certificate, Employed Full-Time)

So you think life is easy after school?

Not at all, Jesus, no. It's only going to get harder as well. (Eric, Argyle Street, Junior Certificate, Apprenticeship)

Many of the young people we spoke to felt that their school could have been more attentive to people who were going to leave school early. Elaine, who attended a school with a working-class intake and high drop-out rate, felt that there should be changes in the school climate, particularly in relation to interaction between students and teachers.

And what advice would you give to the school?

To the school just to cop on and help students and all and listen to them and don't shout at them and you'll get through to them all that's it...They wouldn't listen to you or anything but I loved me vice principal, he was deadly like but I just I don't know, I haven't a clue what to say now but I wouldn't if I had the choice I wouldn't have left school, I would have just stuck to it. (Elaine, Dixon Street, Junior Certificate, Unemployed)

Others also spoke about the school climate, but also about the need for active teaching methodologies.

Try and make the people, keep them staying on, I suppose just teach them better.

...

I'd say if the teachers weren't so serious I would have stayed in school, there was no craic.

Do you think someone could have buckled you down or you know?

Yeah I'd say if the teachers weren't so straight forward and serious about it do you know, you could do the work and have a laugh do you know that kind of way? Whereas they were just straight, work, work, work, you just lose interest then like, whereas if you have a

laugh and work at the same time, do you know you get the work done like.

...

Chill out, don't be so strict like, I mean be strict, they have to be strict to a certain extent like, do you know they have to, like show that they're there to teach like they're supposed to listen to them but don't be so fucking strict all the time, you should have a laugh and learn at the same time do you know. (John, Hay Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

Louise also spoke about the need for more support for struggling students.

I would advise them to get them as much help as possible, as soon as possible before they end up leaving like I did. Because I was asking for help and no one would give it to me. So I'd want them to get the help that they need, especially when they're asking for it. Don't just shove them out or give them the cold shoulder, show them the way because they will leave, I know that for fact because it happened to me, I left. (Louise, Belmore Street, No Qualifications, Unemployed)

In sum, early school leavers would generally advise other young people to remain on in school but highlighted aspects of school policy and practice that would be required to enhance retention.

7.6 Conclusions

This chapter has focused on the post-school pathways of young people who leave school early. It began by considering the post-school plans of early school leavers and found that school leavers can be characterised into three broad types. The first group was largely concerned with leaving school and, by their own admission, had not considered their next move. This was often driven by their negative experiences of school, resulting in the mindset of just wanting to get out of school. The second group had been considering the apprenticeship route, a

popular consideration for males at the time. Those who had made plans before leaving school experienced a smoother transition from school into apprenticeships than those who left school and hoped to secure an apprenticeship afterwards. However, it was clear that apprenticeships were often obtained through a personal contact, more often than not a relative. Others were less successful in obtaining an apprenticeship because they could not obtain employment in the construction industry. A third group had planned on finding work after leaving school, and this group were much more vague about the types of occupations that they expected to enter, indicating a lack of appropriate information and guidance about their post-school choices. At times, this group was unaware of the difficulties they would face in finding employment given their low levels of education. As a result, many experienced a transition from school into unemployment. When employment was obtained, it generally tended to be low-skilled employment in the service or construction sectors and largely gendered in nature. A final group had planned on pursuing an alternative education and training option through FÁS or Youthreach. However, this was more often than not viewed as an alternative to finding employment or the least desirable option. The young people we spoke to also expressed the view that there are barriers to further education for early school leavers both in the terms of accessing alternative education and training after leaving school but also in the type and range of courses available to early school leavers.

The chapter then identified four typical trajectories of early school leavers. These included continuous employment, fragmented trajectories, persistent unemployment/inactivity and participation in further education.

It was evident that few of the early school leavers had experienced continuous employment since leaving school. Some spoke about the difficulties encountered in entering the labour market at an early age and how employers can take advantage of their position in relation to wages and conditions of employment. Many of the group as a whole expressed frustration that ‘a piece of paper’ determined employment

chances rather than skills or knowledge gained through experience since leaving school.

Many of the young people we spoke to had experienced fragmented trajectories incorporating periods of employment interspersed with periods of unemployment or incomplete or short periods of further education. In the short-term, these trajectories more often than not led to unemployment. Many of these young people saw not having a Leaving Certificate as a barrier to securing continuous employment. It was clear that the apprenticeship and construction industry pathway had become less secure as economic conditions declined, resulting in many of the males entering unemployment and having to change their occupational direction.

Many of the young people we spoke to had experienced persistent unemployment/inactivity since leaving school. This group often had difficulty re-engaging with further education and training and viewed their lack of qualifications as a barrier to finding employment. It was also evident that many of these young people were so keen to find employment that they would consider any job, rather than focusing on their interests and aspirations, resulting in plans that seemed to be largely disorganised in structure. Furthermore, there was some evidence that many of the young people we spoke to were unaware of the welfare benefits that they were entitled to, thus reducing their chances of benefiting from state support in terms of finance but also guidance. Importantly, this study has also highlighted the 'human face' of the impact of unemployment or inactivity early in the transition from school. It highlights the psychological stress associated with unemployment (see Whelan *et al.*, 1991; Hannan *et al.*, 1996; Hannan *et al.*, 1997) and the potential for unemployment or inactivity to lead to trouble with the authorities.

A final group was on a clear post-school education and training trajectory either through apprenticeship training or Youthreach participation. While many young people on Youthreach expressed a preference for the learning environment, there was the impression that they saw Youthreach as an alternative rather than a choice. Like those who were persistently unemployed/inactive, they seemed to have little

knowledge of what their next move would be, thus demonstrating a 'drifter' attitude. For those on apprenticeships, it was clear that they found certain aspects of the apprenticeship difficult, particularly the Maths.

Regret was a dominant theme in the interviews; however, this was more often than not articulated in terms of regret at not having obtained necessary qualifications rather than at leaving school per se. Given their negative experiences of school (see Chapter 5), many early school leavers could not envisage a situation in which staying on in full-time education was a viable option for them. However, most of the early leavers expressed the view that they still placed a value on education and would advise people to try to stay in school as life was perceived to be harder after leaving school without a Leaving Certificate.

Table 7.1: Post-School Pathways of Early School Leavers

Name & Age	Qualification	School	Current Situation	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Trajectory
Brian, 18	Junior Certificate	Dixon St	Unemployed	Unemployed/Some Employment	Unemployed/Some Employment	N/A	N/A	Fragmented Trajectory, Employment but mostly Unemployed
Chris, 19	Junior Certificate	Hay St	Apprenticeship	Apprenticeship	Apprenticeship	Apprenticeship	N/A	Apprenticeship, initial period of employment
Christine, 18	Junior Certificate	Dawson St	Youthreach	Unemployed/Youthreach	Youthreach	N/A	N/A	Youthreach, initial period of unemployment
Clare, 17	Junior Certificate	Dawson St	Youthreach	Youthreach	Youthreach	N/A	N/A	Youthreach, initially unemployed
Colin, 18	Junior Certificate	Dawes Point	Employed	Employed	Employed	N/A	N/A	Continuous Employment
Elaine, 17	Junior Certificate	Dixon St	Unemployed, about to go on FÁS	Inactive	Unemployed	Unemployed	N/A	Persistent Inactivity/Unemployment
Emma, 18	No Qualifications	Dixon St	Unemployed	Inactive	Youthreach (didn't complete)	Inactive	Unemployed	Persistent Inactivity/Unemployment/Incomplete Further Education

Eric, 18	Junior Certificate	Argyle St	Apprenticeship	Apprenticeship	N/A	N/A	N/A	Apprenticeship
Frank, 19	No Qualifications	Park St	Unemployed	Inactive	Prison/Detention Centre	Prison/Detention Centre	N/A	Unemployed
George, 18	Junior Certificate	Dawson St	Youthreach	Unemployed for about 3 months, then joined Youthreach	Youthreach	Youthreach	N/A	N/A
Helen, 19	Junior Certificate	Barrack St	School	Inactive	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ian, 19	Junior Certificate	Dixon St	Unemployed	Employed/Unemployed	Employed/Unemployed	Unemployed	N/A	N/A
Isobel, 18	Junior Certificate	Barrack St	Unemployed	FÁS	FÁS/Unemployed	N/A	N/A	N/A
John, 18	No Qualifications	Hay St	Unemployed	Youthreach (didn't complete)	FÁS (didn't complete) Employed/Unemployed	Employed/Unemployed	Employed/Unemployed	Employed/Unemployed

Apprenticeship

Persistent Inactivity/Unemployment

Youthreach, initial period of unemployment

Return to School

Fragmented Trajectory, Employment but mostly Unemployment

Fragmented Trajectory, Employment/Unemployment/Incomplete Further Education

Fragmented Trajectory, Employment inter-dispersed with unemployment

Julie, 19	No Qualifications	Belmore St	Inactive, on Disability Benefit	Community Workshop (computers: didn't complete)	Inactive/Youthreach (hair dressing: didn't complete)	Inactive	In-active	Persistent Inactivity/Unemployment Disability Allowance ¹
Liam, 17	No Qualifications	Park St	Self-Employed – Odd Jobs	Traveller Point (didn't complete)	Employed	Employed	N/A	Continuous Employment/ Self-Employment
Lisa, 17	Junior Certificate	Dawson St	Youthreach	Youthreach	N/A	N/A	N/A	Youthreach
Louise, 18	Junior Certificate	Belmore St	Inactive/Unemployed	Employed/Inactive	N/A	N/A	N/A	Fragmented Trajectory, Employment but mostly Unemployment/ Inactivity.
Oliver, 19	Junior Certificate	Hay St	Unemployed, trying to get a place on FÁS	FÁS/Unemployed	Unemployed	N/A	N/A	Fragmented Trajectory, Short FÁS course followed by persistent unemployment
Paul, 18	No Qualifications	Dixon St	Inactive, on Disability	Inactive	Inactive	Inactive	In-active	Persistent Inactivity/Unemployment

¹ Disability Allowance is a long-term social assistance weekly payment for those aged 16-65 with a disability expected to last at least

Rachel, 19	Junior Certificate	Barrack St	Unemployed	FÁS (didn't complete)/ Unemployment	Unemploy- ment	N/A	N/A	Persistent Inactivity/ Unemployment/ Initial unsuccessful Further Education
Richard, 18	Junior Certificate	Dixon St	Unemployed, about to return to school	Unemployed	N/A	N/A	N/A	Persistent Inactivity/ Unemployment
Sean, 19	No Qualificati ons	Hay St	Unemployed	Employed with relative	Employment (not permanent)	N/A	Mostly Unemployed	Fragmented Trajectory, Employment inter- dispersed with unemployment
Steve, 18	Junior Certificate	Dixon St	Unemployed	Unemployed/ employment with labouring	Unemployed/ employment with labouring	N/A	N/A	Fragmented Trajectory, Employment but mostly Unemployment
Thomas, 18	Junior Certificate	Argyle St	Employed, Full Time	Inactive/ Unemployed	Employed	N/A	N/A	Initial unemployment leading to full time employment

Chapter 8

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

8.1 Introduction

This study offers a unique contribution to what we know about early school leaving in the Irish context by taking a more dynamic approach, placing emphasis on the interaction of the family, individual and school factors which shape a gradual process of disengagement from school. *No Way Back* forms part of the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS), which has followed a cohort of young people in twelve case-study schools as they move through the second-level education system. Using this database allows us to identify early school leavers among the cohort and explore their experiences of school prior to dropping out. Twenty-five of these young people were then followed up specifically for this study, with life history interviews used to explore the process of leaving school and their experiences subsequently.

This chapter summarises the main findings of the study and identifies some key policy issues relating to early school leaving. Before looking at these policy issues, Section 8.2 provides a summary of the main findings of the study. In Section 8.3, our attention turns to the implications of the study findings for future policy development regarding school dropout.

8.2 Main Findings

8.2.1 Context of Early School Leaving

In this study, the term ‘early school leaving’ is used to refer to young people who leave school before the completion of senior cycle education. This cut-off is used because a Leaving Certificate has become the minimum necessary qualification to attain a range of adult life-chances, including good quality employment and health (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). The proportion of young people leaving school without completing second-level education fell significantly between 1980 and the mid-1990s. However, the level of school completion has remained relatively stable from the mid-1990s onwards. One in six young people continue to leave school without a Leaving Certificate qualification, amounting to almost 9,000 young people every year.

The lack of improvement in school retention levels in recent years is perhaps surprising given the introduction of a range of interventions designed to counter educational disadvantage. A change in the statutory school leaving age to 16 has postponed the timing of leaving school from directly after the Junior Certificate examination until some time after entering fifth year but has not increased overall rates of senior cycle completion. It is very possible that the lack of any significant improvement in school completion may reflect general labour market conditions over the period rather than the lack of impact of policy measures. The pull of available employment opportunities during the boom years may have countered any effect of measures designed to improve retention. One might, therefore, expect that the current recession would boost school retention; however, the extent to which this is likely depends on the underlying reasons for early school leaving.

In comparative perspective, Ireland occupies an intermediate position in rates of early school leaving. Although early leaving levels are lower in Ireland than the European average, rates in Ireland remain significantly higher than in the Nordic Countries, Austria and (for males) Germany. Compared to many other European countries, educa-

tional qualifications in Ireland have a very strong impact on later life chances, thus reinforcing the importance of early school leaving as a policy issue.

8.2.2 The Gender Gap in Early School Leaving

Rates of early leaving in Ireland are strongly structured by gender, with males over-represented in the early leaver group. The gap between males and females has narrowed somewhat since the 1980s, though it remains substantial at 7-8 percentage points. Even within the same schools, boys tend to be more likely to leave school before the end of senior cycle than girls. The processes underlying gender differences in school completion (and achievement) have been the subject of much debate internationally, with accounts variously emphasising differences in labour market opportunities, differential engagement in schoolwork, and varied responses to the school and classroom environment (see, for example, Fullarton, 2002; McDowell, 2003; Smyth, 2007b). Our research yields new insights into these processes among Irish school leavers. Firstly, some groups of working-class males respond less well to a strict disciplinary environment and harsh policies directed towards misbehaviour. In the case-study schools, young men, especially those from a working-class background, are more likely to become caught up in a cycle of 'acting up' and 'being given out to' by teachers, a cycle which reinforces their disengagement from school. Secondly, some groups of males are more likely to disregard the need to attain educational qualifications if access to certain occupations (such as construction jobs) can be secured through personal networks.

While young men are often viewed to be more disadvantaged in educational terms than their female peers, both male and female early leavers report similar perceptions of school as a largely negative environment. The low-attaining females in this study provide a stark contrast to the high-achieving females that attract much attention in existing gender research and in policy discourse. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how the negative consequences of early school departure for low-attaining females can often be greater than for low-attaining males because of the greater opportunities

available to males in the labour market, an issue which merits more attention in the Irish context.

8.2.3 Persistent Social Class Disparities in Early School Leaving

School completion rates have increased for all social groups over time. The greatest decline in drop-out rates has taken place among those from skilled and semi/unskilled working-class backgrounds. An interesting feature of the Irish context is the substantial improvement in school retention levels among those from farming backgrounds, with this group now equalling the rates of those from professional backgrounds. In spite of a reduction in early school leaving rates in the 1980s and early 1990s, patterns of school completion continue to be highly structured by social class, with those from semi/unskilled manual backgrounds 2.7 times more likely to drop out of school than those from higher professional backgrounds. These patterns suggest that disengagement from school is a significant source of inequality in Irish society, given the strong links between early leaving and subsequent disadvantage.

In keeping with this national pattern, early school leaving in the case-study schools is found to be differentiated by parental social class background. However, social class cannot be considered in isolation from gender, since early school leaving is particularly prevalent among working-class boys. Our findings shed light on some of the processes underlying this pattern. Part of the explanation for the gender/class gap in early school leaving resides in the greater tendency of working-class students to perceive the school climate as negative, to be allocated to lower stream classes, and to get caught up in a cycle of 'acting up' and 'being given out to' by their teachers. Early school leaving is also influenced by membership of a minority group, with higher rates of early school leaving among Travellers and newcomer (immigrant) students. In the case of newcomer students, the issue does not seem to be one of mobility between schools or emigration; rather the study highlights new evidence in the Irish context which suggests that at least some newcomer young people are at risk of school drop-out. Further research would be needed to determine whether this pat-

tern reflects age at immigration, language difficulties, school experiences or broader social factors.

8.2.4 Academic Underachievement

Previous academic achievement is strongly related to early school leaving. Students who had lower reading and mathematics levels on entry to second-level education are more likely to drop out of school in the years that follow. For many young people, early school leaving has its roots in early experiences of educational failure and academic struggle, sometimes as far back as primary level, making early school leaving a policy issue for all education sectors, not just the second-level sector.

The study findings indicate that early school leaving is not only related to absolute levels of academic underachievement but to how such academic difficulties are addressed by the school. Two contrasting patterns emerge among the young people interviewed. Some young people felt 'left behind' in more academically engaged schools, with their difficulties with schoolwork ignored by teachers. Other young people reported the concentration of students with academic difficulties and related misbehaviour in particular classes, resulting in less time spent on learning in these contexts. This latter pattern was related to school use of ability grouping, an issue discussed in the next subsection.

8.2.5 School Processes and Early School Leaving

While underachievement is a strong predictor of early school leaving, it is important to note that schools vary considerably in their drop-out rates and these differences are not reducible to differences in student 'ability'. Among the case-study schools, drop-out rates tend to be higher in schools with a predominantly working-class intake and lower among mixed and middle-class intake schools, reflecting the impact of school social mix on early leaving. However, considerable variation is evident between schools with the same type of student

intake, indicating that schools vary in how they counter disengagement, underachievement and early school leaving.

Two aspects of school organisation and process emerge as key influences on early school leaving: ability grouping, and school climate. This study clearly indicates that the use of streaming (that is, allocating students to a base class according to their academic ‘ability’) has negative consequences for those allocated to lower stream classes, with the resulting climate of low expectations and negative teacher-student interaction often prompting early school leaving. The school climate, that is, the quality of relations between teachers and students, emerges as a key factor in school engagement and retention. Most of the young people documented negative interaction with their teachers, feeling that they were not listened to, did not receive the help and support they needed, and were negatively labelled as ‘weak’ or ‘troublesome’ by their teachers. In some instances, young people reported feeling rejected by the school, with disciplinary procedures culminating in suspension or expulsion from school.

There is also a body of evidence emerging from this study which suggests that poor interaction with peers can lead to school disengagement or lack of attachment to school life. Such poor interaction occurred along a continuum which ranged from feeling isolated within the class context to experiencing more overt bullying. There are some indications that poor relations with peers compound negative school experiences among those in lower streamed classes. In sum, the reasons for leaving school are complex and inter-related but negative school experiences (including isolation, rejection and underachievement) have emerged as a key driver in the decision to leave school.

8.2.6 External Influences on Early School Leaving

Negative experiences of school have emerged as the main factor in the decision to leave school, but it is important to note that early school leaving may also be triggered by external events. Such events include the draw of the labour market but also high-impact personal issues such as dealing with bereavement. Until recently, early school leaving among males has been attributed to opportunities available in the la-

bour market given the positive economic conditions. However, this study demonstrates that the draw of the labour market was largely tied up with negative experiences of school. Thus, a job opportunity may precipitate leaving school but only in cases where young people were already disengaging from school life. Many of the young people we spoke to were dealing with the bereavement of a family member around the time they made the decision to leave school. The complexity of some of these young people's lives highlights the importance of addressing early school leaving in a holistic way.

8.2.7 Early School Leaving – Process and Act

Early school leaving in the Irish context is found to represent a gradual process. Disengagement or disinterest in school among young people who exit the second-level system prematurely can begin as early as primary school. For some young people, disengagement occurs later, after the transition from primary to second-level or further on in junior or senior cycle. Early school leaving is generally the culmination of a longer term withdrawal from school life, marked by non-attendance and truancy. The gradual nature of the process means that there is some potential for reducing levels of early leaving by fostering school attendance and targeting young people who appear to be 'at risk' of early leaving.

Because of the gradual nature of the process, the exact stage at which young people leave school may be unclear and schools vary in the procedures they put in place for students who intend to leave school. Schools differ in the extent to which they track and encourage young people to return to school, and even young people in the same school may have different experiences of follow-up by school staff. Early school leavers report very little willingness to re-enter second-level education, reinforcing the need for more flexible learning pathways beyond school. This issue is given greater attention in the policy section below.

Furthermore, many young people discuss their decision to leave school with their parents but communication with parents does not

always lead to consensus, with several young people making their decision against their parents' wishes.

8.2.8 Plans and Post-School Pathways

Young people vary in the extent to which they plan their subsequent move upon departure from school. Some are primarily concerned with leaving school, others have only vague plans while a third (smaller) group has specific plans about what they would do. This variation reflected a lack of appropriate information or guidance about their post-school choices as a result of their early departure from school. This reinforces previous findings reporting a serious imbalance in the provision of guidance services at junior and senior cycle levels and the lack of contact that early school leavers have with guidance services (Hannan *et al.*, 1983; McCoy *et al.*, 2006).

Early school leavers vary in their destinations after leaving school but exposure to unemployment is a common feature of their trajectories. We identified four trajectories typically followed by early school leavers, with many experiencing fragmented trajectories or persistent unemployment/inactivity in the short-term. Among those who obtained employment, early leavers tend to take up work in different segments of the labour market depending on their gender. Young males tend to be concentrated in labouring work or apprenticeships and young women in service, often caring, jobs. The reliance on personal networks for obtaining employment or apprenticeships was particularly evident, and employers were often seen as taking advantage of early school leavers in relation to conditions of employment.

The study findings highlight some important policy issues with regard to early school leaving and re-engagement with the learning process. Some of these issues relate to the persistence of gender and social class inequalities, in particular differences in participation, outcomes and opportunities. Specifically, the findings point to the narrowness of viable post-school alternatives for early school leavers. Pathways to pursue the Leaving Certificate qualification after early departure from second-level education are limited in the Irish context, and generally

entail a willingness on behalf of the young person to ‘return’ to second-level institutions rather than being able to pursue education ‘beyond’ second-level education. The fact that the young people we spoke to continued to place a value on education, but were reluctant to return to school, suggests the need for new ways of organising learning, such as community-based systems of education that reach beyond traditional formal and institutional learning. A further issue relates to the potential for alternative pathways or patterns of transition. There is a need to recognise that for a number of young people post-compulsory education is only a real option as a form of ‘re-entry’, and this possibility needs to be opened up and strengthened as structured re-entry into education and training. These issues are addressed in more detail in the following section.

8.3 Issues for Policy Development

This section highlights the implications of the study findings for future policy development. The issues raised include the measurement of early school leaving, the link between school dropout and broader social equity, the promotion of student engagement in learning, guidance, post-school options and second-chance education.

8.3.1 Measuring Early School Leaving

Defining early school leaving is by no means unproblematic, and research and policy reports have used a variety of definitions to assess the extent of early school leaving. The only consistent measures of early school leaving over time derive from two sources: the Census of Population and the School Leavers’ Survey. The Census of Population is, however, limited in terms of what it can tell us about the rate of early school leaving beyond the share of the population who completed their second-level education aged 15/16 or under. The Census indicates the highest level of educational qualification attained by each adult, but not whether this was obtained at school or through second-chance education. The School Leavers’ Survey provides much more in-depth information on a representative sample of early school

leavers according to the stage at which they left school, age, gender and social class, as well as their school experiences and post-school pathways. Given the emphasis in the current climate on policy formulation which is evidence-based, it is unfortunate that the future of the survey is uncertain at the time of writing.

8.3.2 Achieving Equity

This study has documented a largely unchanging interplay between social class, gender and educational outcomes, with the continuing overrepresentation of working-class young men among early leavers. International research indicates that educational participation reflects the different costs and benefits attached to staying in school across social groups (Erikson and Jonsson, 1996). Thus, comprehensive school reform coupled with a reduction in income inequalities brought about through taxation and the welfare system is credited for a decline in educational inequalities in the Swedish context. While broader social and economic factors are undoubtedly key in shaping educational inequalities in Ireland, our findings also highlight the way in which social class ‘plays out’ at the school level in terms of the expectational climate, social relations and ability grouping. Furthermore, inequality may be reinforced by the differential distribution of students across schools, with students in predominantly working-class schools found to have lower levels of academic performance and higher rates of early leaving, all else being equal (Smyth, 1999). It is clear that while some progress has been made, policy initiatives designed to counter early school leaving have not always addressed these complex aspects of school process (Smyth and McCoy, 2009).

Innovative measures to improve the school experiences of these at-risk groups are therefore key in achieving equity; potential measures are discussed in the following section. Clearly, the rationale for student participation and engagement extends well beyond good educational practice into the arenas of social policy, health and well-being. It is clear that schools on their own have the capability only to close the equality gap to a certain degree. This points to the need for

‘joined-up’ policy across government departments regarding children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

8.3.3 Curriculum, Learning and School Climate

The study points to the crucial importance of providing children and young people with high quality learning environments in which student engagement is fostered at all levels of the education system. School experiences at primary and junior cycle levels influence later decisions and represent a key area for potential policy intervention.

The academic struggle reported by young people indicates the need to identify students with learning difficulties as early as possible and put in place the appropriate supports to foster their academic progress. Personalised learning has come to the forefront of educational policy discourse internationally (Leadbeater, 2004). Such an approach places the student at the centre, allowing young people to combine different learning experiences at a pace which suits their needs, interests and abilities. Putting in place personalised learning pathways for young people by, for example, allowing them to take a subset of subjects or enabling them to follow courses over a longer time-frame than usual could therefore help to support student learning and foster engagement in schooling. A shift away from streaming towards mixed ability classes and more flexible forms of ability grouping would have the potential to counter the low expectations and lack of academic challenge reported by young people in lower stream classes.

Positive teacher-student relations emerge as central to student engagement and learning. The study findings highlight the need for schools to adopt a positive behaviour policy, especially since punitive approaches not only alienate students from school but also can themselves trigger school departure (through suspension, for example). While school climate may appear to be a nebulous concept, the study indicates the powerful way in which day-to-day interaction between teachers and students shapes school retention, as well as a range of other outcomes, including academic achievement and personal/social development (see Smyth, 1999; Smyth *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, whole school planning along with initial and continuous teacher edu-

cation need to take account of the necessity to foster positive teacher-student relations.

In recounting their school experiences, early school leavers place much greater emphasis on their academic struggle and poor relations with teachers than on the *content* of the curriculum. Other elements of the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study indicate that students see good teaching as comprising clear explanation by the teacher, making learning fun and actively involving students. Junior cycle students are also particularly positive about subjects with a more practical component, such as Physical Education, Art and Materials Technology (Wood) (Smyth *et al.*, 2007). The use of active teaching methods and transmission of high teacher expectations for all students could therefore go some way towards reducing student dissatisfaction and disengagement. Access to a range of subject areas, particularly on entry to post-primary education, could also serve to support student engagement.

The issue of whether young people who may be at risk of dropout should be provided with alternative programmes or provided with additional support within existing programmes has been the subject of on-going debate internationally (see, for example, Oakes, 2008). The Leaving Certificate Applied programme was introduced in the 1990s in order to promote the retention of less academically oriented young people within the school system. Research on the LCA programme (Banks *et al.*, 2010) indicates that smaller class sizes, more active teaching methods and continuous assessment help to reengage young people in learning. At the same time, the programme continues to face issues regarding parity of esteem in access to employment and post-school education/training. This study points to ways in which the experience of LCA could be enhanced for students but also indicates the ways in which LCA-type approaches to learning and assessment could foster student engagement at both junior and senior cycle (Banks *et al.*, 2010).

8.3.4 Guidance and Early School Leaving

For most young people, early school leaving involves a gradual withdrawal from school rather than a single 'event'. Thus, recurrent non-

attendance and truancy are effective signals of the risk of school drop-out. Responding to these signals at the school level by identifying and supporting those with attendance difficulties is therefore likely to significantly enhance retention.

This study also highlights the need to reorientate how young people are channeled from second-level education. In the context of limited resources, guidance provision is generally targeted at senior cycle students, with those who leave school early having little contact with the guidance counsellor (McCoy *et al.*, 2006). It is evident that access to high quality career guidance is important for all young people. Such guidance should seek to ensure that young people and their families are aware of the short-term and the long-term implications of leaving school early. Guidance services in schools also have a potential role to play in providing support and referral for those young people who have experienced bereavement and other life trauma. Without such support, these young people may be unable to continue on in full-time education.

8.3.5 Second-Chance and Post-School Education/Training

This report highlights the challenge of re-engaging young people with second-level education after the decision to leave school has been made. To want to remain at school or pursue their education elsewhere, young people need to feel that that education is meaningful and rewarding and will yield success. This reinforces the need for schools to find appropriate ways of maintaining high levels of attainment and ensuring that young people from all backgrounds attain those levels. One challenge here is improving the quality of school experiences from an early age. This requires more intensive early intervention and high quality initial schooling. Important for these young people are policies which target some of the barriers to re-engagement with education. For re-engagement to become an effective option, alternative strategies to progress need to be devised for those who exit without requiring them to 'go back' to school. In other words, re-engagement needs to be structured in a way that makes it accessible both by being clearly 'signposted' and by being organised in a way that takes into

account the post-school experience of the participants. Access to qualifications could be supported by joined-up provision of services and the opportunity to engage in formal learning across a range of sites.

While a high proportion (62 per cent) of early leavers progress to some form of post-school education or training after leaving school (Byrne *et al.*, 2009), education and training aimed at potential early leavers must be flexible, relevant, challenging and rewarding, ensuring that they are engaged in programmes and courses which promote the acquisition of skills that they can build upon and which will help lead to secure jobs and better futures.

One of the aims of current education policy is to increase school retention. This study indicates that the specific needs and experiences of early school leavers must be considered if retention is to improve. This group represents young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, and leaving school early has significant consequences for their adult life-chances, thus reinforcing their initial disadvantage. Many early leavers were low achievers in school, developed negative views of school, teachers and other students, and had challenging patterns of school behaviour and attendance. The study highlights the necessity of developing engaging educational experiences and appropriate pathways for young people at risk of early school leaving, given the substantial costs not only to the individual but to society as a whole. Finally, retention at school is not sufficient unless young people experience achievement and obtain qualifications. This study, alongside other Post-Primary Longitudinal Study research, points to aspects of school process, including active teaching methods, flexible ability grouping and positive school climate, which enhance student engagement in learning, an engagement in learning which can serve to promote both retention and achievement equally.

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Disengagement from school is a significant source of inequality in the Irish context, given the strong links between early school leaving and subsequent disadvantage. *No Way Back?* highlights the persistence of early school leaving and estimates that one in six young people continue to leave school without a Leaving Certificate qualification. This book offers a unique contribution to what we know about early school leaving by taking a more dynamic approach, placing emphasis on the interaction of family, individual and school factors which shape a gradual process of disengagement from school. This study is part of a series which follows a cohort of young people as they move through the second-level education system. *No Way Back?* explores the experiences of young people who have left school before completion of senior cycle. It documents their negative school experiences and withdrawal from school life, suggesting options for future policy development to improve retention and student engagement.

No Way Back? will be of interest to policymakers, school management, guidance counsellors, teachers, young people, parents and the wider academic community.

